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improve children's lives



National College
for School Leadership

Schools and academies

A study of the impact of school federation on student outcomes

Case studies

Resource

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Case study 1: Claymore Green Federation

1.1: Federation context

This federation is composed of two primary schools, located one and a half miles apart, in south-east London. In 2006, one of these schools, Claymore, had a track record of good success whereas the other, Brown School had, according to the executive head, “a history of failure”. The local council therefore asked the headteacher of Claymore whether she and her staff would be willing to support Brown. Initially, this request was declined. The executive head explained that she “did not believe in super heads” and that that she was “not a knight in shining armour”. However, upon reflection she realised that she did not want to turn her back on this school, adding that she felt a moral imperative to help the other school improve; “to do the right thing”. She consulted her staff team and they collectively agreed to offer school-to-school support to Brown. Initially this support came in the form of a three-year partnership. The schools thereafter federated and have an executive headteacher and single governing body supporting staff on both school sites.

1.2: Federation structure and focus

At every single level we partnered people up. The office staff started to work together... teachers began to plan together, children started to go on school journeys together, teaching assistants started to run clubs together... The school began to work in partnership... and we could see improvement straight away.

Executive headteacher

Initially, the local council wanted to close Brown and federate the schools. However, the now executive head of the federation did not think that such a federation would work. As she put it: “you cannot trample over Brown and then expect it to rebuild itself; what we have to do is build a partnership”. She thus approached Brown and said she would like to form a partnership rather than a federation with the school. This invitation was accepted after long discussion.

After a three-year partnership the schools formally federated in September 2010, by which time the partnership had developed into a win win situation. The partnership was not easy to begin with: the executive head stated “it was hell – the first year was the most difficult of my life, the second year was a bit easier and by the third I was thinking ‘this might be all right’”. Initially she noted staff concerns that the federation would lead to two satisfactory schools rather than an outstanding one and a failing one. However, she thought that by managing people’s emotional responses she had been able to help overcome these fears. The executive head thought that raising expectations was central to ensuring both schools benefited from federation. As she put it: “we had a belief and determination” to improve both schools and “the biggest challenge was to change people’s mindset” so that they also had higher expectations of pupils.

Here was the message. We are going somewhere. This is where the bus is going... if you want to stay on the bus that’s great... but you won’t lie in [the] way of it because it will run over you. I know that sounds ruthless but I was determined that change was here to stay... satisfactory [teaching] is not good enough... if you decide to step up, fantastic, I will support you, if you want to step off I will support you but you are not going to stay as you are... this is not working.

Executive headteacher

The message that change was here to stay and that children and staff alike are capable of more seems to have been driven by the executive head but it also seems to have swiftly filtered throughout the federation as substantial changes and improvement have been evident (see 1.4). This change in direction and philosophy was not easy for the staff team, especially at the beginning. Indeed, more than half the staff in one school have left since the schools partnered up. An associate head remarked that the experience of the executive head had helped the federation to recruit wisely: “[though] we have had a big turnover of staff... we have brought in some exceptional people”.

While some remaining staff undoubtedly seem to have found changes in ethos and practice challenging, the support and sense of purpose that the executive head has provided to her staff were perceived as being central to improvements made across this federation.

1.3: Economic impact of federation

Does federation save money? No I would say it doesn't because you are putting in another layer of leadership but... I am very good at generating money... how much does a failing school cost a community? I would say... there are huge financial gains – but is it cheap? No.

Executive headteacher

While there was a perception expressed that federation does not in itself save money, there was also a feeling that it does provide value for money in the shape of substantial school improvement. In this federation the additional cost of the new leadership structures has been more than offset by additional revenue streams brought in because of federation. The executive head explained that as she was now spending less time with the children she was able to devote more time to generating external funding for the federation. She felt that her experiences had helped her to become good at this too. As she put it, federation “does free up leadership capacity to generate income and to get best value”. An associate head also indicated that the expertise of the executive head in securing extra funds had been important, commenting that it is hard to improve a school in difficulties quickly without substantial extra expenditure. Furthermore, federation has helped the schools make sizeable savings on the supply budget as staff from one school can be employed to cover absences in another. The federation went from spending £180,000 on agency supply teachers in one school in one year to not spending anything in two schools the next.

1.4: School performance and pupil attainment

Three years ago we had a failing school and an outstanding school. Three years later they are now working on the same areas for development.

Executive headteacher

At the start of the partnership, Claymore had had three Ofsted inspection judgements of ‘outstanding’ in a row with the most recent being in December 2006. Pupil results in this school had also been consistently above the national average and Claymore was at this time a highly successful school according to its headteacher (now executive head). In comparison, in 2006 Brown Primary had received a notice to improve from Ofsted. After a year of partnership, Brown had achieved a satisfactory self-evaluation. By 2009 it received a grade of ‘good’ and in 2010 self-evaluation suggested it was ‘good with outstanding features’. Meanwhile, in 2010 Claymore had become a national centre of excellence and received another grade of ‘outstanding’ at Ofsted inspection. The improvement in Brown has been such that the schools now share a development plan.

1.5: Leadership

The key to our federation is the strength of the executive head. That person is modelling for you. You have their expertise to draw on... She is inspiring. She is exceptional.

Associate headteacher

Initially the leadership structure of the federation remained largely unaltered. However, since federation in 2010 an executive headteacher and two new associate heads have been appointed. There was a strong sense among interviewees that the commitment of the executive head had been central to the improvements witnessed in the federation since the very start of the partnership between the schools. The executive head explained: “one of my core principles is openness and transparency - the learning is open, communication is open and governance is open”. By being open and transparent about her commitment to raising standards, the executive head was able to bring many staff on board with her.

One of the associate heads noted that the executive head was hugely supportive of staff committed to improvement, commenting that she felt as if the executive head “would not let us fail”. The open and supportive approach to reaching for high expectations and standards seems to have successfully filtered through the federation and it also seems to have come to impinge on teaching and learning.

1.6: Teaching and learning

What works works - if it works in this school, it works in that school... if it is successful it will work anywhere; it took me as little bit of time to learn that but that is the thing I had to hang on to.

Executive headteacher

The staff we interviewed were of the view that the quality of teaching and learning had improved since federation and this would seem to be borne out by Ofsted inspections and school self-evaluations covering these respective periods of time. After going into partnership, the schools quickly adopted shared policies regarding behaviour, curriculum, admission and teaching and learning. Although the suggestion above that educational practices that work in one context will invariably work in another might suggest one school was asked to duplicate the good practice of another, this would not seem to be the case here. There was instead recognition among the staff interviewed that educational practices need to be adapted to suit the particular context of each school. Indeed, whereas one school building was open plan, the other was much more traditional in style. While the schools could not be more different in terms of their buildings, an associate head remarked that an “ethos has been transferred”. The staff have over time come to share a commitment to improvement by sharing good practice and providing a rich and engaging curriculum for pupils.

No decision was made alone... we were all in it together... it felt like we had a common purpose.

Associate headteacher

One of the associate headteachers noted that too much focus on results can lead to a very dry curriculum but she explained that this is not the way things were run across the federation. She thought the federation’s improvement was sustainable because the children receive such a rich and engaging curriculum.

While pupils have had some shared learning experiences on the same school site on a project-by-project basis, the real collective element of the federation seems to be in “sharing expertise across both schools”. An associate head remarked that the approach to building the relationships necessary for this sharing of good practice had been steady and calm: “gradually over time people have got to know each other and wanted to share expertise. Now it is a partnership, it is much more... now”. Whereas there was a disparity of pupil engagement in learning between the schools to start with, one of the associate heads remarked that both schools now share the quality of having busy, independent pupils engaged in their learning: “there is lots of learning and creative learning – children are very purposeful”. A literacy leader in the federation also noted that improvement was possible because staff were given time to develop their skills on their own terms. As she put it: “the key to it has been a growing realisation of what we could be – no one has been forced to do anything” but rather encouraged to take time to form relationships and so learn from the good practice of others.

1.7: Continuing professional development

If you want to find out how good teaching happens well you can go on a course and spend two hours on a train... and at the end... of it wonder what that was about... or you can go next door but one and spend a day in someone’s classroom... you have got the theory or you have got the reality and in terms of professional development people learn by seeing it in reality.

Executive headteacher

The executive head remarked that federation has been “absolutely fantastic” for professional development opportunities across the federation. “Rich and rewarding” joint Inset days have been undertaken and a number of staff have been left well prepared to take on senior leadership roles because of the experiences gained in a different educational context, but still within the federation. Teachers have also been able to move from teaching posts to middle leadership posts. A middle leader development programme set up in consultation with the National College for School Leadership may have aided such staff development.

However, there was a perception among staff interviewed that federation has been particularly beneficial for improving the CPD of teachers because of its practical focus. The teaching staff operating in a climate of low expectations were, for example, now able to routinely observe the lessons of staff identified as outstanding by Ofsted in the other school in the federation. The executive head of the federation thought that this role modelling greatly benefited staff in the former school by showing them what a good and outstanding teacher does. She added: “if you do not have good role models, how do teachers and children know how to behave?”

Successful mentoring and modelling also seemed to be occurring in situ for leadership staff. On her executive head at Claymore, one associate head commented: “I don’t need to go on a course. I live and breathe it. I have a mentor on hand”. The other associate head remarked that she felt as if she “had a steering hand on [her] shoulder all the time”. The executive head felt that she too had developed professionally by being involved in a federation. As she put it: “I had been here 21 years and thought I knew everything... when I went there I realised I knew nothing”. Some staff are also more widely involved in school-to-school support beyond the federation due to the school’s status as a centre for excellence.

Summary

This federation really does seem to have developed into a win win situation for both schools. One school continues to be outstanding and another has become good with outstanding features. Both sets of staff seem to have developed professionally because of federation. Not only has school performance improved, but the staff interviewed thought that the curriculum was rich enough to enable sustainable improvement.

Case study 2: Pilkerton Federation

2.1: Federation context

This federation is located in a large industrial city in the north-west of England and it is at present formally composed of two secondary modern schools. Notably however, the two federated schools have also established a range of other, less formal links and partnerships with other schools in the area. The principal factor that drives and sustains this federation and the other partnerships is probably student and school performance, and a desire to share good teaching practice between schools so as to improve learning across the federation. It is perhaps fair to say that one high-performing school has operated as a hub or model for the other school (initially) and also other schools in the community (more recently) to learn from and be supported by. However, the executive head of the federation stressed that the learning and support in question had not been, and should not be, all one way. As he put it: “we are in great demand to support other schools but at the same time we learn a lot too – last year we had record results at both schools... the key to working with other schools is what you learn when you go there – it sharpens your practice.”

In 2005 the local authority asked Pilkerton School to support Elm School as the latter was in danger of going into special measures and members of its senior leadership team had left or were about to leave. In 2006 the schools federated. The new governing body was mostly composed of Pilkerton members with a few additional governors from Elm. On 1 April 2011 a local primary school also became formally collaborated with the two federated schools. Thus while the two secondary schools now have an executive headteacher and share a single governing body, the primary school will, at least initially, retain its own governing body. However, it is expected that the collaboration with the primary school may eventually become a federation.

In 2008 the local authority asked staff in the federation to support a further school in the area, Redford School, which had gone into special measures. With the help of mentoring, Redford moved out of special measures in 2010. Although the schools did not and probably will not formally federate, the partnership and sharing of good practice between the schools will continue at a less formal level.

2.2: Federation structure and focus

Most challenges are to do with poor-quality staff who need to be moved on, trained up or given a different experience.

Executive headteacher

One of the main approaches that the federation has taken to improve performance has been to improve the combined resources of the schools and to “rigorously recruit high-quality staff” and/or to train existing staff to help them improve their performance and expectations. As the executive head commented: “it is the staff that make the difference in terms of raising expectations”. However, shifting the ethos in the schools to one of higher expectations was not easy to start with. Indeed, one of the main initial challenges faced by staff in the federation was the improvement of their teaching performance, especially at Elm. However, a host of other challenges emerged as the federation developed. A lot of the parents at Pilkerton School liked and were proud of the fact that their school had been asked to support another school to improve but there was a slightly more mixed response from staff at the other schools.

2.3: Economic impact of federation

As a group of schools you are more powerful in terms of accessing funding – people are more interested in working with you.

Executive headteacher

There was a general view among interviewees that federation enhances the ability of schools to secure external funding. This federation has been very successful in this regard. Becoming a sports college brought in additional capital, as did a partnership with an internationally known local football team. This money was used to build a new sports village combining new pitches, a go-kart workshop and a vocational study centre.

A sentiment was also expressed that this external funding had been crucial to the improvements gained. The broad curriculum on offer in the federation certainly seems to have helped to improve results and the wider teaching and learning environment but it is a costly curriculum to run. An associate head explained that perhaps the “trickiest thing is travel arrangements”; for example, hiring a coach for the day as a matter of course to ferry pupils on the six-mile journey between schools is expensive. The federation is currently exploring the idea of buying a fleet of cars to reduce this cost. An interviewee indicated that the executive head of the federation had been excellent in terms of seeking out and securing the additional funding necessary for sustained improvement.

2.4: School performance and pupil attainment

We were coming from a school that knew what outstanding looked like and we were taking that understanding to a school that was in danger of going into special measures.

Associate headteacher

School performance seems to have improved markedly in both schools since federation. While Pilkerton was rated as ‘outstanding’ by Ofsted in its last two inspections, Elm has gone from being graded ‘satisfactory’ in 2006 to ‘good with outstanding features’ at its most recent inspection. There has also been a rapid and continual improvement in student outcomes in Elm and an improvement in outcomes at Pilkerton too. Significantly, in November 2010, the schools were both rated ‘outstanding’ by Ofsted, in terms of their leadership and management. The staff interviewed cited a few factors as being behind the improvement. These included: a) a clear sense of purpose or philosophy driven by the senior leadership; b) a wider base of teaching expertise and federation resources; and c) more sustained opportunities for CPD.

2.5: Leadership

Federation has made us more outward facing...every member of the leadership team of both schools...sees themselves as leaders of education not leaders of institutions.

Associate headteacher

The federation has seen significant changes to the leadership structure in both schools. The headteacher of Pilkerton has become executive head of the federation while two deputy headteachers from Pilkerton have taken over as substantive headteachers at Pilkerton and Elm respectively. Perhaps more significantly however, these structural changes have been accompanied by a change in perception among the leadership team of the federation about what it means to be a school leader. One of the interviewees characterised this as a movement from “institutional to educational leader”. All the senior leaders interviewed suggested that the federation had a moral purpose linked to the wellbeing of the wider community rather than just any individual school. Notably, the executive headteacher and the headteachers in both schools indicated that they drew on the strengths of staff within the federation to help them overcome the challenges they faced.

2.6: Teaching and learning

In the early days we had to be mindful of big-brother syndrome, of Pilkerton telling Elm what needed to be done. Now the relationship has much more synergy, with staff from Elm also leading learning in Pilkerton.

Associate headteacher

All the staff interviewed seemed to be of the view that the quality of teaching and learning had improved since federation and this would seem to be borne out by Ofsted inspections covering this period of time. Initially two of the most experienced PE teachers were drafted in from Pilkerton to teach at Elm and this was perceived by the staff interviewed as fundamental to Elm improving its results in this area. Although the federation tries to duplicate good practice and provides a consistent approach to teaching and learning across the federation wherever possible, there was recognition that there were occasions when strategies ought to vary to suit the particular context of each school.

There was a sense in which both schools benefited from a wider pool of expertise and resources as a result of federation. The associate headteacher indicated that the broad curriculum now on offer has been crucial to the improvement in both schools. A vocational learning centre has been built in Elm as a consequence of federation and this facility is now used by children in both schools as a matter of course, with some vocational subjects such as construction and retail being taught by teachers from both schools for students of both schools. The centre has also been used by students from six other schools in the area. The new vocational centre has also engaged a lot of young people who might have otherwise been in danger of becoming disengaged.

One of our big success stories is inclusion... rather than being excluded for a few days, a child goes to one of our partner schools for a few days and is still engaged with the curriculum...rather than sitting at home watching television which is what some [other] schools do.

Associate headteacher

The federation has similarly made great strides to reduce exclusions by instead placing students in a partner school. As an associate headteacher put it: "the exclusion figures at both schools have been reduced enormously". The staff interviewed thought that parents were much happier knowing that the education of their children is more constant and less subject to interruption. Indeed, there was a perception among staff interviewed that student behaviour has improved markedly since federation, especially in Elm School.

The introduction of a new uniform and the constant emphasis on standards may have helped here. Having students in the same class but from different schools in the federation is not restricted to vocational subjects or students being temporarily transferred for behavioural issues. Students travel to receive lessons in a school other than their own four days a week, and a member of staff from Elm now teaches law at Pilkerton, which would not have been possible before federation due to Elm's small capacity. While some pupils did not initially welcome this more fluid teaching environment, now "Pilkerton children love going to Elm and vice versa."

20 or 25 years ago if your school was doing well and the school down the road was doing badly... you would almost revel in another school's failure, which obviously is not right... the league tables do not help this sort of thing – they encourage competition but [we have] this moral purpose of wanting the best for all young people no matter which school they go to.

Associate headteacher

Significantly, the more fluid teaching and learning environment seems to have forged a sense of connection between the schools. There was also a perception that the emerging federation created a much more outward-looking staff team that is now able to offer school-to-school support outside the federation.

One of the associate headteachers remarked: "in the early days there was not an outward-looking spirit but the landscape has changed now... our staff see school-to-school support as the norm", adding that "a spirit of connectedness pervades" the federation now. A number of the staff interviewed saw this shift in moral terms, as a movement away from narrow concerns about students in one school to a broader concern about the education of students in both schools in the federation (and students beyond the federation) and about the wellbeing of the wider local community. As the foregoing quote suggests, one respondent was also of the opinion that federation encourages co-operation rather than competition between schools: "you are not just focusing on your school, but on the much bigger picture".

2.7: Continuing professional development

Being able to offer the experience of teaching in two very different schools is invaluable in a training capacity.

Associate headteacher

All of the staff interviewed agreed that federation had created career development opportunities that would not have been there if the two schools had not federated. An associate head remarked that federation had given him "great experience as a school leader across two very different contexts... to develop a much greater breadth of different leadership styles... this I would not have been able to do if I had just stayed in one school".

Opportunities to develop professionally have not been restricted to leadership roles either but have been filtered throughout the federation. There has been a snowball effect. An associate head remarked that “federation has opened doors for... staff at all levels of the school in terms of curriculum development and curriculum design”.

There was a shared perception that teaching staff who work in both schools of the federation have experienced two different contexts and had been able to explore professional pathways that would not otherwise have been open to them. Indeed, one of the PE teachers who taught at Elm and helped achieve improvement there was able to use the experience of teaching successfully in a different context to gain a promotion within the PE department of the federation. Similarly, a newly qualified English teacher who joined the federation was able to lead positive improvement in learning in the federation in both schools and these experiences helped the teacher to secure a post as director of learning in a school with a specialism in language. While there are two joint Inset days on professional development a year when staff from both schools collaborate, there was a sense among interviewees that the real strength of professional development in a federation is the frequency of opportunity to watch successful teaching in practice. As the executive head explained: “built into daily life in a federation is the opportunity for work-shadowing of good practice”. The sharing of good professional practice is not restricted to the federation. An associate head remarked: “we now have middle leaders who support middle leaders in other schools, and federation was the catalyst for this outward-facing approach”.

Summary

All the staff interviewed were clear that the federation has been extremely positive for both schools overall. Results have certainly improved in both schools and staff at all levels seem to have professional development opportunities that just would not have been open to them outside a federation. While the broad curriculum on offer may be expensive to run, respondents felt that a successful federation would always be in a strong position to secure the funding necessary for sustained school improvement.

Case study 3: Snetterton Road Federation

3.1: Federation context

This federation involves two relatively small secondary schools that are located in a moderately sized city in the heart of England. The schools that now form the federation were three separate institutions in 2007. The main catalyst for federation was a drop in birth rate in the area that resulted in falling rolls in each of these three schools. This fall in student numbers was such that the local authority indicated that one school would potentially have to close unless a federation was formed. While the overall student body has fallen from approximately 2,000 students across the three schools in 2007 to just over 1,600 students across the two schools, the size of the student body has now stabilised and the successful recruitment of sixth form students since federation suggests that student numbers may begin to rise again in the future. Although the federation now formally involves only two schools; the three original school sites have been retained in spite of the necessity to close parts of some individual buildings.

3.2: Federation structure and focus

The schools federated in September 2008 when a single governing body for both schools was formed to augment the executive headteacher who was already in place. While raising student performance was a considerable focus for the federation the school also had various budgetary issues that required attention. The head of educational support explained that at the time of federation, one school had a sizeable deficit that needed to be reduced. Federation thus entailed a considerable restructuring of staff roles: many leadership, teaching and support staff now perform duties across the federation rather than in just one school. The vast majority of staff are also now on federation rather than single-school employment contracts. While the change in contracts does not seem to have caused much anxiety among staff, learning about the different local cultures of each school was, according to the head of educational support, initially challenging: “it took some time to find out about the skills set of staff in other schools”.

However, the staff interviewed indicated that colleagues increasingly embraced the changes brought on by federation after seeing improvements in student outcomes and school performance.

3.3: Economic impact of federation

Through federation we could make considerable savings and the knock-on effect... was redundancies... we centralised a lot of roles... that was... most difficult.

Executive headteacher

The falling student roll meant there was a reduction in funds coming into the federation. A rationalisation process was conducted with a number of duplicated posts across the federation being removed in the shape of redundancies. The head of educational support indicated that “within budget constraints we had to lose some teachers” and as many as 14 support staff out of 85 have also moved on since federation. The rationalisation of roles has led to a reduction in staff wages of approximately £450,000 a year on support staff and somewhere in the region of £300,000 on teaching staff. The federation has been able to substantially reduce its supply teaching and CPD budgets.

Whilst the federation has been able to make considerable savings through this restructuring, this has not been an easy process for anyone. Federation has meant that teachers can now be successfully employed across the federation to deal with staff absences. The assistant head in charge of arranging CPD remarked that since federation “we get much better value for money” by providing most Inset days in-house. Initially the federation did secure some external funding through the National Lottery and by the schools becoming sports and language colleges respectively. The head of educational support did however indicate that obtaining external funding has been something of an Achilles’ heel for the federation more recently, commenting: “it is something we are not very good at, at the moment”. He speculated that the federation’s relative lack of recent success in this area could be partly explained

by the fact that the federation only has a part-time member of staff in charge of putting bids together, whereas this process is in fact very onerous and time-consuming.

3.4: School performance and pupil attainment

The executive head explained that at the beginning of the federation, school performance was not all it could be. He stated that there were “two schools with potential to fail their Ofsted [inspection]; there was serious underachievement in some areas”. He added that “teaching and learning [were] unsatisfactory in one of the schools and satisfactory in the other two”. However, since federation considerable focus has been placed on improving school performance and student achievement. This seems to have paid off. The executive head explained that the school had conducted its own self-evaluations recently and concluded that the quality of teaching and learning across both sites would now probably be graded ‘good’ by Ofsted inspection processes. Furthermore, in terms of student outcomes, at Scots Pine School the percentage of students gaining at least 5 GCSEs at grades A* C has risen from 43 per cent in 2007 to 77 per cent in 2010. At Yellow Ridge School the percentage was 44 in 2007 and in 2010 it was 82 per cent.

3.5: Leadership

We’ve now got three teams of leaders as one executive – there is a fantastic level of different experience... They have the skills set to impact on all aspects of teaching and learning.

Head of educational support

Federation has resulted in substantial changes in both the leadership structure and the roles adopted by school leaders. The executive head of the federation remarked: “my role has changed really quite significantly”. Whereas in 2007 there were three heads of school, the “federation has now evolved into a much more coherent and singular structure”. Staff interviewed suggested that the two remaining schools have been able to retain their own identity and this may have been helped by the fact that Scots Pine School does still have its own head of school.

Importantly, the staff interviewed thought that the leadership team had been able quickly and successfully to adapt to new roles. The head of educational support also thought that the collective expertise and experience of the leadership team had been central to improving pupil outcomes and school performance.

3.6: Teaching and learning

Federation basically gives you the opportunity to ‘cherry pick’ what each of the sites does best... It has been fantastic as far as sharing good practice is concerned.

Head of geography

Federation has led to considerable changes in the ways in which teaching and learning are arranged. During the initial stages of federation, the leadership team and heads of department met to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each school. This helped to identify subject areas where best practice could be shared across the federation according to the needs of each school. It also led to the adoption of a federation-wide teaching and learning policy which detailed the standards expected of all lessons and led to the establishment of a federation improvement group. Teaching and learning have thus very much had the improvement of student outcomes as a focus and student attainment is now much more closely monitored. Geography, history, religious studies, art, and design and technology and music all now share heads of department across the federation.

The staff interviewed thought that the restructuring process had helped to improve the consistency and quality of teaching and learning across the federation. Federation has also meant that the schools were collectively able to provide a broader curriculum than each of the smaller schools would have been able to provide alone: new subjects have been introduced including law and psychology. Students thus have the benefit of a greater choice of subjects to study. They also now travel to other schools to receive lessons as a matter of course in some subjects, including geography. A minibus service ferries students between sites although they do not need to move for lessons if they do not want to. Teachers also teach across sites.

This federation was also brought together by an unexpected development regarding one of the school buildings.

One third of the Yellow Ridge site had to be demolished because it was deemed unsafe, which meant that about 400 KS3 pupils had to be moved at very short notice to receive their education at another site.

Federation provided a safety net for this school which meant that pupils did not miss out on their education. As the executive head put it: “the reason why lessons were not interrupted was because of the federation structure – it gave us the flexibility to move students into one of the partner schools with their parents’ consent, very, very quickly without missing out on any of their education”. The local council estimated that without the safety net of collaboration between schools, six to eight weeks of education could have been lost. Furthermore, the executive head thought that this positive ability to deal with adversity had brought staff together more quickly across the federation.

3.7: Continuing professional development

Because it is our staff providing the sessions... to their own colleagues a kind of professional pride kicks in about the quality of sessions they provide.

Assistant headteacher in charge of CPD

The considerable restructuring process has offered the opportunity for staff at all levels in the federation to progress in their careers as many staff have now had the opportunity to work across three different educational environments. Many teachers, for example, who formerly worked in an 11-16 school have been able to gain experience of teaching A-levels at the 11-18 school site. Similarly, many administration staff and heads of department have federation roles. In this respect, some heads of department do lesson observations across all sites, as they are heads at all sites. CPD is organised across the federation and is led by an assistant headteacher. It is designed to take into account both the professional development needs of individual staff and the school performance issues within the wider federation. The move from three small schools to one larger federation has meant that it is now possible for virtually all the Inset days in the federation to be organised by staff in the federation, for staff in the federation. As the assistant head in charge of CPD put it: “we now have a much bigger pool of expertise to dip into to organise Inset days and workshops”.

The federation is into the second year of a coaching programme with a focus on teaching and learning designed to improve satisfactory lessons to good and good to outstanding. The federation also runs a strand of provision for support staff and, on alternate years, two leadership development courses: one to help existing middle leaders acquire the skills necessary for senior leadership, the other for new heads of department and/or aspiring middle leaders. The assistant head thought CPD had greatly improved since federation. Not only was less money being spent on external courses, but the courses delivered in-house are also perceived as being of better quality due to the professional pride staff have in presenting to each other. The head of educational support indicated that these developments have been received very positively by teaching and support staff. The head of geography remarked: “Inset is a lot more purposeful now... colleagues delivering to colleagues... is a lot cheaper... but it also feels a little bit more real because the people standing up in front of you have tried the techniques they are suggesting with the children that you teach”.

Summary

Federation gives you the advantage of a small school but all the opportunities of a large organisation.

Executive headteacher

Federation really seems to have worked well in this context by providing three small schools with a pool of shared resources and expertise that enabled them to be greater than the sum of their parts. The executive head indicated that without federation the savings that needed to be made because of dwindling student numbers would probably have led to a school closure. However, because of the restructuring made possible by federation, all the school sites have remained open, the necessary savings have been made and student outcomes have improved. Students now benefit from a greater choice of curriculum too.

Case study 4: Our Lady's Federation

4.1: Federation context

This federation involves two Roman Catholic primary schools, located within half a mile of each other in a moderately sized city in the north-west of England. In 2006 the local authority contacted Richard Road School about the possible closure of a Catholic school in the area due to falling numbers and the retirement of the headteacher in Loakes School. The executive head explained: "the reason that we federated was that there was a feeling that another church school [in our parish] needed our support". Loakes School had lost its church and with it its priest. The school itself was undergoing some financial difficulty. The executive head also commented that academic results in Loakes "could have been better" prior to federation. In comparison, Richard Road School had achieved a succession of 'outstanding' school inspection grades. Thus a range of factors seems to have led to these schools federating, including a desire to preserve the existence of a school with a shared Catholic faith and an ambition to improve performance in both schools.

4.2: Federation structure and focus

In the initial stage of the federation it was a little difficult because, as you can imagine, it was two different cultures, two different schools meeting up... but we have moved hugely away from that and staff in both schools really do value the expertise in each other's schools.

Deputy headteacher

The schools federated in 2006, adopting a single governing body and an executive headteacher. There have been changes to both the governance structures and teaching and learning approaches since federation. Initially it was decided that only 20 governors would be permitted and this meant that some governors had to be shed. In consultation with the diocese, school leaders and the governors themselves, some governors left, based on the expertise that the federation most needed in regard to policy and finance.

Some staff now work across the federation including the executive head, the business manager and the early years co-ordinator. Up until 2009, one of the assistant heads also focused on improving teaching and learning across the federation and in 2010 another assistant head focused on assessment across the federation. The federation has also seen changes in personnel especially in one school and these changes perhaps reflect the difficulties that some members of staff felt at the start of federation.

Moving from working in a single school to a federation role seems to have been challenging for some staff, and indeed parents; there was, as the assistant head put it, "a fear of the unknown" in regard to federation. However, all the interviewees expressed a feeling that the leadership team has supported staff and each other to make the changes in structure and role work. The deputy head commented that for some staff it was hard at first "but it is brilliant now". Similarly, the early years co-ordinator remarked that to start with it was "very difficult to be honest... I knew it was going to be a challenge but I welcomed that challenge and from the very start I was told that I would be supported and I feel that has been happening." She added that working with staff who did not initially "welcome change... had been a challenge but I feel we are getting there and the senior management are backing me up". The successful performance of both schools in an Ofsted inspection seems to have helped staff in both schools to see the benefit of federation. A deputy headteacher explained that staff wanted to preserve the identity of each school, and she also expressed a feeling that they had been able to, and this may have helped the federation to become successful too.

4.3: Economic impact of federation

You can federate but you federate under our terms and conditions if you want the money... in the early days... maybe we were not financially savvy... we didn't have a bursar... if we [had had] a bursar [he or she] probably could have got the money for us.

Executive headteacher

Federation has had a mixed economic impact for this federation. Initially the federation seems to have had real difficulty in obtaining external funding, although this situation has more recently improved. The executive head was of the view that the federation had worked to begin with because of extra voluntary work from school staff and governors rather than because of any government funding that supported the structural changes necessary for successful federation. The executive head was aware from the outset that building capacity and changing structures across the federation would have cost implications. However, he expressed frustration that the funding from central government designed to enable federation seemed to come with conditions attached. He said: “the federation never ever, ever got a single penny... to help us with structural changes”. He noted that there were “millions and millions of pounds available that I tried to tap into... but to be honest it was always ring-fenced for certain projects... when I rang up about it they said that there is money available but it has got to be used for this or it has got to be used for that”.

The executive head put in three bids for funding including what he felt was a strong one for a minibus to help travel between the school sites, but none was successful. He also explained that nobody at a governmental level was able to explain to him how future bids could be improved. The executive head felt that in the early days, government funding was more likely to go to secondary rather than primary schools. However, he conceded that the federation’s lack of financial expertise may have inhibited its ability to secure funding, commenting that if it had had a bursar, the federation may have been more successful at this. More recently the situation seems to have improved and the executive head stated that “we are getting grants now”. The federation has with external funding been developing an early years garden. Last year it also successfully obtained government funding through Creative Partnerships and this has been used to develop a new creative curriculum.

4.4: School performance and pupil attainment

Both schools in their own right have continued to progress extremely well.

Deputy headteacher

In 2008 the federation was inspected by Ofsted and both schools received overall grades of ‘outstanding’. For Richard Road this was the second judgement of ‘outstanding’ in a row.

The deputy head explained that there were “massive improvements” evident in Loakes where previous performance at Ofsted inspection had been much weaker especially in relation to teaching and learning. The executive head explained that Ofsted had graded Loakes as ‘satisfactory’ with good features prior to federation. In 2008 the federation also had an inspection with a focus on leadership and the leadership was deemed to be ‘excellent’ across the federation. The assistant head in charge of assessment also noted that Loakes School in the previous year had the best SATs results in its history. Federation thus seems to have had a positive impact on school performance and student outcomes. The staff interviewed suggested that this improvement had been possible because the senior leadership team had been able to support the staff to share their expertise and develop their collective talents.

4.5: Leadership

My way of leadership is, it’s not about me, it’s not about one person... it’s about us.

Executive head

The leadership structure in the schools has undergone significant changes since federation. The federation no longer has two headteachers but rather one executive headteacher supported by two deputy headteachers in each school. Importantly, all the staff interviewed thought that the leadership team and especially the executive head had been central to the improvements achieved in both schools. It seems that the executive head has been able to successfully implement his philosophy of leadership in the schools, this being based on a principle of liberating staff to do what they do best and to support each other to do the same. The deputy head remarked that the executive head “has had the vision and has guided the process” of improvement through federation. She explained: “we have come a long way and that is to the credit of the leadership of [the executive headteacher], really, he invests in all of his staff”. She added that all the staff feel the same about the belief and trust that the executive head has in them: “he trusts you and he believes in you and he wants you to fly with your subject. He gives you freedom to take risks”. The early years co-ordinator similarly remarked that “the drive [in the federation] has come from the leadership”. The recently appointed assistant head who previously taught in one of the schools opined that the “support of senior management has been second to none”. She added that the teaching staff “give you their support in abundance too”.

The executive head was himself keen to emphasise the crucial role that the wider school staff played in enabling improvement. Federation, as he put it, “has got to be driven by staff... for real improvement, for sustained improvement” to happen in schools. The executive head also noted that parents, children and teaching colleagues within the school and the wider area had been supportive of him in his role. He remarked: “at the heartbeat of the federation people are supportive of it... my own staff do not know how much they have given me”.

4.6: Teaching and learning

Because of the federation, I think... the progression of teaching and learning has increased tremendously because we have thought about how we can use the expertise of each other and because we do in-house staff training.

Early years co-ordinator

Since federation there have been substantial changes in the ways in which teaching and learning are arranged with a real drive towards integration of policy and procedures. These changes were perceived as positive by the staff interviewed. The assistant head commented: “there has been a huge improvement - there has been a massive shift because the staff understand the cycle of teaching... and using assessment to inform the teaching”. Indeed, the schools now share one rigorous policy for and approach to assessment and some staff co-ordinate learning in full-time roles across both school sites. For example there is an early years co-ordinator who oversees learning in the early years in both schools. She explained that their new early years curriculum is shared and play based and she commented that teaching and learning in the early years “has improved tremendously” because of a willingness to share expertise. Previously an assistant head had also focused on improving teaching and learning across all stages of the federation. With the help of government funding, the federation has established a new creative curriculum across both schools involving staff and pupils from both schools where planning, resources and trips were all undertaken collectively. Within this there has been a focus on developing a curriculum driven by the local and particular interests of the pupils so as to improve their skills and knowledge in a thematic and cross-curricular way.

One event saw a cartoonist and dramatist hired to help improve the writing skills of boys across the federation (this had been identified as an area for improvement) and the deputy head thought that both staff and pupils had benefitted from this. Significantly, members of the teaching staff have been regularly asked to work in their partner school and to share their expertise with colleagues throughout the federation. The early years co-ordinator expressed the view that most staff had found the change to a more fluid approach to teaching useful. She added that the changes were also improving the quality of teaching and learning: “because we have a shared vision I can only see us improving”. Pupils from both schools also learn together in non-curricular ways. The executive head explained that the school also has a federated football team “and this has brought us together a little bit more”.

4.7: Continuing professional development

Federation allows you to grow professionally without having to search for new challenges or move schools... you can aspire to be in whatever position you basically want to be.

Assistant headteacher

There was a feeling among all the staff interviewed that federation provides an excellent environment for developing as professionals and a sharing of good practice. An environment where it is natural to work across two different school settings appears to have provided staff with opportunities to progress in their careers. Furthermore, working in a different context and being able to observe teachers in a different context also seems to have helped teaching staff to improve their skills and understanding of their practice. The early years co-ordinator explained that a swap-over staff initiative arranged by the senior management had been very helpful. This covered a period of three weeks where staff from one school were asked to work in the other school for professional development reasons and to enable them to share expertise. The federation also organises shared observations to improve the quality of teaching and learning across the federation.

Summary

Overall, [federation] has been a positive experience for everybody.

Assistant headteacher

All the staff interviewed seemed to agree that federation has been very positive for both schools. Student outcomes and school performance seem to have improved in no small part because of supportive leadership and a collective staff commitment to sharing expertise, and working towards shared goals across the federation.

Case study 5: Catholic Collegiate Federation

5.1: Federation context

This federation is located in north-west England and involves two schools: Barley School and Oatley Catholic Primary School. The schools became formally federated in January 2009 although collaboration between them had begun much earlier. In 2007 the two schools started discussing how they might collectively respond to local authority documentation on Catholic schools' fitness for mission within a climate of parish expansion. Thus, while a range of factors influenced the birth of this federation, perhaps the single most important motive underpinning it is a shared Catholic faith. The headteacher of the secondary school commented that the schools in the federation are committed and connected to, and in no small way defined by, their shared faith. The other main catalyst behind the federation was the Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme. The head of Barley had attended a seminar at the National College for School Leadership and in response to this discussed with the headteacher of the primary school the benefits of an all-through school on the same site. Considerable progress has since been made and in two years' time the schools are due move to one new site as a result of BSF funding. However, at the moment the two schools still operate as individual institutions on their original sites. While the schools do now share a governing body, each school presently retains its own headteacher. However, it is possible that the schools will look to become an all-through school with a single headteacher in the future, especially after they move to the single site. Not long after federation in 2009, a new headteacher was appointed to the primary school. While there have been some more recent issues regarding fluctuating levels of pupil attainment in the primary school (expanded upon at 5.3), these were not felt to be animating factors behind the move to federate the schools.

5.2: Federation structure and focus

There was a strong perception among the staff interviewed that the will to federate derived mostly from the former secondary school's board of governors.

Since the schools federated, the focus of the board (and of the headteacher of Barley) has been on planning for the new school building. As the head of Barley put it: "the focus of the federation has become the building". Much of the time spent planning the new school initially involved securing funding through BSF; a process that was complicated by being linked to the sale of church land. The board of governors has also been heavily involved in a staff equalisation programme whereby the pay structures of staff in both schools are brought into line in anticipation of the move to the new building and the possibility of an all-through school. During the interviews, a perspective was expressed that the board of governors was rather too big and unwieldy as all the former governors from both schools had been invited to join at the time of federation. Perhaps as a consequence of this, the new body is now discussing how membership might be streamlined. A view was expressed that the shared governing body model of federation was a very attractive one for Catholic schools as their common philosophical principles would make it possible for them to share and make more efficient use of resources at a practical and policy level. Though the headteacher of Barley was in principle interested in developments regarding the establishment of academies in England, he expressed concern that the protections afforded to faith schools in the Education Act 1944 had not so far been fully thought through in the Academies Act 2010.

It was almost like a peace-keeping mission at first...in the early days there was a little bit of negativity about it but I think those fears have now gone because people have started to see benefits coming out of it.

Member, board of governors

There was a strong feeling that the structural changes involved in federation as well as the impending move to the new school had brought up considerable, albeit short-term, fears among some staff, especially in the primary school. After the new primary headteacher took over in 2009 she noted an anxiety among staff there that the school would be swept up and dominated by the secondary school.

She described the impression as one in which “the headteacher of the secondary school is taking over the world”.

The previous headteacher of the primary school had held a view of the federation that tended to encourage this mindset, in referring to the secondary school as ‘the mother ship’. This view was not shared by the head of the secondary school, and the new primary school head remarked that this phrase gave the impression that the secondary school was driving everything. She emphasised that this was not the case but felt that this “mindset was impossible to shift” among some staff in the primary school, so much so that it was perceived that the only way around it was to employ new staff. There has therefore been a high turnover of staff recently with 5 new teachers in 18 months; an additional 10 non-teaching staff have also left. A member of the board of governors remarked that most of the fears have gone because staff changed their minds “once they had seen the benefit of federating”.

However, while the head of the primary school thought the situation was radically improved she also thought that some anxiety remained among primary school staff about the impending structural changes, not least in relation to her own role. She stated that by accepting a position at a primary school in dialogue with another about becoming an all-through school: “I could be doing myself out of a job in a few years’ time”. While these perceptions seem at first sight to suggest that federation has had a negative impact at least in the primary school, all the staff interviewed agreed that any short-term difficulties are more than offset by the promise that the federation (and the new school) would improve the student experience by moving forward in the long term.

5.3: Economic impact of federation

There would not be a new school if there had not been a federation and the pulling of these schools together on the one site.

Head of Barley

The principal economic benefit of federation for these schools has been securing funding for a new and shared building. There was a perception that the funding for the new building (which they had thought would be central to such improvement) may not have been secured without the unified vision and purpose that federation enabled.

The headteacher of the primary school notably

remarked: “the future of the federation is bright... it is a journey we are on together... for the good of the children at both schools”. The head of Barley similarly remarked that the federation has potential for a “massive and growing impact” in terms of school improvement. It thus seems fair to conclude that though the structural changes had resulted in considerable anxiety among primary school staff at the time and in the aftermath of federation, staff were nevertheless confident that the federation would have a positive impact on pupils in the long term.

5.4: School performance and pupil attainment

Statistics for pupil attainment in the primary school have fluctuated quite dramatically since 2007 with particularly low performance in 2009 and 2010. As a result the school has been placed under the category of ‘cause for concern’ by the local authority. The primary school head indicated that this classification was justified as she thought that the school may well have been placed in special measures had it been visited by Ofsted. Though there was an awareness that pupil attainment in the primary school may have dipped in the short term immediately after federation, in the long term it was felt that the new school on one site offered the potential of a better platform for improving teaching and learning. It may also be the case that the leadership teams within each school will be able to focus more on performance across the federation after the move to the new building.

5.5: Leadership

A federation challenges you as a leader and it does take you on – but don’t think it is going to be easy.

Head of Barley

While the leadership structures remain so far largely unaltered at a formal level in the federation, there have been some significant, less formal changes. Barley has taken a lead role in helping the primary school with problems of finance, administration and recruitment. Perhaps partly as a consequence, in Barley it was also felt that the deputy headteachers now do more of the day-to-day operations. This change seems to have been positive.

The headteacher of the primary school remarked that the headteacher of the secondary school was doing a “fantastic job” for both schools in the federation, adding that her first year in post would have been a lot harder without a “supportive big brother”. She stated: “I know that whenever I have an issue [on finance] it will be solved that day if I get in touch with the head of Barley”. The head of Barley, in turn, also indicated that the new board of governors had been supportive of him in his role and explained that he also had informal networks with other headteachers who could act as a sounding board for advice.

Having the support of colleagues seemed very important to the school leaders in this federation as they both felt that federating has placed a number of new but interesting demands upon them as leaders. As the head of the secondary school put it, “the head of [a single] school paddles [his] own boat whereas a federation leader has to think beyond their own school”. He added: “taking a hit for another school is part and parcel of daily life” in a federation. He speculated that valuing the success of your partner school as much as your own might signify a shift towards system leadership. While the school leaders do seem to have been able to support each other in positive ways since federation, there was a perception that more support could have been forthcoming in regard to raising pupil attainment in the primary school. The primary head commented: “[Initially] I would like to have received more support from the federation in terms of how we could improve and consolidate primary pupil results in national tests which had been very inconsistent since 2007”. More recently the federation has helped her to put a “fantastic staff team” in place and she was optimistic that test results would improve as a result. The head of Barley also thought that secondary school staff had given some indirect support, or as he put it, “a small assist on the side”, to primary staff regarding the improvement of pupil attainment.

5.6: Teaching and learning

Though the headteacher of the secondary school conceded that his effort and attention had very much been on the new building he did indicate that a number of other staff had been quietly working more closely alongside primary school colleagues since federation. At an extra-curricular level, a unified choir has been established and secondary school staff and students now lead some activities in sport and dance in the primary school.

Staff in the primary school had in turn worked with secondary colleagues to develop a more integrated pathway between Year 6 and Year 7. While there is thus some evidence of working together across the federation, to some extent, it may also have been difficult for the teachers to share good practice with each other across schools given the different skills required for teaching in the primary and secondary sector. Interestingly, a member of teaching staff from Barley has, for the last two years, led the development of a mathematics collaboration across the local authority. The establishment of this collaboration was driven by a desire within the local authority to improve the percentage of students achieving five grades A*-C at GCSE.

5.7: Continuing professional development

The federation has afforded some staff the opportunity to work in different contexts. There have also been joint Inset days. However, the most formalised CPD so far seems to have been the maths collaboration. The collaboration principally involves the staff member providing outreach work in other secondary schools including leadership training, evaluative lesson observation and discussion about how teaching and learning strategies can be improved. While this collaboration is quite distinct from the federation between Barley and the primary school, it does indirectly impact on the federation as some primary school staff have also received the same leadership training as well as support with the implementation of their maths curriculum. The collaboration thus provides further evidence of how teaching staff in the federation are gaining experience of building relationships with staff in other schools and sharing good practice both within and beyond the federations to which they belong. The staff member leading the maths collaboration thought that the training it provided had improved the skills of staff in his department as well as the other maths departments in the local authority. Moving back to the federation, a member of the board of governors also opined that the federation had and would continue to provide “stronger professional development opportunities for staff” by sharing different skills. It is also hoped that such professional development opportunities would in turn lead to improved teaching and learning across the federation.

Summary

The school staff interviewed for this case study reported the onset of a range of significant changes since the federation process started and expressed a range of different opinions and views about their impact. The perspectives expressed would seem to suggest that these changes can be viewed as positive overall.

While pupil attainment has fluctuated at primary level and though some staff there may have felt anxious about the structural changes brought about by federation, there was nevertheless agreement among those interviewed that the new school offered great promise to improve teaching and learning in the federation in the long term, especially following the move to the new school building. The true nature of the impact of changes brought about by federation may therefore be more evident when the schools move to the single site in two years' time.

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