



# Chain reactions: a thinkpiece on the development of chains of schools in the English school system

**Robert Hill**

**Resource**

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# Introduction

We were delighted to be asked by the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services to work with Robert Hill and help steer this thinkpiece examining the impact of chains of schools on the English school system. It is, so far as we know, the first time that this issue has been studied in depth. And it is very timely, given that the government is introducing accreditation of groups, or chains, of schools.

The work builds on thinking undertaken by a group of national leaders of education (NLEs), of which we were part, who formed a fellowship commission, supported by the National College. The commission was asked to address the question 'How can the school system develop the most effective numbers of trusts/federations/chains, and what would be the associated accountability framework?' In early 2009, the commission presented its findings to ministers as they were planning the white paper *Your child, your schools, our future: building a 21st century schools system* (DCSF, 2009a).

We have no doubt that this publication will be of immense value to leaders of schools, academies and colleges as they reflect on the challenges facing schools and the growing role that chains of schools look set to play as the accreditation of school providers and groups develops.

In **section 1**, Robert Hill explains how the chains agenda in the secondary sector has grown out of:

- school-to-school improvement initiatives, including the NLE programme, that have paired high-performing schools with those that are struggling or underperforming
- the growth of groups of academies sharing the same sponsor

**Section 2** sets out the defining characteristics of a chain from an educational perspective. Most importantly, Robert points to how chains have developed a distinct teaching and learning model and common operating systems that are applied in all the chain's schools, though their application is normally adjusted to reflect the particular context and circumstances of an individual school. Chains train their leaders intensively and deploy them across the schools in the chain to help ensure that the teaching and learning model and other systems (for managing behaviour and attendance, for example) are consistently and appropriately applied.

The chains are employing, or moving to employ, staff on a chain rather than a school contract. Most, though not all, chains are running schools that are in reasonably close proximity to each other or, as they grow, are developing geographical clusters of schools within their chains. This is important for facilitating the practicalities of school-to-school support. Chains are organising functions and systems such as ICT, human resources, financial administration and facilities management on a central basis. They have strong performance management systems that underpin quality assurance procedures and help to protect the brand value of the chain. They also have clear, effective corporate governance arrangements, with governors fulfilling a role similar to that of non-executive directors.

**Section 3** identifies important benefits from the growth of chains where these are constituted in accordance with the key criteria and principles described above. Improvements in attainment and the results of Ofsted inspections show how chains offer a way of helping to turn around and, crucially, sustain educational improvement in challenging schools. They are also in effect inventing a new and arguably sharper form of governance for the school sector.

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There is growing evidence that chains are developing a new and able generation of school leaders, which, given the age profile of school leaders and the rate of impending retirements, could be a considerable plus for the school system. Chains can also provide a more efficient economy of scale for organising back office and specialist services which, in the current financial climate, could be of significant value to schools.

However, the development of chains is raising as many questions as answers. In [section 4](#), Robert highlights and discusses seven questions that need further consideration by school leaders, promoters of chains and the government as well as the wider public:

1. Is there an optimum size for chains?
2. Is the process by which chains acquire schools sufficiently transparent?
3. Is the basis for funding chains fair?
4. Do all school chains have a sustainable education and business model?
5. Will schools in chains still be committed to working with other local schools?
6. Is the accountability system for school chains fit for purpose?
7. Are chains of schools doing enough to share learning between each other?

**Section 5** considers what the development of school chains means for the primary sector. The last 15 years have seen a succession of programmes rolling out of Whitehall aimed at incentivising secondary schools to work together, draw in external sponsors and develop school-to-school improvement. But there have been few initiatives that have promoted leadership of the primary sector by the primary sector, even though the challenges facing primary schools are as great, if not greater.

There is a large tail of primary schools that are struggling to achieve the standards achieved by the majority. There are too few applicants for vacant headships. Too many primary headteachers have insufficient capacity to give a sufficient amount of time to strategic leadership, which, given the range of issues that primary schools have to work on (eg, fluctuating pupil numbers, curriculum review, extended schools and changes in early years education) is essential. Small schools and rural schools are receiving a substantial subsidy but are often still struggling to remain financially viable.

Although the primary sector has not enjoyed the same scale of institutional incentives to work in partnerships as the secondary sector, it has nonetheless generated a range of innovative models of leadership and governance. Management partnerships, business support partnerships, primary school federations, hard, town-wide clusters of primary schools, secondary-primary federations, whole-learning community federations and all-through 3–19 schools have been some of the main responses. Some of these initiatives have been led by local authorities, some by school leaders and others by innovative governors.

Growing numbers of these developments have characteristics and benefits in common with secondary school chains. They apply a clear teaching and learning model and associated systems. They have evolved a new and stronger model of primary school leadership: an executive head responsible for two or more schools, supported by a head of teaching and learning on each site. This in turn is creating a new career pathway.

Primary school federations and trusts are also providing a broader basis for organising professional development that enables staff to share, learn and work with a wider group of colleagues. They are also strengthening governance and securing better planning and use of resources.

Despite these developments, a number of factors inhibit the pace of change. There is resistance by parents and governors in some quarters. The funding and accountability systems reinforce the status quo. There are particular issues for faith schools, which account for a third of schools in the primary sector, if they want to partner formally with non-faith schools.

In addition, the government has still to provide a clear roadmap of how it expects the organisation of primary schooling to evolve over the next 5 to 10 years, although it has made partnership working a key element of its world-class primary programme (DCSF, 2009c), announced in December 2009.

Robert concludes this paper by arguing that we need to create frameworks that provide primary schools with the critical mass necessary to develop strategic leadership, support the new career structures, improve professional and curriculum development, address school underperformance and realise economies of scale.

Noting that the government is introducing accreditation for the primary sector, he proposes that all primary schools could (or arguably should) be part of what he calls accredited primary school groups (APSGs) that adopt and work to chain-like standards. That does not mean squeezing primary schools into a single mould: APSGs might operate under the umbrella of a trust, a federation, an education company, an all-through school, a whole-learning community or town-wide cluster or, were the Conservatives' policies to be adopted, chains of primary academies.

Adopting this policy objective would mean:

- clearly articulating the vision and, potentially, setting a timetable for all primary schools to be part of an APSG
- creating a clear system of accreditation for APSGs
- incentivising primary schools to join an APSG, not so much by making new funding available as maximising the leverage of existing funding streams

- redesigning the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) to reflect the executive head/head of teaching and learning model
- incorporating all primary schools assessed as inadequate by Ofsted into an APSG
- enabling APSGs to use budgets flexibly across all the schools in their group
- encouraging and empowering local authorities to develop a network of APSGs in their area
- creating a cadre of school leaders to champion this agenda
- working with faith groups to resolve the particular problems associated with faith schools

The government's recent plan for implementing the 2009 white paper proposes a number of actions that support the development of these ideas. This is a bold and exciting agenda, and we invite fellow school leaders to join the debate on these issues.

Margaret Holman, Headteacher,  
Bishop Stopford C of E School, Kettering

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The Park Federation, London

February 2010

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## Section 1: The context

The growth of chains of schools, sponsored or run by the same foundation or charitable trust, is a phenomenon that has crept up on the state school system in England over the last decade. It has come about as a result of two main factors, formal partnerships (in the form of trusts and federations) and academies.

### Federations and trusts

Evidence on how to kickstart and sustain school improvement – particularly in areas of deprivation and in underperforming schools – has increasingly pointed to the value of partnership working and of schools leading and supporting other schools. Independent evaluations of a range of programmes starting with Excellence in Cities in 1999 but including Leading Edge, London Challenge and national leaders of education (NLEs) and national support schools (NSSs) attest to the positive value of focused, systematic and rigorous school-to-school improvement support.

The most recent affirmation of this partnership dividend comes in research undertaken for the National College by Manchester University (Chapman et al, 2009). The researchers studied 264 schools from a random sample of 50 local authorities and grouped into 122 federations. They compared these with an equivalent sample of 264 non-federated schools with a similar baseline in terms of performance. Their analysis showed that federation was not only positively related to performance in the years following federation but that the impact was greatest where the aim of the federation was to raise educational standards by federating lower and higher attaining schools.

In 2004 and 2005, researchers in the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) had produced reports (Potter, 2004; DfES, 2005) identifying the processes that a stronger school in a performance federation followed or applied when working with another school (see Appendix 1). They also charted how progress in such federations moved through four phases:

- a preparatory phase that triggers and sets the scene for activity
- an initial phase focused on making sure that the schools' basic operating systems are in place
- a development phase to address the underlying weaknesses and build up staff skills
- a final phase in which the partnership becomes much more one of mutual learning and when the long-term future of the supported school is planned

Although it may not have been realised at the time, this seminal analysis started to capture what were, in effect, the essential elements of a chain-like approach to school improvement. The research was also instrumental in the development of two new policy approaches:

- the inclusion of new powers (Section 63) in the Education and Inspections Act 2006, giving local authorities the option of requiring schools in special measures or in receipt of a notice to improve to enter into a collaboration or federation with another school
- the creation in 2008 of national challenge trusts, providing a mechanism to take schools that were below the benchmark standard for five GCSEs at grades A\*–C (including English and maths) within the control and governance of a high-performing school

The creation of 20 national challenge trusts had been approved by June 2009 and up to 70 are envisaged.



## Case study 1:

### Development of a chain of trust schools

The Kemnal Trust was formed in 2008, based on Kemnal Technology College in Bromley in south-east London. The headteacher is an accredited national leader of education and the college is a national support school. The trust has taken responsibility for three other schools: Welling, Debden Park High and King Harold. The schools retain their distinct personalities but share a chief executive officer, as well as knowledge, systems and teachers.

Kemnal, graded by Ofsted as an outstanding school, was brought in by Essex County Council to take over the day-to-day running of Debden Park High School after the latter was placed in special measures in January 2007. The same happened with Welling School in Bexley in January 2008. Kemnal introduced its systems to both schools and ensured that there was good leadership on site, bringing in leaders and expertise from other schools in the trust and making sure there was good support and professional development for all the staff.

As a result, both schools came out of special measures on their second monitoring visit, the quickest recorded turnaround for a secondary school. Debden Park has now been judged outstanding in its own right, just 21 months after it came out of special measures.

A similar approach has been taken with King Harold School in Waltham Abbey, Essex where the Kemnal Trust appoints a majority of the governors as part of its role as a national challenge trust school.

Despite only working with the school for a year, the proportion of students gaining 5 GCSEs at grades A\*–C (including English and maths) has risen by 10 percentage points to 36 per cent. In September 2009, Ofsted assessed King Harold School as satisfactory and improving quickly. 'This improvement', inspectors concluded, 'is due largely to the school's recent association with the Kemnal Trust and the expertise in school improvement that it has shared and provided'.

Source: DCSF, July 2009a; updated with material supplied by the Kemnal Trust

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## Academies

The academy model first emerged around the turn of the 20th century. The idea was to create a new model of independently managed state schools outside the traditional local authority system, with a focus on areas of underperformance and disadvantage. External sponsors would bring added commitment, expertise and funding to this cause.

In September 2009, 200 academies were open in 82 local authorities, and up to a further 100 are due to open by September 2010.

When academies first started, each one was a free-standing institution. However, as sponsors came to terms with the concept and practicalities of establishing an academy as well as the opportunities arising from the expansion of the academy programme, they increasingly moved to sponsoring more than one academy. By February 2008, there were 40 sponsors of multiple academies either open or in the pipeline, including 5 (ARK, Harris, Oasis, ULT and British Edutrust) with plans for more than 10 each. Chains now account for more than half of all open academies.

As Lord Adonis, the former education minister, has commented:

**The rise of these academy chains is a highly significant development for English state education.**

Adonis, 2008a

## Accreditation of school providers and groups

The formal recognition of the scope and potential of the school chains agenda came in the latter half of 2009. The government's white paper referred to the many examples 'where federations, Trusts and other multi-school models have tackled problems in schools which have been identified by Ofsted as weak and failing' (DCSF, 2009a:49). The white paper announced the intention to introduce and consult on an accreditation system for education providers wishing to operate groups of schools. In October 2009, DCSF published a consultation paper on accreditation (DCSF, 2009b) and in February 2010 (DCSF, 2010) announced the final criteria for:

- accredited school providers, led by educational institutions (such as schools, further education colleges and universities), academy sponsors, church and faith groups, educational consultancies, other educational providers or private and third sector organisations, wanting to run one or two schools
- accredited schools groups, led by educational organisations directly responsible for the leadership and governance of two or more academies or schools in majority trusts or federations, wanting to run three or more schools

Both accredited school providers and accredited schools groups may apply with other organisations that are not accredited but who wish to co-sponsor or be a partner to the application.

Those leading an accreditation application will be expected to have (or demonstrate the capacity to access) a track record in their own field; the vision to be able to lead a partnership; accountability and governance mechanisms for ensuring improvement; and the knowledge and experience to support significant school improvement.

The proposed criteria are fully aligned with the existing criteria developed by the National College for designating national leaders of education and national support schools.

All schools and education providers will in future have to be accredited if they want to be considered for formal school intervention projects, such as new academies and instances where a school is taking over another school via a majority trust or federation. These proposals originally related only to secondary schools and academies, but the government has since announced plans to introduce accreditation within the primary sector.

DCSF plans to accredit the first groups of schools in March 2010.

## Section 2: What is a chain?

In the commercial sector, chains are a commonplace part of the market system. A chain may supply a service, license the manufacture of a product or run a set of retail outlets. A chain-based enterprise is frequently driven by a vision and set of values that are backed up with standardised operating systems and/or a product range that provides the basis of

the customer offer. Chains are normally strong on metrics and quality assurance procedures in order to protect the value of the brand, secure a healthy financial return and satisfy customers' aspirations (see Case study 2). An overarching board normally provides the main governance and is ultimately accountable for the success of the chain.



### Case study 2: Defining elements of a commercial chain

George Ashford is a senior executive for Inchape plc, and has worked in a range of commercial chains in the retail sector for many years. In a presentation for the National College he identified seven defining aspects of chains in the commercial sector.

1. The brand is a combination of two things: a) values – what an organisation stands for, and b) delivery – what it achieves.
2. Getting real ownership of the brand in each outlet is essential and needs to be addressed as a priority.
3. The biggest challenge is ensuring quality in every outlet – one or two poorly performing outlets can soon damage the reputation of the brand.
4. The key to addressing this is high-quality leadership and management in each outlet and across the chain, coupled with ensuring consistency of implementation of the fundamentals in each outlet.
5. 80 per cent of what each outlet needs to do is based on standard operating procedures. We know these procedures work so why invent something new? All outlets need to accept and implement the 80 per cent. That leaves 20 per cent for creativity, inspiration and contextualisation. Problems arise when those in charge of outlets try to amend the 80 per cent instead of focusing on the 20 per cent.
6. There is a need for a well-defined set of performance measures for evaluation and a clear process for 'exiting' poor performers.
7. Increasing the scale of the overall chain needs to be handled very carefully. Many come unstuck by over-expanding. Increased size gives you flexibility and increases income but you must not compromise on quality and capacity to lead.

The secondary school chains that are developing share many of the characteristics of their commercial cousins, though they have also developed features that are peculiar to an educational environment. Typically they will have the features described below.

- **Clear vision and values:** These capture and describe the central driving educational ethos of the chain. Most schools have a vision statement but what tends to set a chain's statement apart is an explicit or implicit description of how it sees the mission going beyond the boundaries of an individual institution (see Case study 3).



### Case study 3: Vision and value statement

The Haberdashers' Aske's Federation consists of three sister academies in south-east London – 'three schools, one vision' is the federation's strapline:

**The Aske's vision is one where all pupils in the federation are inspired to reach their full potential, regardless of their ability or background, where aspirations and achievements are constantly raised through the highest quality academic, personal and vocational teaching and guidance, and where the pupils and staff at the three Academies benefit from each other's strengths.**

Source: Haberdashers' Aske's Federation  
([www.hahc.org.uk](http://www.hahc.org.uk))

- **A distinct teaching and learning model:** Along with systems covering areas such as behaviour, pastoral support and engagement with parents, chains adopt a common teaching and learning model across all the member schools. This is the crucial defining feature that makes a school chain a chain and distinguishes it from other groups of schools that are working together with shared governance. The teaching and learning model underpins the operation of all the schools in the chain. One chain captures the importance of its common teaching and learning model in this way:

**By sharing common standard operating procedures, frameworks and policies, we will be developing academies that can lead an educational evolution rather than revolution on their way to sustainable, high-performing status.**

Academies Enterprise Trust  
([www.academiesenterprisetrust.org](http://www.academiesenterprisetrust.org))

Case studies 4 and 5 give examples of how teaching and learning models operate in practice and how they apply across a chain.



## Case study 4:

### Outwood Transformation Model<sup>®</sup>

The Outwood Grange family currently consists of five schools serving over 6,000 students. It includes approximately 800 staff with a budget of £35 million and involves work with 4 local authorities.

Two of the schools are academies (Outwood Grange Academy, Wakefield and Outwood Academy, Adwick, Doncaster) and the other three schools in Yorkshire and Stockton-on-Tees were linked to Outwood Grange because they were in special measures, national challenge or both. Outwood Grange is working with these schools under NLE contracts. Each school retains its own governing body or has an interim executive board.

In four of the five schools, the individuals acting as headteachers have as their substantive position vice-principal at Outwood Grange. In the fifth, the headteacher has been appointed by the executive principal and inducted into the Outwood Transformation Model<sup>®</sup>, which has seven strands.

#### Strand 1: Leadership with vision and efficacy

The vision, Students come first, is critical to setting the tone for a school's improvement strategy. Schools are organised round the 'deeps' model developed by Professor David Hargreaves with the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust.

#### Strand 2: Quality learning and teaching in the classroom

There is a clear focus on quality in the classroom with five-part lessons and lessons for learning implemented across a whole school. There is an emphasis on outstanding lessons and the Ofsted criteria for outstanding lessons. A classroom observation database is set up to allow speedy analysis of good practice within the school.

#### Strand 3: Flexible curriculum model

The curriculum is reviewed and a two-year Key Stage 3 followed by a three-year Key Stage 4 is introduced, including vertical mentor groups and

vertical teaching groups. GCSEs are offered in one year as a default mode, with whole-subject immersion days planned at intervals throughout the academic year.

#### Strand 4: Systematic monitoring and intervention

A whole-school monitoring and systematic intervention programme is used which involves sharing with students and reporting to parents at six-weekly intervals on progress across every subject in relation to their Fischer Family Trust band D target.

#### Strand 5: Systems, protocols and learning environments

A range of inter-related systems and protocols (including a whole-school behaviour programme, curriculum-led financial planning and changes to the school day) are introduced so that a school can develop cohesively across the board.

#### Strand 6: Bespoke professional development

Professional development for all staff, including support staff, is seen as the key to sustaining improvement. A school's leadership team will attend a two-day leadership challenge residential event that equips them with an understanding of the processes and the tools required to be effective leaders. Middle leaders and aspiring middle leaders are invited to attend two courses, each of 10 modules, on transforming middle leaders. Every week, two hours are set aside for a professional development session with all staff, including support staff, where the models, systems and protocols are embedded.

#### Strand 7: A praise and reward achievement culture for staff and students

Heavy emphasis is placed on raising self-esteem and praising progress. Students, staff, governors and the community need to feel positive about themselves and rally behind a school as it starts to become a successful institution. This also involves immersion visits to Outwood Grange Academy so that staff, students, governors and parents can see for themselves the impact of the vision.

Source: Outwood Grange Academy



### Case study 5: Kunskapsskolan educational model

Kunskapsskolan is the largest secondary education provider in Sweden. The company runs 32 schools for 10,000 12–19 year olds as part of the Swedish free schools system, which enables parents to spend an education voucher at a school of their choice. The schools are comprehensive, inclusive and co-educational in their intake. They are typically smaller than English schools and have up to 500 students. The schools all follow the same pedagogic approach.

The Kunskapsskolan model is based on personalised learning. Every student follows a long-term learning and attainment plan agreed between the student and the student's personal tutor and parents. Students work at a pace that matches their abilities and goals, using the most effective learning style to achieve the goals set out in the national curriculum. Parents are actively engaged in their children's education, participating in setting goals and able to monitor progress through online reporting systems.

Although the model is focused on a student-centred approach to learning, Kunskapsskolan follows the national curriculum, participates in national tests and conforms to national assessment systems.

Kunskapsskolan has been selected as a preferred provider to run two academies in the London borough of Richmond-upon-Thames and a third in Suffolk, which will be called learning schools.

Source: Kunskapsskolan  
([www.kunskapsskolan.co.uk](http://www.kunskapsskolan.co.uk))

Such is the importance that ARK Schools (which sponsors eight academies and has a further one set to open in 2012) attaches to its teaching and learning model that it has formalised the core content in a handbook. It explains in practical terms how the 10 principles of the ARK model and the 4 aspects of its operating approach (see Case study 6) should apply in each ARK academy.

Other aspects of the handbook cover academic tracking arrangements, HR, finance and governance arrangements.



### Case study 6: ARK model: principles and approach

1. High expectations for:
  - student achievement and behaviour
  - staff professionalism, skill and commitment
2. Rigorous and engaging lessons
3. Respect for teachers and a calm orderly environment
4. Continuing assessment and responsive support for each child
5. Depth before breadth: an emphasis on literacy and maths
6. More time for learning
7. Larger schools broken down into smaller units: schools-within-schools
8. Aspirational identity
9. Motivational culture
10. Strong partnership with parents

#### The four key aspects of the ARK model

1. Focus on the key levers of improvement
2. Clear and simple aims, roles and accountability
3. Transparent and honest feedback
4. Principal autonomy

Source: ARK Schools ([www.arkschools.net](http://www.arkschools.net))

Nearly all of the chains interviewed for this project were clear that it was not just a question of automatically imposing an inflexible central model on an institution. They recognised the need to take account of the local context.

For example, EdisonLearning, an education company working with 100 schools including several academies, has developed a comprehensive secondary school model, e2. This covers:

- relationships and ethos between learners and teachers
- curriculum (instructional learning, conceptual learning, collaborative learning and personal learning)
- organisation and systems
- change management
- people development
- performance measures

EdisonLearning sees the model as being 70–75 per cent non-negotiable and 25–30 per cent context specific (ie, adapted to the circumstances of an individual school).

In the nine Harris academies in south London, the teaching and learning model comes out of proven approaches used in the first Harris schools. All the Harris academies are expected to follow a template which is supported by structures, systems and policies, but they have flexibility to adapt it to the local context.

**Each of our academies has its own personality and way of doing things.**

Harris Federation of South London  
Schools Prospectus 2009/10,  
([www.harrisfederation.org.uk](http://www.harrisfederation.org.uk))

How this works in practice is illustrated by what happened when in January 2006 the Harris Federation agreed to convert Tamworth Manor High School in the London borough of Merton to an academy on a fast-track basis. Dan Moynihan, CEO of the Harris Federation writes:

All of the Harris CTC policies and procedures were imported to the new academy and have since been developed and 'tweaked' where appropriate to fit local circumstances. We transferred our 'house system' where assistant principals lead houses with groups of subject staff responsible for both the academic and pastoral welfare of students, removing the previous roles of heads of year. We also transferred an innovative 14–19 vocational curriculum, a tried and tested computerised system for tracking and monitoring individual students and behaviour management systems. To boost post-16 achievement, we created a joint sixth form between three academies, importing established systems all in one go.

Moynihan, 2008:17

- **A system for training leaders and other staff:** This means the teaching and learning model is applied consistently and in a way that ensures that the model is understood and internalised. This approach is an integral feature of the Outwood chain (see Case study 4). In the Harris Federation, the heads of English, maths and science come together to study data on relative performance and observe lessons in each other's academies both to provide challenge and also to learn from each other's practice. A specialist team of advanced skills teachers works across all the federation's schools. There are common professional development training days across the federation and all 85 newly qualified teachers working in the 9 Harris academies are supported and trained together.
- **Deployment of key leaders and staff across the chain:** Case study 4 showed how vice-principals from Outwood were being deployed as headteachers across the family of schools. Case study 7 below illustrates how the Kemnal Trust has made extensive use of its leadership resources across the four schools that are part of the trust. The headteachers of Walsall, Sandwell

and Madley academies, which are all sponsored by the Mercers Company in association with Thomas Telford School, have all come from Thomas Telford School. The head of Merton Academy, which is part of the Harris Federation, was previously a vice-principal at Harris City Technology College. The principal of Crayford Academy comes from the leadership team of the Haberdashers' Aske's Federation, of which it is a part.

These leaders are not only able leaders in their own right but also, particularly in the early days of a chain, expert proponents and guardians of the

teaching and learning model on which the chain is based. As Lord Adonis has commented in the context of establishing new academies in a chain:

**[Academy sponsors] often appoint principals to their new academies from within their existing 'family' of schools, identifying the most promising leaders who are specially trained to take up headships elsewhere within their 'group'.**

Adonis, 2008b:vii



### Case study 7: Deployment of key leaders across the Kemnal Trust schools

A vice-principal at Kemnal Technology College moved to become headteacher at Debden Park High School and having led the transformation of that school, is now also acting executive head of King Harold School.

The director of e-learning and the head of maths at Kemnal Technology College also transferred to Debden Park as assistant headteachers.

Two heads of college and the vice-principal with responsibility for science at Kemnal Technology College moved to Welling School to take over respectively as headteacher, first deputy headteacher and deputy headteacher (with responsibility for science at Key Stages 3 and 4).

Two of the current vice-principals at Kemnal Technology College support new schools that join

the trust. One focuses on Year 11 and sorting out systems and structures and training staff in the use of data. The other interviews all staff and trains a continuing professional development co-ordinator.

The director of special educational needs (SEN) at Kemnal Technology College ensures that all schools in the trust have robust systems for identifying and supporting pupils with SEN and provides training for all SEN staff.

The CEO oversees the work of all the schools in the trust and his previous post as principal of Kemnal Technology College has been filled by one of the vice-principals at the school.

The director of finance, estates and administration of the Kemnal Trust exercises financial oversight across all the schools in the trust.

Source: The Kemnal Trust  
([www.ktc.bromley.sch.uk/information/kemnal\\_trust.asp](http://www.ktc.bromley.sch.uk/information/kemnal_trust.asp))

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- **Direct employment of all or key staff:**

The deployment of leaders and other staff across a chain is in part made possible because in many of the academy chains all the staff are employed on a central, academy-wide contract. In trusts and federations, the position may be slightly different – senior staff may be on a central trust or federation-wide contract with new staff moved to a central contract as staff turnover naturally occurs.

At Outwood, for example, vice-principals have contracts that oblige them to work across the north of England. Other staff, who are able and developing as leaders or expert practitioners but who may not be able to gain promotion because other high-quality staff are filling lead positions, may be put on assignment posts. That means that they too can be deployed across all the schools in the Outwood family. This flexible approach also means that staff can be moved around as contracts come to an end.

- **Geographical proximity:**

Most of the chains are operating in a relatively defined area or sub-region. The Harris academies, for example, are concentrated in four boroughs in south London. The three Haberdashers' Aske's schools are located in south-east London. The Outwood family is based in Yorkshire and adjacent local authorities. Thomas Telford and the three Mercer academies are all situated quite close to each other in the West Midlands, though there are plans to open a new academy in Hammersmith in west London. The four Emmanuel Foundation academies are based in the north east. The Kemnal Trust operates across Bromley, Bexley and Essex, which thanks to the Dartford crossing provides a relatively geographically compact focus for the trust. The Cabot Learning Federation consists of three academies in Bristol and one in nearby Weston-Super-Mare that will join the federation when it opens in 2010.

There are, however, exceptions to this geographic rule. Six of the eight ARK academies are located in inner London (which it considers to be important in terms of the support the academies provide for each other) but there is also now an ARK academy in Portsmouth and one in Birmingham. Similarly, four Academy Enterprise Trust (AET) academies are located in Essex, and new academies that are relatively close by are coming on stream in Suffolk and Enfield. However, AET is also expecting to run academies in the London borough of Richmond and the Isle of Wight, which will result in the chain having 10 academies by 2011. As it expands, AET is planning to group its academies in clusters as the basis for providing management and support.

The seven academies sponsored by Edutrust Academies Charitable Trust are dispersed across the Midlands, Yorkshire and North London. The 11 Oasis academies are situated around the country, though significantly most of them are in pairs that are near to each other, providing a basis for mutual learning and support. The 17 academies of the largest academy sponsor, the United Learning Trust, are also fairly scattered though they fall into around 5 geographic clusters.

- **Central resources and systems:**

Just about every chain is organising some of its functions centrally, ie across the chain. As Case study 8 illustrates, the functions that are most commonly provided centrally are executive leadership (and associated support), human resources, financial management (including invoicing, payments and payroll systems) and ICT. Premises management is sometimes organised centrally and sometimes by each academy individually.



## Case study 8:

### Examples of central functions managed by chains of schools

Chain	Number of staff employed centrally	Centrally organised functions	Arrangements for funding central functions
<b>Chain A (5 schools)</b>	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– executive principal</li> <li>– director of executive services</li> <li>– director of human resources (HR)</li> <li>– director of finance</li> <li>– director of facilities</li> </ul>	Each school contributes a modest charge to cover the cost of central functions and capacity-building support. As the family of schools grows, it is expected to reduce this charge to between 0.5% and 1% of budgets. In addition, income is received for the support provided for assisting schools in special measures or national challenge.
<b>Chain B (4 schools)</b>	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– chief executive</li> <li>– bursar who provides financial and business planning support across the trust</li> <li>– vice-principal, who leads work on a funded programme of school-to-school improvement</li> <li>– network manager and two technicians employed centrally to oversee the ICT function</li> </ul>	<p>There are three sources of funding:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– payments from schools for centrally provided services such as ICT</li> <li>– payments from external bodies for services, eg SSAT</li> <li>– fees from local authorities, schools and DCSF for providing support for underperforming schools</li> </ul>
<b>Chain C (4 schools)</b>	6.8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– executive principal and part of the salaries of two assistant principals</li> <li>– finance and procurement</li> <li>– HR</li> <li>– marketing and public relations</li> <li>– one team assistant/personal assistant</li> </ul>	Each academy contributes £95 per student to the central running costs, yielding around £250,000 in total (about 1% or less of income). This is matched by income from consultancy, software sales and local authority contracts for school improvement support. The chain also carries out a large part of its own project management on planning new academies, which brings in additional income.

Chain	Number of staff employed centrally	Centrally organised functions	Arrangements for funding central functions
<b>Chain D (9 schools)</b>	15 approx	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– chief executive and personal assistant</li> <li>– director of finance and operational development (including site maintenance)</li> <li>– director of projects</li> <li>– ICT director and supporting ICT and finance staff</li> <li>– small team of subject specialists and project managers</li> <li>– The central office also deals with HR and pay roll, including negotiation with the unions.</li> </ul>	A charge is made on each academy's budget.
<b>Chain E (8 schools)</b>	40 approx	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– HR and performance management of staff</li> <li>– centrally procured and managed ICT systems</li> <li>– finance (invoicing, payroll and accounts management)</li> <li>– project management of new academies,</li> <li>– education services, including negotiating improvement targets with academies, data and performance management, internal inspection of schools, brokering support (particularly in relation to maths and, literacy and assessment) and challenging underperformance</li> </ul>	<p>Income includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– fees from DCSF for costs of setting up an academy</li> <li>– fees charged to academies of just under 5% of total government funding, which is about half the amount that would be retained by the local authority in relation to a community school</li> <li>– subsidies from the sponsor's charitable trust, though the long-term objective is for central functions to be financially self-sufficient</li> </ul>

All the secondary chains interviewed for this project said that having common IT systems was essential for the effective operation of the chain, though some were constrained by existing PFI contracts from putting this into practice. One chain even considered the issue so important that it had stripped out the PFI ICT systems it had inherited and paid to have its own fit-for-purpose systems installed throughout schools when they joined the chain.

The number of staff centrally employed by chains is generally quite small, though comparisons between chains need to be treated with caution as the chains are of different sizes and at different stages of development. In the case of the chain with the largest number of staff, the numbers reflect a different approach to providing improvement support: it is more chain- than school-based.

Funding for central functions comes from two main sources: charges on schools in the chain and income generated from improvement support services provided to schools outside the chain, either under contract or bought in. In one case, a sponsor is contributing to the central costs but this is not considered to be a long-term arrangement.

- **Strong quality-assurance arrangements:** Systematic and intelligent use of data is an essential element in the life of most secondary schools. School chains have similarly put in place information systems to track performance on both a whole-school and pupil-level basis. They understand the importance of timely data both for enhancing performance and protecting what a brand stands for.

Systematic monitoring and intervention forms strand 4 of the Outwood model (Case study 4) and was a key aspect of the Harris Federation's work with Merton Academy described above. Similarly, the Kemnal Trust's ICT systems support registration seven times a day, online school reports, timetabling, behaviour records and homework management. All this is available to staff, pupils and parents on a 24-7 basis. In addition, the progress of every student is monitored against demanding targets across all key stages. The data is available to be

interrogated in real time by the trust leadership and is monitored on a weekly basis and again parents can access this information at any time. The teaching and learning practices needed to deliver demanding improvement targets are subject to rigorous quality assurance, linked to performance management and continual professional development.

As well as having central ICT data management systems, the ARK Schools director of education leads a team that inspects all its schools so that it has an external view and assessment of how they are performing.

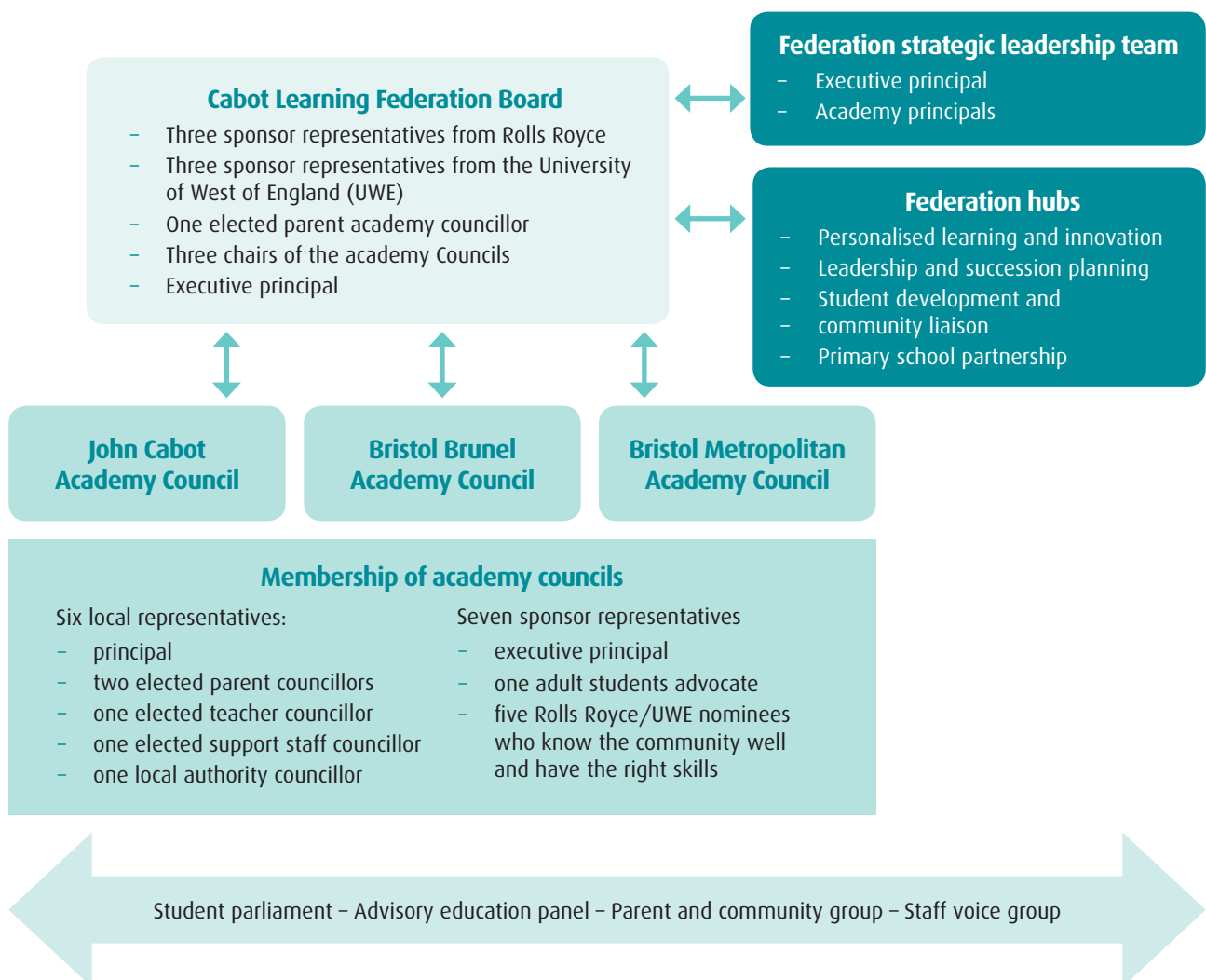
The executive principal of the Cabot Learning Federation sees it as part of his role to observe lessons with colleagues from the senior leadership team (SLT) to moderate the judgements they are making about teaching and learning. He attends one SLT meeting in each academy every month to give feedback to colleagues on the federation and to keep up to date with developments. He also manages the federation's key performance indicators, using data provided by the academy leadership teams and, in conjunction with his chair, leads the performance management of the academy principals. The executive principal also leads reviews of core areas of development such as the quality of sixth form provision or the progress being made in English and maths across the academies.

- **Effective and clear corporate governance:** In general, the chains interviewed for this project had clearly defined corporate governance arrangements that reserve central accountability for a parent board, balanced with maintaining autonomy for individual institutions. In most cases the overarching corporate board reserves the right to nominate the majority of governors to the governing body of each institution within the chain.

Figure 1 shows the governance structure for the Cabot Learning Federation and the membership of the individual academy councils and the overall federation board. Underpinning the membership arrangements is a formal memorandum that describes the roles and accountabilities of the

board and the councils in respect of strategic responsibilities, governance, finance and asset management, staffing, communications, monitoring and evaluation, students, curriculum, teaching and learning and communities.

**Figure 1: Governance of the Cabot Learning Federation**



Source: Cabot Learning Federation (adapted)

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The link between the main corporate board and that of individual institutions is normally secured by having the chairs of each school in the chain take a seat on the main board and/or by the executive head/principal and chair of the main board sitting on both the main board and board of individual schools.

The corporate board, and in particular the chair of the board, also play a key role in most chains in reviewing the performance of the executive head/principal and in setting their salary.

All of the academy chains and nearly all of the chains that are growing out school improvement contracts have external sponsors or people with commercial or academic expertise on their boards. This is hugely valued and is seen as bringing greater rigour, challenge and innovative thinking to the work of the chain.

The Cabot model includes a local authority representative on each academy council, illustrative of how some chains chose to work with local agencies. Doncaster Metropolitan Council, for example, is a co-sponsor of the Outwood Academy, Adwick.

The chains that were interviewed also placed great emphasis on identifying and securing able and appropriate local representatives to contribute to the governing bodies of the individual schools or academies. They recognised the importance of the local context but were also determined to find people of the right calibre and the experience for these positions.

The formal accountability and governance of chains is in most chains complemented by an executive group that leads and manages the whole chain. In the Cabot model it is called the federation strategic leadership team. It is composed of the executive principal and the academy principals and its role is to:

- agree common goals and shared practice across the academies
- identify areas of focus where support and help from another academy could be of use
- check the alignment of the federation vision with that of the academies
- monitor and quality-assure the performance of students across the federation

The Harris Federation has a principals' executive group, chaired by the chief executive officer (CEO) that meets half-termly and reports directly to the Harris Federation Board through the CEO.

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## Section 3: The benefits and potential benefits of chains

Not all the schools that are promoted by the same sponsor or share the same overall governance meet the criteria for being chains in the full sense of that term and as defined in section 2. But where chains are truly chains, they are contributing to real and defined benefits to the education system in England. The chain phenomenon is helping to address some of the systemic challenges that the school system has wrestled with for generations.

### Sustaining educational improvement in challenging schools

We already know that a strong school, with good systems and a clear model of school improvement, can, if it is moored alongside an underperforming school, be a very if not the most effective way of addressing its problems (Potter, 2004; DfES, 2005; Hill, 2008; Hill & Matthews, 2008). This concept lies at the heart of NLEs and NSSs. Structured partnerships of this kind have a good track record in helping to lead struggling and weak schools out of special measures rapidly and bringing about a significant improvement in results. The Kemnal Trust example (Case study 1) is one of many examples that could be cited.

The challenge has been to sustain schools as they emerge from an Ofsted category or other challenging circumstances, take their performance and development to the next level and ensure that high achievement is, as it were, embedded in their DNA. Too often, as tended to be the case with schools that were part of Fresh Start, institutions slip back after an initial burst of improvement.

Becoming part of a school chain is not the only solution but, provided it follows the model described in section 2, it does offer a structural framework for enabling improving schools to continue to progress. It is not just that this model provides an ongoing source of leadership, teaching and curriculum support and development – though that in itself is significant. It is also because integration within a chain embeds on a permanent basis the aspirations, expectations, systems, standards and accountability associated with the success of one or a group of schools (see Case study 9).

There is, however, one caveat. A chain and, as they expand, each sub-cluster should have at least one school that has performed highly over a sustained period at the heart of its operation if it is to deliver this mission. A chain where all the schools are still en route to achieving high attainment, as some of the academy chains still are, may not be in the position to take on a struggling school. The effort in taking an underperforming but improving school may divert resources and effort away from more immediate priorities. The accreditation criteria for both accredited school providers and accredited school groups (DCSF, 2009b) guards against this risk by putting an appropriate emphasis on a sustained track record of achievement.



### Case study 9: Sustaining improvement at Haberdashers' Aske's Knights Academy

Knights Academy came into being in its current form in September 2005. Since then the academy has made and sustained huge progress moving from 9 per cent of students achieving 5 or more GCSEs at grades A\*-C in 2005 to 64 per cent in 2009. In addition, although it recognises that further progress is still needed, 35 per cent of students gained 5 or more GCSEs at grades A\*-C, including mathematics and English. In 2008 Ofsted assessed the academy as 'good' and improving rapidly.

The academy is the first to acknowledge that these achievements have been gained and sustained through being part of the Haberdashers' Aske's Federation – Knights shares a chief executive, board of governors and sixth form provision with nearby Haberdashers' Aske's Hatcham College. Knight's principal says:

**We draw on the support and expertise of Hatcham College, and the vision and ethos of the Haberdashers' Aske's Federation.**

The federation has now added a third school to its chain with the opening in September 2009 of a 3-18 academy in Crayford in the London borough of Bexley.

Source: Haberdashers' Aske's Federation  
([www.hahc.org.uk](http://www.hahc.org.uk))

## Providing a new model of governance

For a long time, many headteachers have been concerned about the governance of schools. They generally acknowledge the dedication and time that governors give to their institution. A good number of headteachers will also readily accept that they are fortunate enough to have an able chair who brings a wealth of expertise and experience to the work. Others describe how some of their governors add real value. But overall the school governance system often seems to deliver less than the sum of its parts with too much of the work of governing bodies bound up in committees, papers and procedures.

The introduction of trusts and academies and, to an extent, federations, is effectively inventing a new form of school governance. A clearer distinction is being made between strategic direction and oversight and more operational accountability, with the former being exercised at chain level and the latter at school level. On the whole, governing bodies are smaller and more focused and they are bringing in new sources of expertise from the business, academic, faith and charitable sectors.

The net effect, as section 2 highlighted and the experience of the Harris Federation shows, is a sharper and more driven form of accountability (In Case study 10, Dan Moynihan, CEO of the Harris Federation, explains this in more detail.) The commercial sector's preoccupation with bottom-line performance is rubbing off when applied to schools. The involvement of higher education is helping to bring rigour to the evaluation of teaching and learning models and interventions. Faith- and charitable foundation-based chains are bringing an enhanced sense of moral purpose to educational governance.



### Case study 10: Governance of the Harris Federation

The governing body comprises a range of people representing the community as well as business people who bring a sharper accountability than might normally be the case in the state sector. A key difference with other schools is that sponsors are not constrained by thinking inside the standard 'educational box'. For the sponsor, there are never problems or excuses that prevent things from happening, just situations which need solutions. It is this absolute expectation of success which makes the difference.

Moynihan, 2008:15

Not all academies are part of a chain but of 21 academies that formed part of the academy evaluation programme, the quality of governance, as assessed in Ofsted inspections, was found to be outstanding or good in all but one of them (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2008).

## Training a new generation of school leaders

At the present time, 3 out of 5 headteachers are aged over 50 and over a quarter are over 55. The ensuing retirement bulge is not expected to work its way through the system until 2015 (Pattison, 2009). The school system faces a big challenge in recruiting sufficient leaders, particularly as it has until now typically taken up to 20 years for a teacher to progress from the classroom to headship.

It is not just the quantity of headteachers that need to be trained and recruited that is an issue. Headship is becoming more demanding and complex. It is requiring increased skills in strategic and change management as society, the economy and education policy constantly evolve. Partnership working between schools, which continues to grow, involves new ways of working, particularly in terms of relating to other leaders and institutions. The National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH), now a requirement for all new headteachers or principals, has been reviewed to reflect these new demands.

School partnerships provide a good context for supporting and developing aspiring and middle leaders. They enable emerging leaders to observe the style of leadership of leaders from institutions other than their own. They often have the opportunity to take on new responsibilities either in another school or across a partnership. There may well be joint leadership training with colleagues from other schools.

As section 2 illustrated, chains build on this approach, align it with their teaching and learning model and systematically use the chain to grow, nurture and deploy new leaders. The Harris Federation, for example, has its own MA programme which is focused on school improvement and is designed to help teachers of all levels progress to leadership and management roles.

Staff in the AET academies who are working towards promotion or who are identified through a talent management programme are offered two leadership routes – one to become a leader of

pedagogy and the other to enable them to develop as leaders of organisations. These routes are linked by a set of common development opportunities covering access to Master's qualifications, in-house middle leadership programmes, opportunities for action-based research and shared leadership activities. A coaching programme supports participants, enabling them to develop their expertise and, if required, change routes mid-flow.

Schools in a chain are also able to shorten the period of development by investing in the training of emerging leaders and being able to move them around the chain. A head of department or an assistant principal does not have to apply for a new post in a new school, bed themselves in and work their passage before applying for the next promotion. They can, as with the Outwood model, simply apply for an assignment post that will move them round the chain's schools in different roles. In many ways it might be described as a more apprenticeship-based approach to growing school leaders – a development that will have implications for the National College as it plans the future of leadership development training and support.

Chains are creating what one executive principal describes as an internal employment market that is providing a ladder of opportunity within a chain for aspiring leaders. Of more significance for the maintained school sector as a whole is that the chains are providing a resource that addresses the vexed issue of succession planning. Effectively they are helping to build what is often referred to as system leadership.

Several chains are being encouraged in their leadership development role by bidding successfully for additional resources to develop leadership capacity. This is enabling them to offer leadership development support to a much wider group of schools and potential leaders (see Case study 11).



## Case study 11: Future leaders

ARK Schools partnered with the National College and the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust to establish Future Leaders, a programme that aims to develop the next generation of headteachers for secondary schools that are in challenging circumstances. It offers a four-year leadership development programme for current and former teachers. ARK also provided significant funding, especially in the start-up phase.

After a year-long apprenticeship under a successful urban head, participants receive cutting-edge UK- and US-based training, along with coaching and mentoring from education and business leaders, to help them gain a senior leadership role after 12 months. The goal is for them to be working towards headship within four years. The programme recruits participants and training schools for London, north-west England and the West Midlands on a rolling basis throughout the year.

Source: Ark Schools ([www.arkonline.org](http://www.arkonline.org))

## Creating an economy of scale

Schools in England have seen their budgets rise in real terms (ie, after taking account of inflation) by more than half since 1997 and, given that there are fewer pupils, by 65 per cent in terms of spending per pupil (Audit Commission, 2009). However, the financial outlook is, to use the Audit Commission's term, 'more austere'.

DCSF is expecting schools to contribute £3.7 billion of cash-releasing efficiency savings from 2008/09 to 2010/11. As part of this, a 1 per cent efficiency saving, worth £307 million, has been incorporated into school funding for the period from 2008/09 to 2010/11. Beyond 2010/11, the government has said it will increase schools' budgets by 0.7 per cent in real terms – far lower than in recent years – and schools will also have to generate further efficiencies and pay for increases in national insurance (NI) contributions and salaries from within this total.

The introduction of local management of schools and the increased autonomy of schools fostered by successive governments have liberated the leadership of many schools and enabled them to be more creative and innovative in using their resources. But decentralisation of financial management has also brought some diseconomy of scale.

It is not cost-effective for each and every school to purchase its own ICT licences or organise its own ICT procurement. Although many schools buy in some services such as HR and legal services from their local authorities, many take responsibility for their own premises management, administration and procurement. There is great variation between schools' spending on standard items, suggesting that there is scope for large savings. For example, the Audit Commission has stated that £400 million could be saved by better procurement alone (Audit Commission, 2009).

School chains point to a sensible way of organising school finances. Chains can afford to employ fully qualified and experienced financial and business managers and can make savings in back office administration by pooling resources and using standard systems across the chain. The chain also provides a better and more economically viable basis for business planning, the organisation of procurement and maintenance of premises:

**By managing our ICT, finances, human resources and site maintenance from one central location our costs are reduced. This also means that individual academies can spend more time focussing on education and improving standards.**

[www.harrisfederation.org.uk](http://www.harrisfederation.org.uk)

This approach has been reinforced by the Audit Commission, which reports that:

**The secondary school example (in our Managing School Resources tool) demonstrates how, by employing an executive principal and administrative staff across two schools and having single department heads, the management and administrative costs for one school have reduced from £633,000 to £447,000, a reduction of nearly 30 per cent. This is approximately 6 per cent of the school's £3 million total annual revenue expenditure.**

Audit Commission, 2009:38

One needs to beware of generalising from individual examples, and partnerships or mergers between schools are unlikely to be effective if they are undertaken primarily for financial reasons. However, it would be odd if chains were not able to take advantage of their economies of scale.

Chains are also beginning to look at their business model for delivering the curriculum and are starting to identify ways of managing their resources more effectively by, for example, sharing specialist posts across the chain, establishing joint sixth forms and rationalising the use of support staff.

In some cases, chains are using their teaching and learning model as the basis for establishing a benchmark unit cost for teaching a particular module or programme because they know from the lead school what it costs to apply the model effectively and successfully. They are then using these unit costs as a point of comparison when they incorporate another school into the chain (see Case study 12).

In short, organised clusters or groups of schools are much more likely to provide an economy of scale that will enable schools and academies to weather a period of financial stringency.

## Maintaining a sense of perspective

Claiming these benefits for chains does not mean that they should be considered a magic bullet to deal with all the ills of the school system. Section 4 raises a series of questions that need to be considered and addressed as the concept of chains of schools is developed and extended.



### Case study 12: Using an effective teaching and learning model to rationalise costs

Applying the model has helped to take out costs without prejudicing standards or attainment. For example, at X school over £500,000 has been saved but the proportion of students gaining 5 or more A\*-Cs (including English and maths) has risen from 34 to 64 per cent in 6 months. The curriculum bonus that accrues from this approach is ploughed back into the school through, for example, extra investment in ICT and other services.

Source: Interview with  
anonymous executive principal

## Section 4: Issues and challenges for chains

The development of chains of schools is still a relatively new phenomenon in the education system. Accreditation is only just being introduced. It is not surprising, therefore, that there are issues and challenges to be resolved. This section describes seven questions that need to be considered and addressed by the education community, school leaders, policymakers and government ministers in relation to the development of chains.

### 1. Is there an optimum size for chains?

None of the representatives of the chains that were interviewed for this study felt that their chain had reached its optimum size. In part, they wished to continue to expand as part of fulfilling what they saw as their educational mission but they also wanted a larger operating base so as to generate a sufficient economy of scale for their central support functions.

There was, however, recognition that there might in certain circumstances be a diseconomy of scale if a chain became too big. For example, there were thought to be limits on the span of control that one executive principal could reasonably exercise, particularly if s/he saw it as part of his/her role to provide mentoring support and challenge to school and/or academy principals.

There was no consensus on what an upper limit for a chain might be, though somewhere between 8 and 15 schools/academies was the most common suggestion. One chain has aspirations to have nearer to 20 schools in its family. However, in discussions, another organisational model began to emerge. It was suggested that the larger the chain, the more likely it would be to spawn either separate geographical clusters or sub-chains; indeed, there is already evidence that this is starting to happen. Thus an overall chain might have a number of geographical clusters or sub-chains overseen by local executive principals reporting to a main board. The model was likened by one chief

executive to the business model developed by the chain's sponsor, ie very lean at the centre and using regional managers to oversee operations on a geographical basis.

This thinking was prompted by an acceptance that geographic proximity was important for facilitating mutual support and learning across a chain. In this regard, it will be interesting to track and compare the performance of chains that are geographically concentrated and/or use geographical clusters with those that are, or become, more geographically dispersed as they expand and develop.

### 2. Is the process by which chains acquire schools sufficiently transparent?

Chains have to date grown in five main ways:

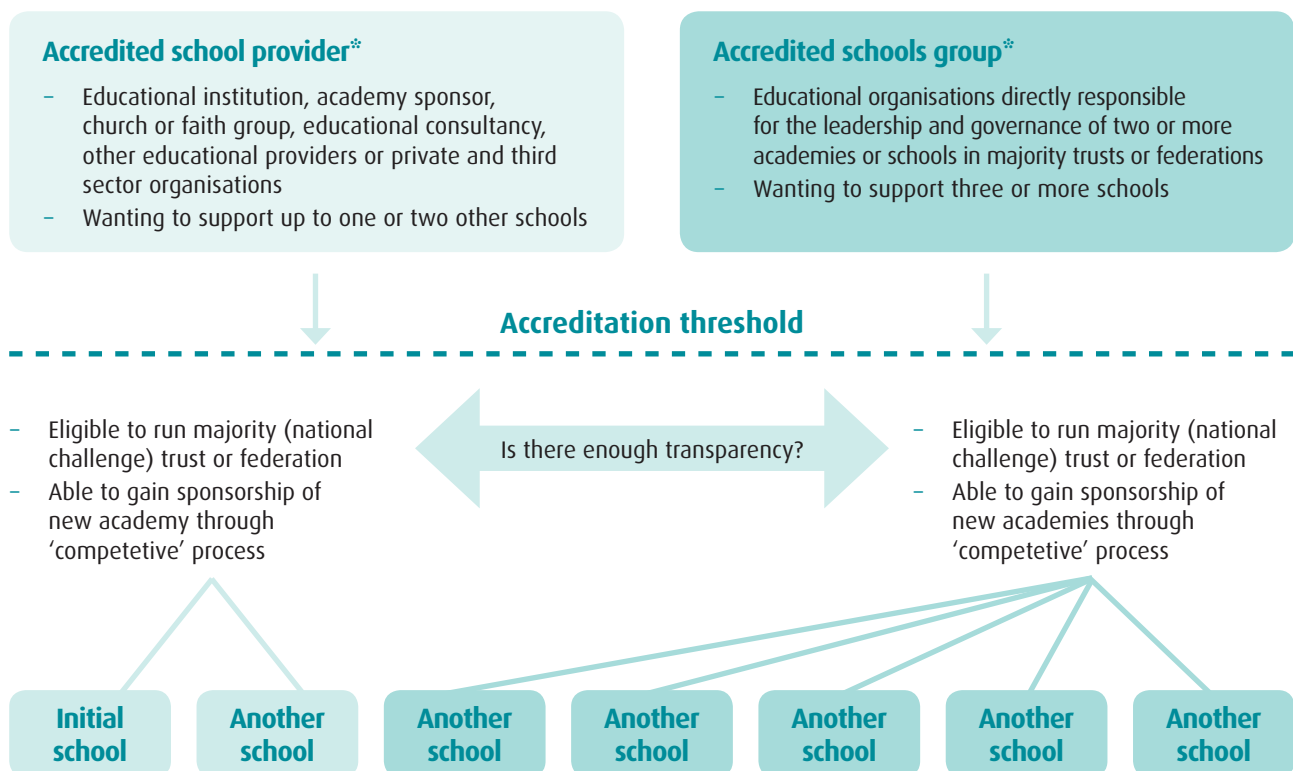
- Schools have formed and expanded their own federations and trusts.
- Schools have been awarded local authority contracts to turn round underperforming schools (often drawing on NLE accreditation).
- Schools have won competitions run by local authorities for establishing new schools.
- Schools have been accepted as lead partners in forming national challenge trusts or federations.
- Academies have been awarded a new academy franchise. The process for this has become more transparent in recent years.

Figure 2 summarises how the accreditation process proposed by the government in October 2009 would work. The first three routes described above would not require chains to be accredited in order to increase the number of schools in their chain. However, the introduction of the accreditation system might well mean that local authorities will in future expect promoters of new schools and schools undertaking general improvement support work on their behalf to be accredited.

Accreditation would, however, be required if a school wanted to be a lead partner in a majority (national challenge) trust or federation, or if one academy wanted to take on another academy.

In a further significant change, DCSF proposed in the October 2009 consultation (DCSF, 2009b) a more systematic and open approach to selecting sponsors for new academies. All accredited school providers and groups in a region would be able to attend a briefing and submit a bid. The bids would then be shortlisted and a contract awarded after a 'brief presentation and a discussion with a local authority and DCSF panel'.

**Figure 2: Operation of accreditation system, as announced in February 2010**



\* Both accredited school providers and accredited schools groups could take on willing partners, enter into federations, enter and win school competitions and accept other local authority contracts (other than national challenge trusts/federations) without requiring accreditation.

As more commercial enterprises become involved in school chains as co-sponsors, the process of selecting school providers and groups for specific academy projects may well be open to legal challenge if it is not perceived to be fair and above board. However, the proposals described above for selecting new academies would, if implemented, be more transparent than anything that has gone before.

The same cannot be said, however, in relation to identifying lead partners for majority trusts and federations. Local authorities must follow statutory guidance and school reorganisation procedures for establishing national challenge trusts/federations (including, depending on the structural solution chosen, a period of consultation). They must also consult with DCSF. But there are no set criteria, rules or procedures for them to follow in deciding which accredited school provider or group to select to partner the underperforming school.

DCSF sees local authorities as exercising a commissioning function in this situation but has not to date provided guidance on how to exercise this role transparently and fairly, given that in any area there could be a number of accredited school providers or groups that could undertake the support function. Indeed, where a local authority chooses to close a weak school and reopen it as a national challenge trust, this may result in less rather than more transparency as authorities can ask the secretary of state for exemption from the requirement to hold a competition for a new school:

**Where a [national challenge trust] solution has been brokered and a strong school partner and possibly other strong external partners identified there would be little benefit in requiring a competition and it would delay the process.**

DCSF, 2008:20

It is understandable that the government wishes to see rapid action where schools are underperforming. However, all actions should be consistent with UK and EU competition requirements: sums of up to £750,000 can be allocated to a school that is selected to partner a weak school. Becoming a majority trust or federation entails a permanent arrangement that brings control over a substantially larger amount of public funding.

It is significant that the Department of Health, for example, has recognised the need to introduce transparency criteria as a diverse range of suppliers become more involved in providing health services. It has introduced new rules on competition and collaboration that conform with EU requirements (Department of Health, 2007). It has also established an independent panel to oversee the operation of this new system. DCSF might well find that it is necessary to adopt a similar approach.

### 3. Is the basis for funding chains fair?

One of the by-products of the current school funding system is that academies in chains are inadvertently at an advantage compared with other state schools involved in chains.

The government's policy is to fund academies on a comparable basis to other schools in their areas with similar characteristics. Each academy receives a general annual grant from the secretary of state to meet its normal running costs. This is calculated on the basis of the funding formula of the local authority in which it is situated, with an additional allowance for the money that local authorities hold back from maintained schools. Academy chains effectively draw on this additional allowance when they make a charge on academies for the central services and functions that they provide.

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Schools in non-academy chains still have to pay a central charge to their local authority in the form of a sum held back by the authority which is agreed following consultation with the local schools' forum, even though they may not be using the services provided by the local authority. In reality, these schools may well be drawing on the central services provided by a chain but any charge that is made for the services has to be paid in addition to the local authority deduction.

Short of moving to funding all schools directly on a per capita basis, there may be no easy answer to this dilemma, though should accredited schools that currently do not have academy status be offered the chance to acquire it, then it seems likely that many of them will take the opportunity to do so. It may be that the current school funding review is able to provide another solution to this problem.

Whatever the means of funding central services for chains, the arrangements should form part of the national framework for consistent financial reporting of spending by schools and local authorities. This will ensure that there is transparency about the financial management of school chains in an area that for many years bedevilled relationships between local authorities and schools.

#### 4. Do all school chains have a sustainable education and business model?

The risks to the sustainability of emergent school chains come from several sources. First, some chains are expanding quite fast. They will need to ensure they have sufficient management support and expertise to sustain their growth and meet their commitments. They are, after all, taking on some of the toughest educational assignments in the country. It takes years to build up a reputation but it only needs one project to go wrong for the whole brand and chain to become discredited. This

risk is all the greater because of the way in which chains expand. In the commercial world, businesses generally do not grow by taking over failing organisations but that is largely how school chains are expanding.

The business guru, Jim Collins, has recently written about the 'undiscipline of more' (Collins, 2009). He cautions against confusing growth with excellence and advises that you can only grow as fast as you can attract or develop the right people, a lesson that is surely applicable to school chains. Those leading school chains need to ensure that they have within their chain a sufficient number of high-performing schools and school leaders to support the assignments and growth they are taking on.

Investing in the right level of leadership and support in turn raises issues about a chain's business model. Providing that support requires investment and some chains are getting themselves in the position where they are effectively in hock to their next school improvement contract, meaning they need the work to sustain their central infrastructure. That is fine all the time they are winning school improvement business, but as the market becomes more crowded and funding gets tighter, they will need to ensure that their business model is sustainable. This is where the expertise of business sponsors and commercial organisations that might be involved with chains as co-sponsors could prove very valuable.

The third risk relates to sustaining the educational performance of chains. There has been some remarkable progress and turnaround in schools taken on by chains but not every school in every chain is yet performing at the level that it should be, nor achieving all that the chain and the schools themselves aspire to. Already we have seen DCSF advise local authorities that the United Learning Trust will not be taking on any further academies until it resolves some of the problems with the very challenging schools it has taken on (BBC, 2009).

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The draft accreditation criteria mean that providers and groups can lose their accreditation if, for example:

- performance falls, to the extent that a chain would not meet the criteria for accreditation if it were to apply again
- there is no improvement in the performance of the school being supported

So there will be no room for complacency – chains will need to stay on top of their game to maintain their status.

## 5. Will schools in chains still be committed to working with other local schools?

As we argued in section 4, chains of schools are bringing significant gains to the school system. But they are not the only form of school partnership that is valuable. More informal, though rigorous, partnerships focused on providing mutual curriculum support are also effective and have impact. Sports school partnerships have, for example, helped schools to improve the quality and supply of physical education and the range of sports young people can take up (Loughborough Partnership, 2008; Ofsted, 2006). The Leading Edge programme has been effective in providing curriculum support at Key Stages 3 and 4 (Hill, 2009), and many schools, whether through soft or hard federations or partnerships, are providing mutual support.

There is of course room for both vertical partnerships (ie, schools working together in a chain) and horizontal partnerships (ie, schools working together in a locality) and some schools in chains are successfully combining both elements. The tracking surveys used to evaluate the academies programme – that monitor both academies in chains and those that are not – shows that over half of staff (55 per cent) supported local schools through the sharing of expertise and resources, an increase on the 45 per cent recorded in 2003/04 (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2008).

It will, for example, be important for schools in chains to play a full role in 14–19 consortia so that their students can benefit from the increased choice that having an area-wide 14–19 curriculum can bring. Sixth-form provision and independent information and advice for students may also often be best organised on a cross-school locality basis. It is therefore worrying that in some areas, school leaders report that schools that are part of chains are choosing not to work with other local schools.

Schools in chains need to commit to being part of a wider community of schools. The Outwood chain, for example, has adopted the principle that it will not adopt policies or practices that are detrimental to any young person or school in a neighbouring community. Another chain that was interviewed explained that the extent of joint working with other schools sometimes depended on the stability of the schools in its chain. If a school were in a period where it was trying to stabilise performance, tackle poor behaviour and attendance and generally bring order to its systems, it might well effectively opt out of local collaboration for a time. But those schools in the chain that were in a much stronger position would generally be expected to play a leading role in local behaviour partnerships.

Combining the dual commitment to a chain and to other local institutions will not always be easy, particularly when it comes to issues relating to behaviour and hard-to-place pupils. The policy of a chain on exclusions or admissions could, for example, put it at odds with the policies being pursued by other schools in the area. Some of the tension might be eased now that funding for pupils excluded from academies has to follow the pupil and is not retained by academies.

The context for managing this tension will also change as the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009 (HM Government, 2009) takes effect. This makes it a statutory requirement that schools enter into behaviour and attendance partnerships with other schools in their local authority area. Chains will need to discuss and work with their schools on how to handle this new obligation.

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## 6. Is the accountability system for school chains fit for purpose?

The current accountability framework for schools is focused on individual schools. Performance tables assess the performance of each school separately. The new school report card that is being planned will have a similar focus, though the government is committed to consulting on how partnership can be reflected in it (DCSF, 2009c). Maintaining institutional accountability is clearly essential but as chains play a bigger part in the school system, further thought needs to be given to their overall accountability.

One option, as has been introduced for sixth-form consortia, would be to report the performance of chains as well as of individual institutions.

Another option would be to rely on the accreditation process, including the procedures for removing accreditation for underperforming chains and schools. However, the draft criteria only seemed to focus on the performance of the lead school and a particular school being supported rather than the performance of the chain as a whole.

In September 2009, Ofsted introduced revised inspection arrangements that assess, as part of reviewing the quality of leadership and management, a school's involvement in partnership working. Inspectors report on the extent and effectiveness of a 'school's partnership activity with other providers, organisations and services to promote learning and well-being for its own pupils and those of its partners' (Ofsted, 2009a; revised January 2010). In addition, all schools in a hard federation or sharing 'important aspects of their provision' are inspected at the same time (Ofsted, 2009a; revised January 2010).

However, it is unclear how these provisions will apply to schools that are part of the same trust or chain and whether Ofsted has sufficient capacity to inspect all schools simultaneously as chains grow well into double figures.

Perhaps more significant is that the inspection regime has not yet got to grips with what a school is responsible for and what the central organisation of a chain (which might well act as the accountable governing body or appoint the majority of governors) is accountable for. Nor is the extent to which Ofsted inspections understand or have a remit to look at and comment on the role of an executive principal or CEO entirely clear.

Another aspect of the debate relates to the accountability of chains to local people. The establishment of academies and trusts has moved the governance of schools away from a stakeholder model, based on groups such as parents, the local authority, the community, and staff having places on the governing body. In its stead we now have a corporate sector model. There are still places as of right for parents but the governing body has become a board with governors acting as non-executives and recruited for their expertise and experience. It is similar to the changes that have been made to the governance of hospital and primary care trusts.

Critics argue that this development, which the establishment of chains is entrenching, undermines the local democratic accountability of schools. They say that any concerns on how a school conducts itself (unless its performance significantly deteriorates) are now outside of the remit of the local authority and that local elected representatives are excluded from any oversight of a schooling system which is an issue of major concern to local people.

Advocates of chains counter that they work hard to include parents and local representatives in their governance arrangements, that they are part of the same school accountability system as all other maintained schools, that all schools are now subject to the duty to co-operate with the local children's trust and that the sharpest accountability of all comes in the form of how parents choose to apply for schools.

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One way that might help to square this circle would be to consider whether the overview and scrutiny committees of councils (which act in a similar way to parliamentary select committees) might be developed to look at the role and work of all schools in their area, irrespective of who runs them. Many overview and scrutiny committees, for example, already receive reports on the establishment and operation of academies. These committees are also already used to examine the work of other agencies such as the police and local health providers. The intention would not be for them to influence the day-to-day running of chains, nor to have an executive or governance role, but to review the work of chains, alongside that of other local schools.

## 7. Are chains of schools doing enough to share learning between each other?

Many of the chains are being led by leaders who have great vision and entrepreneurial energy and ability. They have a strong belief in what they are doing and the model they are implementing. The education system can only but benefit from this dynamism and commitment.

However, such is the degree of their zeal, that they are failing to take advantage of sharing and learning from other chains. The conviction that the particular teaching and learning model they have developed is right could inhibit their openness to learn from the experience of others, particularly since some chains are beginning to claim intellectual property rights for their teaching and learning model. It would be ironic if learning across an education system were stifled rather than stimulated by the arrival of chains. There could well be a role for the National College to stimulate a learning community among emerging chains.

It will also be important to build up this mutual understanding because inevitably staff will want to move between schools in different chains. The commercial sector understands that collaboration of this kind can help make an organisation more, not less, competitive.

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## Section 5: What does this agenda mean for primary schools?

### The context

The last 15 years have seen a succession of programmes rolling out of Whitehall aimed at incentivising secondary schools to work together, draw in external sponsors and develop school-to-school improvement. Specialist status, 14–19 pathfinders, academies, the leadership incentive grant, London challenge and national challenge have all been programmes that have focused mainly on the secondary sector. Any involvement of primary schools has tended to come about indirectly. Even where primary schools have been written into the script, as they have with sports school partnerships, this has tended to be as recipients rather than as contributors.

Crucially, there have been few initiatives that have promoted leadership of the primary sector by the primary sector. Some of the education action zones, Excellence in Cities clusters, behaviour improvement partnerships and federation pilots have involved groups of primary schools. The most positive development of system leadership in the primary sector has been the creation of 144 NLEs. But the scale of what has been funded and supported is small in relation to the total number of primary schools.

Even with school chains, the primary sector was not in the vanguard of policy developments. The government's proposals (DCSF, 2009b) did not apply to primary schools, though some of the chains that will almost certainly seek accreditation include all-though 3–19 schools. The consultation paper (DCSF, 2009b) noted that structural solutions such as trusts and federations are used less frequently for low-performing primary schools than they are for secondary schools. It went on to argue that these options should 'be more readily considered when looking at securing long-term improvements for primary schools' (DCSF, 2009: para 3.6.2) since standalone primary academies are not a proportionate or cost-effective response.

However, as part of its World Class Primary Programme launched in December 2009 (DCSF, 2009c), the government announced a firm commitment to an accredited schools group programme for primary schools and to trialling the concept in key local authority and City Challenge areas.

### A range of challenges

The relative lack of action thus far on promoting primary schools to come together is all the more surprising since they face a set of challenges that are every bit as demanding, if not more so, than those faced by the secondary sector. Some of these challenges overlap with those of secondary schools but in addition there are other issues that are peculiar to the primary sector.

#### Performance

While performance in the secondary sector at Key Stage 4 is progressing year-on-year, progress in the primary sector, as measured by the proportion of pupils achieving level 4 at Key Stage 2, has plateaued. There is also a large tail of schools struggling to reach standards achieved by the majority of schools. In 2009 there were 1,472 primary schools where fewer than 55 per cent of pupils achieved level 4 at Key Stage 2 in both English and maths, an increase of over 100 since 2008 (DCSF & BIS, 2009).

In addition, although a relatively small proportion (3 per cent) of primary schools were assessed as 'inadequate' in 2008/09, in overall terms this indicates that there could be several hundred such schools across the country. Just under a third of primary schools (equating to up to 6,000 schools if the proportion were applied nationally) were assessed as 'satisfactory' (Ofsted, 2009b).

## Applications for and appointments to headship

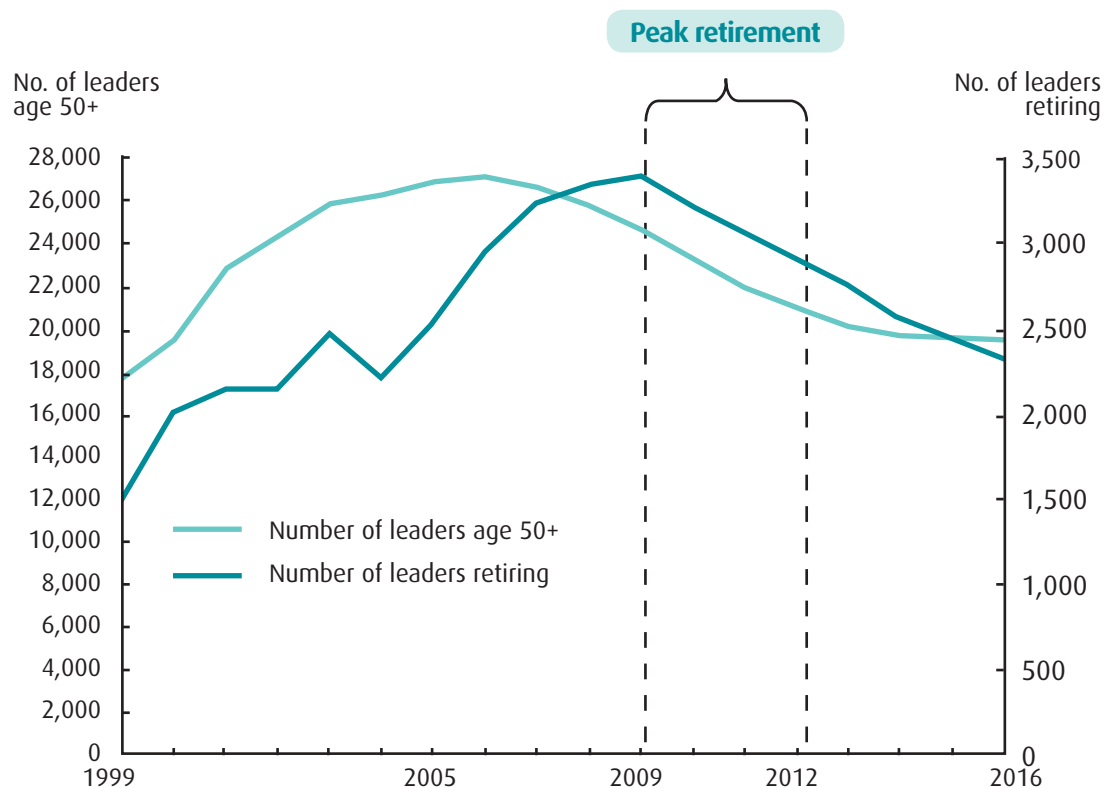
There is a continuing problem with securing sufficient applications for headship posts in primary schools. A recent study (Howson, 2009) reveals that:

- primary headteacher vacancies averaged 4.8 applications compared with 15.9 for secondary sector
- the number of applicants deemed suitable to interview for headship posts averages 2.7 per vacancy

- over a quarter of primary headships remain unfilled after advertisement
- 40 per cent of adverts by Roman Catholic schools and 30 per cent of adverts by Church of England schools were readvertisements

The gravity of this situation becomes all the more apparent in the light of the retirement profile of primary school leaders (see Figure 3). A 15–20 per cent increase in the overall recruitment of leaders is needed between the years leading up to 2012, which is the peak retirement year.

Figure 3: Age and retirement profile of primary school leaders



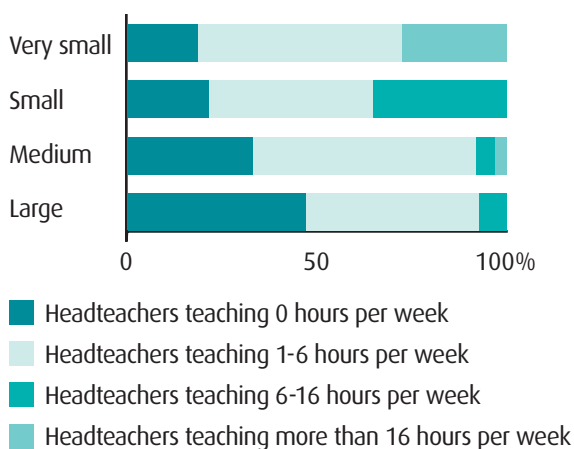
Note: The term 'leaders' includes headteachers, deputy headteachers and assistant heads

Source: DfES (based on Penstats data and McKinsey analysis)

## The model of primary headship

The model of having a single headteacher responsible for the leadership of each individual primary school is struggling to cope with the current demands of the post. As Figure 4 shows, many primary headteachers are spending a considerable number of hours each week teaching, even in many medium-sized primary schools. The merit of this is that it keeps their practitioner skills sharp and in touch and involved with their pupils. But inevitably it reduces the time they have for their leadership role and tasks.

**Figure 4: Hours taught by primary school headteachers, by size of school**



Source: National College 2008

As the National College has argued:

**Headteachers deal with too many operational issues and administrative tasks. The small size of many primary schools makes distributed leadership difficult, and the system places a lot of expectations – and many individual accountabilities – on the single headteacher of the individual school.**

National College, 2007:4

When the National College was asked to provide advice to the secretary of state on primary leadership (National College, 2007), it described how primary headteachers are under increasing pressure from an 'unprecedented mix of high levels of devolved responsibility, sharp accountability structures, and radical changes in the way schools interact with other services and their communities' (National College, 2007:4). It cited the Every Child Matters agenda and personalisation as two examples of this. Since then, more challenges have landed in the in-tray of primary headteachers: the introduction of extended schools, the review of the primary curriculum, the implementation of the review of maths by Sir Peter Williams, the increase from 12.5 to 15 hours in the early years education entitlement for three and four year olds along with the ability for parents to take the entitlement in a more flexible form, a new statutory duty in relation to social cohesion – and so on.

In addition to these pressures, there are also the dual challenges of:

- fluctuating pupil numbers – in some parts of the country pupil numbers are going down while in other parts of the country they are increasing as the birth rate rises
- public spending constraints – the smaller the size of an organisational unit, the harder it is to manage reductions in resources

In short, as the National College has so aptly put it, primary headteachers have remodelled the primary school workforce but have not yet remodelled their own role.

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## Small and rural schools

There is a particular challenge for very small schools, which are normally but not exclusively found in rural areas. A total of 1,400 schools have fewer than 75 pupils and 4,239 have fewer than 150. Small schools are on a per-pupil basis funded more generously than other schools and research undertaken for the National College estimates that this subsidy amounts to around £700 million per year (Greany, 2009).

The same research indicates that despite the additional funding, small schools have fewer resources to spend on support staff with the result that headteachers are increasingly stretched by bureaucratic and managerial activity, and report a negative effect on their work-life balance. Not surprisingly, in the light of this headteachers of small rural schools are finding it increasingly difficult to fulfil their leadership and management responsibilities and there is real difficulty in filling headship vacancies when they arise (Todman et al, 2009).

Small schools also provide fewer opportunities for pupils and staff to learn from peers.

## A range of innovative responses

Although the primary sector has not had the same level of institutional incentives as the secondary sector to work in partnership or to develop school-to-school improvement, it has nonetheless generated a range of interesting responses and innovative models of leadership and governance in response to the challenges primary schools face. In some instances, local authorities have been in the lead, while in other cases it has been school leaders and sometimes forward-thinking chairs of governors that have been the catalyst for change. The models include the following:

- **Management partnerships** involve small schools sharing a headteacher, who may be referred to as an executive headteacher. This approach tends to be used where one school cannot recruit anyone suitable for a headship post and so teams up with another local school to share leadership capacity. Sometimes it is a permanent arrangement but sometimes it is temporary, en route to a longer term solution such as federation. Norfolk has 18 management partnerships of this type, which are supported by the local authority through its funding formula. The model was felt to be ‘a highly effective response both to struggling rural schools and to headteacher recruitment difficulties’ and has helped to build leadership capacity (Todman et al, 2009:23).
- **Business support partnerships** typically take the form of a group of primary schools coming together to appoint a school business director or a secondary school providing a range of business services for its local feeder primary schools. Wellacre Technology College in Manchester, for example, provides business management services to more than 20 local primaries (covering financial support to 9 schools, grounds maintenance to 11 and ICT consultancy to 1), enabling primary headteachers to delegate aspects of their work and so reduce their workload. Two primary school business managers work to a school business director and the services provided include training for other support staff in the primary schools and audit and procurement support for ICT (ASCL, 2009). The scheme is one of 35 that has been sponsored by the National College.
- **Hard federations between two or more primary schools** are sometimes formed in response to the problems of recruiting a headteacher and sometimes in response to the underperformance of a school and it being placed in special measures or been given a notice to improve by Ofsted (see Case study 13).



### Case study 13: First Federation, Devon

Blackpool Primary School in Devon has 320 pupils and in April 2009 was classified as good with outstanding features by Ofsted.

In 2004, a new chair of governors was appointed whose background as a regional bank manager with responsibility for a large number of branches gave him a wider perspective on the education system. In 2005, the governing body agreed to form a federation, though at that stage it did not have a particular partner school in mind.

In spring 2006, the local authority pointed Blackpool to a school three miles away with 67 pupils (Chudleigh Knighton) that had had 9 headteachers in 6 years and had received a notice to improve. Both schools had voluntary-controlled status and so discussions with diocesan representatives were held as part of moving to establish the First Federation in September 2006.

The headteacher of Blackpool Primary became executive headteacher, supported by a head of teaching and learning in each school. This helped to secure parental support, and heads of teaching and learning have all the day-to-day contact with parents.

The federation helped Chudleigh Knighton to develop higher expectations of pupils, clear tracking and progress monitoring systems, a stronger application of assessment for learning and more effective and consistent standards of teaching. In partnership with Blackpool Primary, the head of teaching and learning used classroom observation, mentoring, coaching, shadowing and visits to other schools as part of the improvement process. A single special educational needs co-ordinator worked across the two schools and applied the same approach to lesson planning, assessment, classroom display and the use of interactive whiteboards.

The executive headteacher coached and mentored the heads of teaching and learning and inspected the systems and structures and teaching and learning to ensure progress was being made. New staff are appointed on a federation contract and around half of the staff are now on such a contract.

By June 2007, Chudleigh Knighton was assessed overall by Ofsted as being good, and outstanding in

leadership and management. Inspectors commented:

**This rapid improvement has occurred because of the outstanding leadership and management resulting from the federation with a nearby primary school. The executive headteacher and head of teaching and learning have brought positive change to every aspect of the school.**

The school now has 86 pupils and its contextual valued-added score has increased from 96.6 to 101.3 since becoming part of the federation.

In November 2008, two further schools approached the First Federation with a view to joining. One was Lady Seawards Primary School 16 miles north of Blackpool Primary, which has 70 pupils. The school had had a longstanding problem recruiting a headteacher on a substantive basis.

The other school to join the federation was a voluntary-controlled school, Salcombe Primary, which is 30 miles south and with 79 pupils and that had not long emerged from having a notice to improve.

The new federation, which came into being in April 2009, used the same model of having heads of teaching and learning under the direction of the executive head.

The formation of a new federation required the dissolution and reconstitution of governing body.

In autumn 2009, the federation began conversations with two further schools that have expressed an interest in becoming part of the federation. The federation has also started investigating the prospect of working in collaboration or forming a school company with two larger primary schools outside the federation that have specialist expertise. This would enable the federation to continue to work at raising standards across all the schools in the federation while at the same time offering a broader range of expertise, advice and intervention in areas such as school improvement, addressing the needs of challenging children, speech and language and curriculum innovation.

Another area that is being explored with one of Devon's learning communities is the possibility of forming a primary school federation of eight to nine schools and working with the local secondary school on improved transition arrangements and the Every Child Matters agenda.

Source: Interview with executive headteacher

- **Hard clusters of primary schools** bring together all the primary schools in an area to support each other on leadership and curriculum development. This is done through a formal structural relationship such as a federation or education company (see Case study 14).



### Case study 14: Gloucester primary school cluster

Gloucester Council divides the county into seven areas for the purposes of working with its schools. One of these areas covers Gloucester City. The 39 primary schools in the city work together through the Gloucester schools' partnership (GSP). The partnership grew out of the Gloucester excellence cluster. When government funding ended in August 2008, the 15 primary schools in the excellence cluster decided to continue working collaboratively and opened up membership more widely across the city. In September 2008, a group of 39 schools became the GSP.

An NLE was instrumental in providing the drive for the initiative. The GSP is governed by an elected partnership board and funded by a levy on schools. It has set up an education company as the vehicle for conducting its work which covers:

- supporting intelligent accountability by providing challenge, customised support for headteachers and opportunities for succession planning
- co-ordinating delivery of extended services and the Every Child Matters agenda
- organising and delivering CPD programmes to support high-quality teaching and learning

The GSP is itself reviewing how schools in the city are organising HR, finance and other functions. GSP has a good relationship with the local authority and makes use of its staff and expertise.

Source: Interview with local authority officer, Gloucester City Council

- **Secondary-primary hard federations** in which a secondary school provides leadership, curriculum and business support to one or more primary schools is a further model of collaboration. Banbury Secondary School and Dashwood Community Primary School in Oxfordshire, which over the years had collaborated on a range of issues, are one recent example of this (see Case study 15).



### Case study 15: Banbury Dashwood Federation

Dashwood Community Primary School had been placed in special measures at the end of 2007 and an interim executive board, which included the principal of Banbury School, was set up to help the school tackle its problems. The assistance Banbury School provided with leadership, management and classroom monitoring was one of the factors that resulted in federation being agreed as the natural long-term solution.

There is a single governing body but both schools remain separate and are inspected by Ofsted separately. An executive headteacher has overall accountability for the two schools and is supported by a headteacher on each site who runs the schools on a day-to-day basis. Dashwood Community Primary School came out of special measures in September 2009.

Banbury is also helping Dashwood School with finances, caretaking and grounds maintenance. However, the value of the federation is not all one way. For example, Banbury School staff are keen to draw on the expertise of Dashwood colleagues in thinking about the best learning methods to use with younger secondary students when they join Year 7.

Source: Interview with executive headteacher and sources on Banbury School website ([www.banbury.oxon.sch.uk](http://www.banbury.oxon.sch.uk))

- **Whole-learning community federations/ partnerships** bring together schools across phases and age-ranges to work together on curriculum issues and the wider welfare of children and young people in the area (see Case study 16). This type of collaboration is most commonly found in parts of the country where primary schools feed into one or two secondary schools and so there is a logical and stronger basis for the partnership.

- sharing expertise and resources in teaching and learning, especially at Key Stages 3 and 4, at a time of a falling pupil rolls and associated budget reductions

Source: North Pennine Learning Partnership ([www.trustandfoundationschools.org.uk](http://www.trustandfoundationschools.org.uk) and [www.nplp.org.uk](http://www.nplp.org.uk))



### Case study 16: North Pennine Learning Partnership

The North Pennine Learning Partnership is a trust that encompasses five schools – a first school, two middle schools, a high school and a technology college – located across 1,000 square miles of Northumberland and Cumbria. The trust has brought the following benefits to the schools:

- a stronger framework for existing collaboration on, for example, delivering the Every Child Matters agenda through extended schools and a sports school partnership
- access to external expertise since the trust includes a range of external partners including two universities, a company specialising in ICT systems and support, the Institute for Outdoor Education and the Rugby Football Union
- efficiencies of scale, including the opportunity to work with the National College on a project to develop partnership school management and business support
- increased curriculum coherence, including strengthening the link between primary and secondary strategies and securing seamless provision from early years to Key Stage 5
- support for leadership development by providing the confidence and context to develop strategic leadership skills, practise distributed leadership and develop innovative leadership models to support all schools within the partnership

- **All-through 3–19 schools and academies** is a form of school and governance that has largely been developed and led by the school sector itself: significantly, the number of such institutions is growing fast. Those who advocate 3–19 schools argue that it has the following advantages.

- It avoids the problem of students slipping back when they move from Year 6 to Year 7.
- It enables schools to operate a more flexible curriculum where pupils can learn and be grouped according to their progress rather than how old they are.
- It provides a stronger basis for engaging with the local community and other agencies to address the Every Child Matters agenda.
- It helps to raise aspiration as pupils see and relate to the achievements of older students.
- It provides a platform for student leadership.
- It provides a much more sustainable leadership model for the primary phase of education.

Some of the secondary chains are increasingly involved in this agenda. For example, the Haberdashers' Aske's Federation has integrated two primary schools into the federation and has plans for more. Both were primaries in very challenging circumstances and are now part of an all-through schools plan. AET is developing the first district-wide 3–19 academy school network.

In addition to these more structural models, there is also a host of more informal ways that primary schools are using to work together and support each other.

## Features shared by emerging primary models and chains

Few if any of the primary school federations or partnerships could be described as chains in the sense in which this term has been used in the earlier part of this thinkpiece. However, they do have some features in common and are beginning to deliver some of the benefits that chains of schools in the secondary sector are producing.

### Developing a clear teaching and learning model

As primary school federations develop, particularly where they take the form of performance

federations (ie, a stronger school supporting an underperforming one), they are increasingly developing and applying a standardised teaching and learning model.

In some cases, as with Case study 17 below, the model has been very consciously and deliberately developed and implemented. In other cases, as described in Case study 13, a lead school is taking the systems it has successfully developed and applied in its own school and transferred them to another. Sometimes the teaching and learning is based on a lead school's own effective practice but is allied with an external curriculum scheme such as Read Write Inc<sup>1</sup>.



### Case study 17: Learning Federation, Oldham

Mills Hill is a primary school of 600 pupils in Oldham. It is high achieving: the headteacher is an NLE and the school has NSS status.

Mill Hill has developed a teaching and learning model based on Professor Spencer Kagan's approach to co-operative learning. Children are placed in mixed-ability groups of four, which remain in place for about six weeks. Co-operative teaching and learning processes are highly structured. The aim is to maximise each child's contribution and to develop the idea that members of the team are co-learners who are mutually accountable for each other's success.

In order to introduce the model into Mills Hill, there was a review of the curriculum, based on legal requirements but modified to allow a flexible, skills-based, cross-curricular approach with purposeful links between subjects and blocking. Learning follows children's interests and is more responsive. For example, children can pursue a line of enquiry if they are particularly interested in a science topic.

The model is allied to an intensive use of data. The assigned teachers in each year group meet the head of school to determine cohort targets and identify which pupils are above, at, or below national expectations. Targets are used in performance management. All teaching staff belong to one of three curriculum teams that investigate and address variations in the achievement of different groups.

There are termly assessments in the core areas of reading, writing and maths using optional tests produced by the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Authority (QCDA) and Testbase materials. An external agency marks the tests and evaluates attainment after the optional tests in the summer term and a consultant analyses RAISEonline data to provide feedback.

Every child who is achieving below national expectations has some sort of intervention and this information is shared with individual pupils and parents. The school uses national booster programmes such as Further Literacy Support (FLS) or may set up additional reading with a parent or grandparent. A member of the leadership team meets assigned teachers each term to monitor progress.

<sup>1</sup> Read Write Inc programmes, developed by Ruth Miskin, are based on the premise that children learn most effectively when excellent modelling, followed by partner discussion and teaching, are deeply embedded into every lesson.

Termly and weekly assessments inform gap teaching periods, which are week-long spaces in curriculum time that enable focused teaching in core literacy and numeracy skills where a need has been identified. Teaching may be individual, group or whole-class. Year 6 pupils are being trained as certificated reading mentors so they can support individual pupils in nursery and reception.

Mills Hill is now applying this teaching and learning model in Medlock Valley Community School, which is some five miles away and had been recording scores below the floor targets at Key Stage 2 for seven years. Despite the school having a brand-new building, the school was not popular with parents and suffered from high levels of pupil mobility. Following consultation with the eight NLEs in the borough, the local authority decided on a federation as an alternative to closure, which was the path it had been considering.

The governors at Medlock Valley supported the change and the two schools came together in a hard federation with a single governing body. The headteacher of Mills Hill became the executive principal of the Learning Federation with a head of school on each site. The head of school appointed to Medlock Valley was formerly the deputy at Mills Hill and an assistant headteacher at Mills Hill was promoted to headteacher of school on that site.

All new members of staff have from September 2008 been appointed on a federation contract and can be deployed across the two sites. Progress at Medlock has been steady and sustained as measured by results at Key Stage 2 and the school is now above the floor targets (Table 1).

**Table 1: Medlock Valley Community School results 2007 2009**

Subject	2007	2008	2009
Percentage of pupils achieving level 4 or higher in English	52	55	69
Percentage of students achieving increase of two levels in English since Key Stage 1	71	73	77
Percentage of pupils achieving level 4 or higher in maths	48	61	88
Percentage of students achieving increase of two levels in maths since Key Stage 1	68	82	94
Percentage of pupils achieving level 4 or higher in English and maths	39	48	69

Source: Interview with executive principal;  
[www.nationalcollege.org.uk](http://www.nationalcollege.org.uk)

Hackney Learning Trust has helped broker the formation of three federations in the borough. The trust's experience is that the federations have brought stronger strategic leadership, raised expectations of the standards that pupils can achieve, a clear pedagogy and high-quality teaching that plans and uses effectively all the available curriculum time and is continually tracking and monitoring progress.

The trust has concluded that a school has to be outstanding on pedagogy to be able to impart and influence the performance of another school:

**If it is just good overall it won't be strong enough or have enough clarity about its model to be able to change the culture and performance of the school with which it is linked.**

Executive director, Hackney Learning Trust

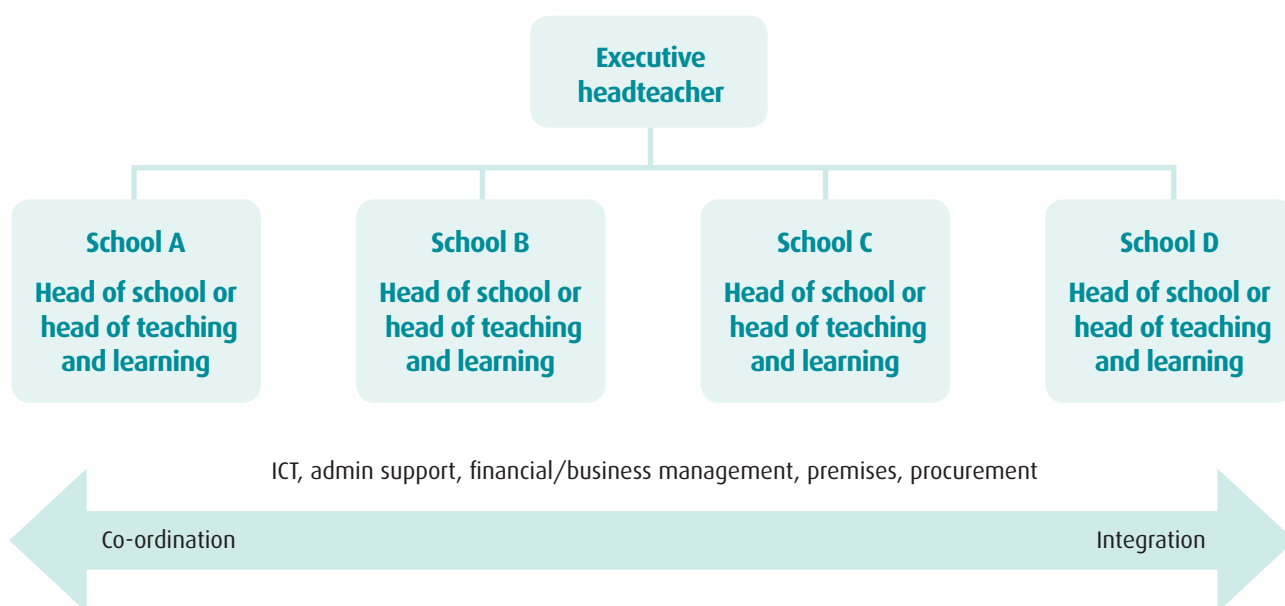
Significantly, as with the secondary chains, lead schools in federations are deploying their key staff and leaders from the home or lead schools across the schools they are supporting in order to ensure that their teaching and learning model is understood, adapted to the particular circumstances of a school and applied in an informed and appropriate way.

Like secondary school federations, they are also recruiting new staff on federation contracts, which not only provides greater flexibility in deploying staff resources but also helps to apply the teaching and learning model in a consistent fashion.

### Evolving a new leadership model

The primary sector is throwing up a range of structural solutions in response to the challenges it faces but characteristic of them all is the remodelling of how leadership functions within primary schools. Many of the hard federations have moved, as described in Case studies 13, 14 and 15, to a school leadership model of an executive headteacher with overall responsibility for two or more schools who works with a head of teaching and learning on each school site, with the latter running the school on a day-to-day basis (Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Emerging model of headship in hard federations**



Sometimes the model starts with two or more primary schools forming a hard federation with a single governing body, and that normally includes an executive headteacher. In other cases executive headship may come first, with this providing the platform for schools moving to federation.

The model has many similarities with the model of non-school heads developed within the Dutch primary school system (see Case study 18), and enjoys a number of advantages. It brings clear and dedicated leadership capacity to a group of schools. This ensures the schools have the capability to think and plan for the medium term as well as manage school affairs on a day-to-day basis. It strengthens the operation of leadership teams,

providing a broader base for organising development and support. For example, the leadership team of the Learning Federation in Oldham meets jointly and this has helped it become a real driver of school improvement across the two schools. Leadership development is also undertaken jointly and each half-term one member of the leadership team spends five days in the other school to observe and exchange learning and ideas.



### Case study 18: Development of leadership of primary schools in the Netherlands

In 1998, the Dutch government introduced an Education Act that encouraged the 7,000 primary schools in the Netherlands to merge, and backed the legislation with a five-year time-limited scheme of financial incentives. By 2005, 4 out of 5 schools were part of a federation consisting of 2 or more schools, with the average size of federation comprising 11 schools.

Within federations, principals may lead a single school or multiple schools. Where a principal oversees more than one school, a specific teacher may take on the role of location leader to be the point of contact for parents and staff on a day-to-day basis. A federation may also employ an educational professional as a superintendent to oversee strategy and operational management within the federation. In total, 20 per cent of a school's capital funding and a small proportion of

its staffing budget are devolved to the federation. The federation takes overall responsibility for school improvement and professional development.

Advantages associated with the Dutch federation model include:

- principals having more time to lead their schools, particularly where they were previously combining teaching and leading
- staff and leaders benefiting from joint planning and wider thinking
- schools gaining a stronger sense of direction
- an increased economy of scale enabling schools to purchase services more effectively and share the cost of specialist staff
- being able to transfer skills and jobs from one school to another
- a broader pool of expertise on which to draw to provide curriculum leadership, development and support

Source: Collins et al, 2005

The value of the new leadership model has been recognised by Ofsted, particularly in turning around underperforming schools.

**A small number of schools causing concern have formed federations or more informal partnerships with other schools. This has been successful in many cases in hastening the recovery of inadequate schools. The key elements in this recovery are more incisive leadership and management, bringing about improvements in the quality of teaching and learning.**

Ofsted, 2008:33

The new model described in Figure 5 also provides a source of coaching, mentoring and support for emerging leaders who have opportunities to develop their leadership skills under the guidance of an experienced practitioner.

The post of head of teaching and learning provides a bridge between being a classroom-based practitioner and leadership. In effect it is providing a popular new career path for primary school leaders. For example, in the summer term of 2008 the First Federation in Devon (featured in Case study 13) advertised for a new head of teaching and learning at Chudleigh Knighton. There were 17 applicants for the post. This compares with an average of four applications for primary headship posts in Devon overall. This new leadership model has the potential to be a large part of the solution to the succession planning challenge that the primary sector faces.

### Strengthening governance

The different forms of partnership structure are, as with the secondary sector, bringing new governance models. Schools in a hard federation have a single governing body. That means that in total they have fewer governors than the previous two schools would have had on a combined basis. This requires federations to think harder about the specific role of each governor and the organisation

of the governing body itself. The First Federation in Devon started off with 16 governors when it was first formed, but reduced that to 11 and formed an executive group of 6 to ensure that the federation had strong strategic leadership. The number was expanded to 13 when the federation took on 2 further schools.

Having fewer governors also means that recruitment to the governing body becomes less a matter of finding people to fill vacancies and more a question of ensuring that applicants have the right skills and experience for the role on the governing body that they are being asked to play.

Whole-learning community models and all-though schools also bring a range and depth of governance arrangements to the primary sector. In addition, primary schools that are using shared or multi-school trusts as the basis for joint work or taking on other schools are able to draw on the expertise and resources of external partners, as Case study 16 showed.

### Improving professional development

There is good evidence of the effectiveness of collaborative learning and CPD in such school networks (Cordingley & Temperley, 2006). The schools studied as part of this project indicate that leaders and staff have been quick to exploit the opportunities for shared professional development that working in a federation or a multi-school trust brings. Joint INSET days, shared curriculum planning, exchanges of schemes of work and lesson plans, cross-school lesson observation and mentoring as well as more formal development programmes have all formed part of the approach.

For example, as part of establishing the Learning Federation in Oldham, five extra INSET days were secured for Medlock Valley staff which were used to observe and work with Mills Hill staff and so help to transfer and embed the new system of teaching and learning. Some CPD is undertaken jointly and staff from both schools are now working together on developing the curriculum to reflect the changes resulting from the Rose review.

## Securing better use of resources

Primary schools are for the most part not forming or joining federations and other structured partnerships to save money, though in the case of small/rural schools, federation may well be part of a long-term solution to maintaining educational and financial viability. However, being part of a larger corporate group helps deliver better use of resources on three fronts.

First, federations and trusts provide the basis for rationalising the organisation of back office and other functions. For example, the Learning Federation in Oldham has a business manager who works across the two sites. This has enabled some costs to be taken out at Medlock Valley. The federation is also able to procure IT licences across the federation and there is some economy of scale in terms of reduced charges from the local authority in respect of service provision and training on child protection.

Another example is Comberton Education Trust, which is not only responsible for Comberton Village College but has won a competition to set up and run a new primary school. In setting up the school, full use was made of a range of the Comberton staffing resources. Comberton, for example, ran the initial HR and administrative services until the new school

could begin to appoint its own staff. ICT systems and resources are provided by the trust. As the primary school grows in size, catering, HR and premises management could also become shared services.

As Figure 5 indicates, the model for organising support functions can vary: in some cases functions are being integrated but co-ordination is another option. For example, one federation in Devon has retained three administrative officers over the three schools in the federation, but one focuses on premises, another on finance and the third on HR and personnel issues.

Second, federations provide the basis for sharing and deploying specialist staff, whether that is special educational needs, language, music, behaviour management or advanced skills teacher (AST) support.

Third, there can be savings from introducing new leadership models, particularly in rural and small schools. Figure 6 provides an example of how re-engineering leadership across two or three schools in Northumberland could yield potential savings. The sums are relatively modest, though for small schools they may be significant, particularly where schools are under pressure from falling rolls and tighter annual budget increases.

Figure 6: Example of savings to be gained from introducing new leadership models

Model	Savings	Additional costs	Available for school improvement
Executive headship (two first schools)	One head's salary £53,200	Salary rise (head): £5,505 Class teacher (to cover costs of teaching duties previously undertaken by headteacher): £24,500 Assistant headteacher: £3,800	£19,935
Executive headship (three first schools)	Two heads' salaries £106,400	Salary rise (head): £5,505 Class teacher (to cover costs of teaching duties previously undertaken by headteacher): £28,000 Two assistant headteachers: £7,600	£58,339
Executive headship (one middle and one first school)	One head's salary £53,200	Salary rise (head): £5,505 Class teacher (to cover costs of teaching duties previously undertaken by headteacher): £24,500 Assistant headteacher: £3,800	£26,000

Source: Todman et al, 2009

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## Pace of change and inhibitors of progress

The merits of federations and shared trusts that are acting in similar ways to chains are becoming clearly established. However, the rate at which structural change is occurring is slow. Research for the National College in 2009 (Chapman et al, 2009) based on a survey of 50 local authorities found 264 schools in 122 federations, across both primary and secondary phases. In the same study, 9 out of 10 involved just 2 schools, 4 out of 5 had a joint headteacher, but just 15 per cent had a joint (ie, hard federation) governing body. Three-quarters of these had been formed in 2007 or 2008, suggesting that the pace of change is picking up but even so, if the data from these 50 local authorities were extrapolated for all 152, there may still be only 260–270 federations in total across England.

More significantly, the research indicates that primary-phase schools (including infant, junior and first schools) are under-represented in comparison with secondary schools. This may in part be explained by the variety of developments in the primary sector (managed partnerships, shared trusts, formal cluster arrangements and all-through 3–19 schools) not being included in a survey on federations. Nevertheless, the number of primary schools involved in federations relative to the scale of the challenges and the potential benefit of structured partnerships is extremely low.

Interviews for this project with local authority representatives and school leaders indicate that there are a number of reasons for this:

- In some cases there is resistance by parents and governors (and some school leaders), who fear that the identity of their local school and the control they have over it will disappear as a result of federation.
- Funding disincentives can emerge in the form of local authority funding formulas that build in an allowance over and above a standard per-pupil entitlement to help cover the fixed costs of running small schools, where ministers have committed to a presumption against closure. The reasons for

this funding are entirely understandable, given the many benefits that small rural primaries offer, but it could shield them from finding alternative ways to remain viable.

- Funding inflexibilities can also come to light due to federation. Schools generally have retained their separate identity within federations and trusts in order to maintain their entitlement to an individual funding allocation. Three or four schools that amalgamate have to date been allocated less funding as a single institution than they receive if they are funded separately and individually. It has been possible to overcome the problem of keeping separate budgets within a federation or trust, but the schools involved have had to show a clear audit trail that links spending to a particular school's budget. They have not been able to simply merge the separate budgets into one pooled budget to be deployed across all the schools in the federation or trust as the leadership team and governors think fit. DCSF has recognised this problem and plans to change the existing regulations so that federations of schools can be funded as a single institution (DCSF, 2009c). It is also proposing to make clear that governing bodies can allocate funding to provide facilities and services to pupils at schools other than their own.
- Federations, trusts and education companies provide a good menu of options from which primary schools can choose when deciding how to organise or hardwire their relationships with other schools. But there is an issue with the governance of federations in that the governing body has to be dissolved and reformed each time another school joins the federation. If federations are to become more like chains and acquire new schools as matter of course, this could be a factor that holds them back. It may be that the government's proposals (DCSF, 2009c) to enable accredited governing bodies to be involved in the establishment of new maintained schools and academies could provide a way to help resolve this issue. The aim of the proposed new power is to allow innovative and high-performing schools to create new schools without the need for governing bodies to set up a trust or schools' company. These proposals

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have at the time of writing not yet received parliamentary approval.

- Around a third of primary schools are either voluntary-controlled or voluntary-aided church schools, though the proportion is much higher in some local authorities. Church schools have severe problems in recruiting headteachers, but they also face difficulties in moving into a structured partnership. They cannot at present be part of a trust because their voluntary status means they already have their own trust or foundation. They can join or form a federation but unless it is a federation of exclusively church schools (which is not always possible) it will mean being part of a mixed federation of faith and non-faith schools. This means that a faith tradition may in effect have to accept some dilution of the influence it exercises over a governing body and headteacher appointments. A faith school will also want to be reassured that the distinct religious character of the school is going to be retained. The National Society for Promoting Religious Education (NSPRE) and DCSF have produced joint guidance on how voluntary schools can work with trust schools (NSPRE & DCSF, 2008) but all the solutions proposed involve complex arrangements.
- As with the secondary school system, the accountability regime is focused on individual institutions and so creates little incentive for schools to join together to tackle problems.
- The primary sector is developing a diverse range of models in response to the challenges it faces. This is no bad thing, but would be more effective if there were an overall vision of how primary schools might be organised and delivered in, say, 10 years' time. At present there is no clear long-term vision and similarly there has been no articulation of the long-term sustainable model of school leadership that primary schools should be moving towards.

## Options for the future

While the challenge in the secondary sector is to steer and channel the growth of chains, the challenge in the primary sector is different. We need

to create structures and frameworks that provide primary schools with the critical mass necessary to develop strategic leadership, create new career structures, support professional and curriculum development, address school underperformance and realise economies of scale.

Primary schools should not be clustered together for the sake of it. That will not add value. Primary schools do not all have to be part of chains; the scope of the evolving organisational structures is, as we have seen, more diverse than that.

The government is proposing to move schools towards more formal partnership working by introducing regulations requiring schools from September 2011 to consider shared headship and/or governance arrangements before appointing a new headteacher (DCSF, 2009c). This is an interesting move and could well help to change the way that federations and other forms of partnership are perceived, but it will take a long time to make a substantial impact on the primary school system, given the rate at which headship vacancies occur. Even then a duty to consider shared headship and/or governance is unlikely on its own to overcome resistance to change.

An alternative approach would be for all primary schools to be part of a group of schools – which one might call accredited primary school groups (APSGs) – that adopt and work to chain-like standards.

APSGs might operate under the umbrella of a trust, a federation, an education company, an all-through school, a whole-learning community or town-wide cluster or, were the Conservatives' policies to be adopted, through chains of primary academies.

The APSG would provide the basis and scale for creating dedicated executive and strategic leadership, growing new leaders, organising support functions, sharing specialist posts and supporting school-to-school curriculum and professional development.

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Whatever the organisational form, the accreditation process would promote consistency of operating standards and educational outcomes. If this were agreed as a policy objective, there are several steps that could be taken that would help to turn the policy into reality:

- **Articulate a clear vision** of the future of primary school organisation and primary school leadership. The World Class Primary Programme does provide a much clearer steer towards greater collaboration. The government could, however, go further and adopt an approach similar to the Dutch one, and pass enabling legislation that provides a framework for expecting all primary schools to be part of an APSG within a defined period of, for example, five years.
- **Create a clear accreditation system for APSGs** that retains and encompasses the range of organisational models, provided they met the sort of criteria associated with effective chains of schools, ie, APSGs would have to demonstrate that they had a proven and effective teaching and learning model, clear executive leadership, governance and cross-school support service arrangements and a track record of using partnership to improve school performance. Such a system would preserve the integrity of the chain approach while allowing flexibility for school organisation to reflect local circumstances. The government has also taken the first steps in this direction by introducing accreditation for groups of primary schools. It is also intending to learn from the establishment of formal partnerships between strong schools and primary schools in the most challenging circumstances (see below).
- **Incentivise primary schools to join an APSG.** This would not so much be about making new funding available as maximising the leverage of existing funding streams:
  - The allocation of primary capital could be made dependent on schools being part of an APSG or the allocation could be routed via APSGs.
  - Funding for professional development and school improvement could be channelled

though APSGs. The government is proposing that partnerships of schools will in future be able to receive funding for school improvement as a group of schools rather than individually (DCSF, 2009c). Children's trusts are also being encouraged to devolve additional funding to partnerships to offer and/or commission their own services on behalf of the local authority. These measures could act as an incentive by only being available to schools that were part of an APSG.

- The receipt of the small schools' supplement via a local authority's funding formula could be made dependent on schools being part of an APSG.
- **Redesign the National Professional Qualification for Headship**, or aspects of the Leadership Pathways programme that feeds into it, for the primary sector to reflect the head of teaching and learning/executive headteacher model and the different roles they encompass.
- **Use the outcomes of Ofsted inspections** so that all primary schools given a notice to improve or placed in special measures are automatically incorporated into an APSG. The government has already ventured a long way down this path with its plans to establish primary partnerships in those local authorities with a high number or proportion of what it calls hard-to-shift primary schools. A fund of £10 million has been allocated to support up to 150 of the highest quality projects, which are expected to be based on underperforming schools becoming part of shared governance arrangements such as federations or majority trusts. Potentially this approach could be extended to all primary schools that are consistently underperforming. The government is hoping to extend the level of its financial support but is encouraging local authorities to use their existing school improvement resources to develop this scheme (DCSF, 2009c).
- **Change the regulations on funding for federations as proposed by DCSF** to enable APSGs to use budgets flexibly across all the schools in their group.

- **Encourage and empower all local authorities** to develop a network of APSGs throughout their area. Many are already active on this agenda (see Case study 19) but some headteachers in the study commissioned by DCSF (Todman et al, 2009) reported that a firmer steer from the local authority would be helpful in giving greater legitimacy to formal collaborative models. The

latest policy statement from the government (DCSF, 2009c) does give local authorities a very clear statement about the importance of their role in 'driving partnership solutions' and 'brokering partnerships' via federations, shared trusts, short- or longer term support through NLEs/NSSs, and new partners or accredited schools groups to support improvement priorities.



### Case study 19: Development of primary school federations in Devon

Devon has 316 primary schools, many of which are in rural areas and a significant proportion of which have falling rolls. Some 16 per cent of primary-aged pupils are educated in 41 per cent of the primary schools and only 81 schools have more than 210 pupils.

There have been problems recruiting headteachers of sufficient leadership potential and prior leadership experience. Many of the small schools do not have deputies so do not have a route for developing and bringing through emerging leaders.

Devon County Council has been pursuing a policy of promoting federations among primary schools since September 2005. A federation toolkit was produced, and linked to a joint exercise to promote the toolkit to governing bodies around the county.

Schools interested in federation have been able to draw on a small budget (between £500 and £2,000) from the county's innovation through collaboration fund to help explore what federation would mean for them and their potential partners. Intensive effort also goes into communicating with parents, and not just using leaflets and meetings. Surgeries, drop-in sessions and one-to-one meetings are also arranged.

The first federation was established in September 2006 and the executive head and chair of governors

of that federation have become powerful advocates of the approach.

The county council produces a newsletter for governors on a termly basis and this has been used over the past three or four years to drip feed messages about federation. The county council also works very closely with its diocesan colleagues as nearly one third of Devon's primaries are also Church of England schools.

As of October 2009, there were 9 hard federations involving around 22 schools. Two other federations are in the process of being formed. In addition, some other schools have a management partnership which means that they share a headteacher.

The county council is increasingly moving toward pursuing a more strategic approach towards federation. Devon's schools are grouped into 31 learning communities. The council is instigating area reviews of primary education within these learning communities. The approach is not based on proposing a master plan for each area but presenting governors and headteachers with data on surplus places, the demographic profile and projections and asset management. The learning communities are asked to develop options for the future linked to the deployment of the primary capital programme. This is beginning to result in federation emerging as more of a mainstream option.

Source: Interviews with local authority officers

- **Create a cadre of school leaders** to lead and champion this agenda, perhaps based on the existing NLEs in the primary sector:

Emerging evidence suggests that the advocacy of headteachers themselves has been an important factor both in planning and in sustaining formal collaborative arrangements. Their personal enthusiasm and vision are likely to be crucial in overcoming initial reservations and misgivings that may be felt in their communities.

Todman et al, 2009

The National College has been commissioned by DCSF to take forward a national leadership models and partnerships programme. Its aim will be to inspire and enable schools and localities to develop fit-for-purpose models of leadership and governance that reflect their local context and circumstances (DCSF, 2009c). This programme could be one way of helping to identify and create champions of change.

- **Work with faith groups** and their national representatives to find solutions to the problems associated with incorporating church schools into APSGs. The government plans (DCSF, 2009c), subject to parliamentary approval, confirm that all governing bodies may become members of foundations of other maintained schools and this may help to address one aspect of the problem. Part of the answer may also lie in developing ethos committees as pioneered by the First Federation in Devon (see Case study 20).



## Case study 20:

### The role of ethos committees in federations involving church schools

The First Federation, Devon is developing the concept of ethos committees as a way of continuing to recognise the distinctive nature of the church schools in the federation, given that there are only 2 foundation governors (plus a vicar who serves as a governor ex-officio) out of a total of 13 that specifically represent the church's interests. The role of the foundation governors is to provide oversight and be a link between the schools in the federation and the governing body.

In addition, each of the four schools in the federation has an ethos committee which includes a nominated person from the parochial church council, a parent from a local church, pupils and the head of teaching and learning. Each of the two foundation governors on the governing body is linked to two of the committees. The outcomes of committee meetings are minuted. The remit is to look at how well the school is working on its Christian distinctiveness and it uses the Statutory Inspection of Anglican Schools report and toolkit as a means of focusing its work.

Source: Interview with executive headteacher, First Federation

Acting to foster and develop APSGs would recognise the role and contribution that primary schools have to make to the education system. As importantly, it would help to grow the next generation of primary school leaders and provide primary schools with the capacity to lead change and address the range of challenges that schools face over the next decade. APSGs would take the concept and principles of chains but apply them in a way that is relevant and appropriate to the primary school context.

# Appendix 1: How performance federations help weak schools to improve

Characteristics of effective school improvement models as evidenced in academic studies	How performance federations help deliver the model
Intolerance of system failure	The stronger school comes in with a culture of high expectations and challenges the acceptance of poor performance across the board.
A clear sense of primary mission with a number of small goals set	A clear mandate or contract (along with governance arrangements) for the stronger school to work with the weaker school is agreed. This includes the problems to be tackled and the improvements to be achieved.
Creation of a critical mass to get a school moving	The stronger school, with its high expectations, proven ways of working, secondment of key staff and access to additional resources, provides the impetus to get the weaker school moving by saturating the school with its approach.
Early identification and tackling of problems	The stronger school confronts the weaker school with the problems and any personnel – be they staff or students – that are blocking progress. The schools agree what action will be taken, including making changes in the leadership of the weaker school where necessary.
Consistent application of standard operating procedures	The stronger school insists on – and if necessary imports – clear rules and procedures for uniform, behaviour, pupil attendance, lesson planning and quality assurance, study leave, course assessment, staff absence etc.
A culture of monitoring, including peer monitoring, to improve teaching and learning	There is intensive observation and monitoring of lessons, including enabling teachers from the weaker school to observe colleagues at the stronger school and vice versa.
Co-construction of support to meet flexibly the precise needs of the weaker school while adhering to the principles of effective school improvement	The stronger school is responsible for maintaining a systematic school improvement model, but enables the weaker school to tailor support to address specific weaknesses and concerns, for example in teaching a particular subject or ensuring a relevant curriculum for a discrete group of students. The weaker school is involved throughout in shaping the work of the support federation.
Extensive training and retraining and very careful recruitment	The results of lesson observations form the basis for a structured staff development and training programme. This may include shared training with staff in the stronger school, one-to-one coaching and mentoring or working with an advanced skills teacher. The stronger school ensures that the right staff are recruited to fill key skill gaps. These are often at the level of assistant headteacher or curriculum leader.

Rich use of data	The stronger school ensures that data systems are in place in the weaker school to track the progress of each pupil, year group and department and to set appropriate targets for improvement.
Simultaneous top-down and bottom-up leadership	The stronger school provides clear strategic leadership but also builds up the confidence and skills of middle, senior and aspiring or potential leaders in the weaker school. The aim is to equip them to take responsibility and be accountable for quality and standards.
Close attention to the quality of resources and the learning environment	Short-term measures are put in place to improve the learning environment, for example by redecorating or refurbishing parts of the school and/or reorganising areas to accommodate different teaching methods. A long-term plan for the development of the school premises is drawn up.
Simultaneous engagement at school and classroom level	The support federation model provides the strong leadership the weaker school needs, but also focuses on improving the quality of teaching and learning in every lesson.
Capacity developed for self-sustaining improvement	As the support federation develops, the relationship between the schools changes to one in which there is mutual learning. What was the weaker school starts to regain the capacity and confidence to conduct its own improvement agenda and/or forms a longer-term partnership with the stronger or another school.

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