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Small school challenges

Learning lessons from small school headteachers.

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SCHOOL LEADERS

Report

Introduction and context

In 2008 there were 2,637 schools in England with less than 100 pupils, of which 645 had less than 50 pupils (Teachernet 2008). These schools are highly significant to their communities and can form a bedrock for local people, with a particularly strong history of small schools in rural areas. Furthermore, small schools have also been frequently characterised by their flexible and creative approach to teaching and learning. Despite this, small schools remain a relatively under-researched group.

There is currently widespread interest, and some concern, over the future of small schools, largely prompted by the increased threat of falling rolls to their survival (DfES 2005). This has led to greater debate about federation and collaboration as ways forward for small schools and as a means of protecting their future.

This study, undertaken between summer 2007 and autumn 2008, explored the perspectives of small school leaders and managers, examining the operational and strategic issues they currently face. It comprised two focus groups and a series of individual interviews, so that in all, 20 headteachers of schools of less than 100 pupils were consulted.

The group of headteachers from Cambridgeshire and Norfolk, comprised one headteacher of a federation, three male headteachers and seventeen female headteachers.

The interviews, which lasted about an hour each, centred on four key themes:

1. Setting directions
2. Developing people
3. Redesigning the organisation
4. Managing the teaching and learning programme

Findings

Dealing with complexity

As organisations, small schools have a high degree of complexity, stemming from the small numbers of staff they employ and the intricate remit they fulfil. In particular, headteachers have fewer opportunities to delegate their work and as a result are more likely to have to engage directly with diverse groups of stakeholders. Dealing with initiatives such as extended services for instance is therefore markedly more challenging within a small school context.

Rural small schools also face different demands to many larger schools because of the more central role they play in their local community. In such contexts, the school is more embedded and significant to community life than larger schools, which adds to its complexity. As one headteacher indicated:

“Small schools are often in isolated communities and you need to have others involved. To go out and have others come in are important experiences for everyone.”

Furthermore, most small school headteachers teach. This places additional considerable demands on their time and can act as an obstacle for accessing professional development.

However, marked benefits can come from this. For instance many headteachers identify teaching as one of the most enjoyable aspects of their role. Demonstrating strong teaching craft can also increase a headteacher's credibility with their staff, as one commented:

“Small school headteachers are well placed to have meaningful discussions with staff. You aren't asking them to do something which you don't have to do yourself.”

Headteachers' involvement in the core purpose of schools may help to raise standards in instances where the headteacher is a particularly good teacher. More generally, benefits will come from their closer relationship with pupils, which supports broader approaches for monitoring their progress. For instance, as one headteacher commented:

“Monitoring for us seems to take the form of a whole lot of formal and informal conversations, observing lessons in passing, monitoring work and talking to children.”

The demands that new initiatives and policies place on schools are often more keenly felt in small schools than their larger counterparts. Perhaps unsurprisingly, increasing bureaucracy is the greatest preoccupation of small school headteachers. The difference in their context led some headteachers to suggest that it may be appropriate to allow smaller schools more flexibility in terms of their organisational structures.

Mutual support

Respondents highlighted how the sharply felt demands on small school headteachers may result in their experiencing feelings of isolation. One headteacher said:

“When things go wrong there’s nowhere to hide. The headteacher is the person who is accountable. The community sees that.”

Respondents indicated that formal mutual support networks were less ingrained and established for small school headteachers, partly because of their workload and partly because of their geographical isolation.

As a result, mutual support networks are potentially more important for small school headteachers but ironically more difficult to establish and sustain. However, these headteachers described how some informal networking (e.g. PLN initiatives, Cluster work, INSET) for mutual benefit did occur and provided a useful basis which could be built upon yet further.

Small schools and succession planning

Ironically, the highly complex nature of small schools is such that they offer a unique forum for learning about headship.

Furthermore the high profile nature of headship in small schools meant that greater demands existed for individuals to lead by example and demonstrate a grounded and pragmatic view of their pivotal role in their learning organisations.

While the reduced numbers of staff meant that the number of initiatives that could be pursued was smaller, it was nevertheless the case that more leadership opportunities exist within the organisation. Thus experience of management in small schools was more likely to be shared, which in turn, has positive implications for developing school leadership potential.

Some headteachers described their difficulties in offering posts to Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs), as work demands limited their abilities to provide a regular mentoring role to these individuals. One headteacher commented:

“I decided not to have NQTs in my school as I couldn’t give them very mixed age groups and any coordinator role. I wouldn’t be able to give them realistic support. It would not be fair to an NQT.”

Finally, as average salaries for leaders in small schools are generally lower than those paid to their larger school colleagues, there is less scope to use pay as a means of retaining staff. As a result, headteachers of small schools are forced to consider alternative, more creative approaches to staff retention.

Forms of collaboration as a way forward

Many of the challenges of small schools could be addressed through more systematic, formalised collaborative working. Many headteachers expressed concern over feelings of isolation and greater partnership activity could help to address these issues.

Small school leaders interviewed in this study also recognised the need to develop greater collaboration between stakeholders within their own school.

There is evidence that collaborative working is increasingly being applied between schools and within clusters, but is not yet used more systematically as a specific model for developing leadership potential.

These headteachers were keen to communicate and learn with others, building opportunities for their schools to work together to support the communities they serve. At the same time however, they were keen to retain an appropriate degree of autonomy and independence.

Recommendations

Leaders of small schools would benefit from advice on clear and well-researched development opportunities which would promote alternative models of shared leadership. One area of potential may be to utilise small schools more fully as a means of developing leadership capacity through placements of individuals with strong leadership potential.

Greater practical encouragement and support is needed to facilitate networking between aspiring and substantive small school headteachers. Support is also needed to help small school headteachers to access professional development opportunities, which are often overlooked in leaders' efforts to cope with the daily life of small schools.

Soft and hard federations appear to have particular potential for small schools and may offer one way of overcoming the specific challenges they face, while at the same time, enabling them to retain important aspects of their unique character.

To support this, further research and guidance is needed on funded models of formal and informal federation to evaluate their potential benefits for small schools and to help develop the next generation of school leaders.

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