

# Can federations help stars to come out?

Exploring the unique contribution  
of federations to the development  
of school leaders

SCHOOL LEADERS

Report

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## **Abstract**

This research investigates the structure and practice of a small number of federated schools. It concludes that federation has a positive impact on the professional development of staff and the engagement of governors. The benefits of federation were found to be broader than positions in league tables or the collection of awards though these were found to contribute to success. The research found that federation required effective collaboration and created more opportunities for talent to be identified and nurtured.

## Introduction

### Can federations really be full of stars?

Federations are pairs or groups of schools with close bonds, that enable collaborative working - the very antithesis of competition. Does their practice have a greater impact on staff development? Is the impact positive? Can federations really be full of stars?

This study looked in greater depth at the impact that working together, particularly in hard federations, had on teachers. It questioned whether their continuing professional development is enhanced and whether greater opportunities to grow as leaders are provided.

We are Dual Headteachers at the Federation of Abbey Schools in Darlington (630 pupils), where there has been a history of collaborative working since 2000. The schools were formally soft federated in April 2004 then hard federated in 2007\* after receiving a second Leading Aspect Award (Birmingham Local Authority). Our practice concerning staff development was considered by the local authority assessors as exceptional. The audience for this study consisted of governors, headteachers, school leadership teams and those teachers that aspire to leadership, because in our own federation, it is these very groups that have experienced considerable change.

We have chosen this study because we are working in an evolving federation and have an in-depth knowledge of this form of collaborative work. Additionally we are leaders of a sustained primary strategy learning network, part of a School Centered Initial Teacher Training (SCITT) consortium and have thriving international links. We are aware of the impact a successful federation can have on everyone's learning and therefore this is an appreciative enquiry highlighting many of the positive aspects of federations. Promoting the sharing and celebrating of good practice is a central theme and a sound basis for developing federations and crucial for the leadership of education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) for example, envisages federations of schools, to be one of the ways forward to offset the complexity of workload and demands on leadership appointments. The diversity that a federation brings can be a vehicle to the visionary and strategic leader. This study poses questions for these leaders. The development of staff and of new leaders within a system and the true potential for distributed leadership are explored. Do federations enable an enhanced capacity of opportunity for staff development? The research investigated the provision for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) within a range of federated structures.

How do federations contribute to the growth of new leaders? The study considers if there is sustainability in their leadership models and if there is scope for succession planning.

This study has the potential to contribute to the national debate concerning federations. The research undertaken may be of interest on many levels. It will be a valuable document for anyone working in or setting up a federation or involved in the enhancement of teachers as professionals. It will provide evidence on a national level of the impact that federations are having on the education system.

\*For the purposes of this study, a simple definition - A soft federation is a collaborative where there are separate governing bodies for each of the schools involved, but the schools share committees with delegated powers, often a curriculum committee or a strategic committee. A hard federation has one shared governing body.

## Literature review

We have looked at a range of studies into the development of federations. These have highlighted different models – from soft governance federations where the main driver is the need to share staff expertise or to work together on curriculum initiatives, to hard federations, where one governing body and one headteacher are responsible for more than one school. Long term visions in these hard federations recognise the importance of shared CPD that promotes leadership development and succession planning. Our study aims to discover how hard federations are having an impact on this crucial issue.

Among the various publications on this subject, we have noted frequent reference to how federations were gradually implemented in the Netherlands (e.g. NCSL 2005a) where positive financial support from the government encouraged links between the country's seven thousand primary schools. Advantages suggested included economies of scale and the enhancement of support networks. It was the Education Act in 2002 that facilitated the creation of federations in England. Their importance was recognised in the government's white paper (DfES 2005). The standards that can improve are wide ranging:

- Quality of teaching enhanced by focus on personalised learning.
- Improved test results and particularly value added achievement.
- Better behaviour.
- Standards of communication with parents.

However, the improvement in the opportunities for the development of staff as leaders is crucial to the sustainability of the education system. The NCSL research publication 'Does every school need a headteacher' (NCSL 2005b) highlights a range of advantages of the federation model, especially the opportunities to develop leadership. Robert Hill, former adviser to Tony Blair, had already contributed to the federation debate in his book 'Achieving more together: Adding value through partnership' (Hill 2008). He put a very positive slant on the value of the model and challenged heads to 'lead and shape the agenda' (TES 2008). In the same article however, Toby Salt, Strategic Director for School Leadership Development at NCSL and previously an executive head at a two school federation, suggests that the 'one headteacher, one school' model will always be the most predominant and that the future of federations could be determined by government policies and the national agenda.

There is a variety of examples of schools working together. The second interim report from the University of Warwick's Centre for Educational Development, Appraisal and Research (CEDAR) (2005), for example, was produced prior their final publication 'School Federations - Pilot Study' (CEDAR 2007). Funded by the DCSF, it considers the continuum of soft to hard federations. Many studies also refer to federations that have grown from collaborations that were pertinent to particular needs, within Education Action Zones (EAZs) for example, or as a result of networks, described, by Chapman & Aspin (2003), as 'intentional constructions, linked together in a web of common purposes'.

What are the common purposes of federations? There is a consistency of opinion that in federations, CPD is a core focus where teachers become active participants, sharing their learning in a wider community.

Ireson (NCSL 2007) refers to the greater opportunities teachers have to 'engage in focussed and collaborative planning' and Steve Munby, Chief Executive of NCSL, in his address at NCSL's annual conference (Munby 2008) suggested that strategic leaders and executives of federations will make leadership more manageable with more realistic expectations of individuals. Federations can also have a positive impact on not only the professional development of staff but especially on the distribution and consequently the strengthening of leaders, and of leadership teams. Headteachers report that they have 'developed an enhanced range of skills working within an extended context' (Percy 2006).

Federations are a significant and large scale change to the traditional 'one head one school' model. Fullan (2003) believes that if any focused educational change is to be sustained, then 'the more that leadership becomes the key' (p 451). This critical element of system leadership puts an emphasis on the roles of the head and leadership team in ensuring that the advantages of bringing staff together are maximised.

It is this background that is a precursor to our study, which initially considers possible impacts of federations before focusing on the CPD and development of new and existing leaders that previous research has found is potentially most significant.

## **Methodology**

This research comprised a number of different elements.

The first phase of the study involved the completion of a questionnaire survey of all federations on the DCSF database. A total of 37 responses were received, representing a response rate of 59%. The survey explored the ways in which federation had a positive impact on the schools concerned.

The findings from this survey helped to formulate the research questions explored during the second phase of the study, which comprised interviews and a focus group of federation leadership team. The federations which supported this work were identified on the basis of positive evidence in relation to CPD. Additional consideration was also given to the length of time federated, geographical proximity, mix of phase and size. The main characteristics of each federation are included in appendix A.

The interviews sought to identify common themes and general facilitators of successful practice while noting common barriers.

The study ran through the academic year 2007/8, the initial work involved was accessing the database and sending out questionnaires during October 2007. Analysis took place shortly after this, in preparation for the visits programme in spring 2008. The findings were written in the summer term 2008.

## Findings

The findings of this study focused on two areas:

1. The continuing professional development of staff in federations and the opportunities that were open to them.
2. How leaders developed within their own federation setting.

Federations have been created for many diverse reasons and our dialogue with heads, governors and teachers reinforced that view. These included filling headteacher posts and the subsequent threat of school closure, opportunities to use high achieving schools to support those in challenging circumstances or the chance to increase learning opportunities by sharing expertise across a range of small schools. Our findings also supported the view that federations were formed to improve standards. However, while we expected a focus on standards and achievement of children, we have also found considerable evidence to suggest that federations also support professional development of staff and leaders at all levels.

The results of our questionnaire showed that a high impact score for CPD was given in many federations that had differing make up and circumstances. There is evidence to show that this CPD did not comprise the 'traditional' model of attendance at a course and subsequent cascading to others in the schools. For example, in one of the rural federations, a teacher represented the three schools and 'she returned to filter back to all staff from the federation thereby sharing the cost. The schools, in effect, had professional development for three subjects for the price of one.'

There was also an impact on the development of a wider distribution of leadership, where individuals could have an input into the life of other establishments such as the overarching federation leadership team structure in a large city federation. In one federation, a member of staff has the title Federation Associate Principal and the brief to manage data across the schools. In all cases the professional development of the head was substantial. Quotes like 'It's been fantastic for me', 'I have grown tremendously in the role', and 'I have been motivated by fresh challenge,' provided evidence of the value of federating.

We have therefore presented our findings to highlight how these federations have impacted on CPD and, significantly, how new leaders have evolved within these systems. We also explored professional development that current leaders have experienced as they carried out their roles and the key changes that took place in leadership structures.

### Continuing Professional Development in Federations

From our own experience and the evidence we obtained from the federations we visited in this country, there is evidence that federations can give opportunities for individuals to access CPD opportunities that would not normally be available in single school settings.

For instance, in our own federation, staff have accessed training and knowledge across the whole site and learned from each other's expertise. An early example was subject leaders for Design and Technology (DT) who attended a course, presented to all staff and then worked together to lead a DT focus week. More recently one teacher attended Common Assessment Framework (CAF) training and then trained all staff on site. External agencies and local authority personnel only need to make contact with the relevant member of staff who then communicates across the federation.

CPD coordination is cross federation, with more and more joint staff meetings and enhanced communication through an application of ICT to memos and diary entries. A higher level teaching assistant (HLTA) facilitated CPD needs of all support staff. There has also been considerable leadership development, which is referred to elsewhere in this research.

Of the six federations visited, there were examples of approaches which offered improved access to CPD which can be shared with others as good practice.

Four themes emerged from this work:

1. Continuing professional development and its impact on leadership in federations.
2. Leading learning to raise pupil achievement and attainment through strong and relevant CPD in federations.
3. Staff retention and leadership succession planning through federations.
4. Change of culture and outlook through staff employed on federation contracts.

The next part of this report considers each of these themes in more depth.

## **1. Continuing professional development and its impact on leadership in federations**

In federation 1, a primary headteacher from a large city who had very recently retired had, with his headteacher colleague, successfully federated an infant and junior school with equally good reputations on the same site. The headteacher explained how federating (alongside achieving Beacon School status) had energised his staff who had previously been reluctant to access CPD. The impact of that federation (2004) had been a great motivator to him, helping to give clear vision and direction. He commented:

“You have got to lock into that vision, take the staff with you, they like to be led.”

Staff had taken on different yet focused responsibilities. One deputy head for example, enhanced her leadership skills by taking on a particular role of developing CPD across both schools.

Federation 2 was secondary, yet significantly, its success has led to a primary school agreeing to federate with it in the near future. Of the two secondary schools, one was higher achieving than the other, which brought its own challenges. The more successful school in the partnership had its own newly qualified teacher (NQT) induction programme. To ensure that both schools could benefit from this, coordinators were placed in both schools and all NQTs in the federation had access to the programme, giving immediate opportunities for newly qualified teachers to continue quality professional development.

There was a substantial amount of expertise across this federation and it was clearly being used. For example, the deputy head led and delivered much of the training programme to develop HLTAs. The CPD coordinator also organised and managed the training development for staff to ensure it was differentiated appropriately to their needs.



The success was celebrated and staff were given the federation's own certificate of professional development. Other elements included staff across the federation having the opportunities to visit other schools or institutions. The federation also offered bursaries for specific professional development e.g. FA coaching. CPD days were joint and on the last day of term, staff worked together on schemes of work and ended with a social event. This event had a positive impact on team building.

In two rural federations the contexts were very different. Federation 3 was made up of two small schools which had weekly staff meetings alternating schools as a venue, the professional development days were alternated too. While staff in these schools were aware of the differences between the two institutions, they considered the needs of all children as one federation to be crucial. For example, any educational visits were arranged across the federation. As one headteacher stated:

“We bring everything down to the children. No member of staff, other than the headteacher, is that far removed from the children.”

The performance management cycle was organised across both schools. Peer observations took place in both schools which gave staff wider ranging opportunities in organisational management and a greater understanding of leadership structures. Effective communication was especially vital in this setting and all staff used email and other ICT that linked the schools. Federation 4 was in a similar setting, small schools scattered through a rural area.

There were a range of examples of innovative CPD in both of these rural federations. For instance, subject leaders worked extensively together. One teacher noted that the role of the subject leader was:

“Sharing the role in the federation, ensuring quality support in each area and time for subject coordinators to carry out the role effectively.”

Meanwhile joint staff meetings were held in all 3 schools to promote the sharing of good practice. Other examples included one assistant head with particular expertise in mathematics who led the subject across the federation and in another instance, a member of staff feeding back the learning from an external training event to colleagues across the federation.

There was also an example of a member of staff trained as a mentor across the federation who had responsibility for CPD. There was a shared transition programme across the federation, helped by the fact that all children transferred to the same secondary school. The programme had a positive impact on pupils and teachers who had the opportunity to visit each other's schools and met and worked together during the final term.

A headteacher in one federation described the many challenges he had in 'bringing it all together', but was extremely positive and committed to the federation his school was involved in. He noted the critical role others played in this stating that:

“It has grown and evolved all the way through, the building has been an instrumental part, but it is about the people. We have joined up our thinking but retain our unique identities.”

The organisation of CPD across the Federation was critical in this and created real added value in this area of activity. Examples of changes which supported this included:

- The creation of an administration team made up of staff from all schools with identified roles and responsibilities.
- An ICT post created across the schools led by a TLR postholder which developed their leadership portfolio.
- Effective informal staff exchanges, particularly targeted at Foundation Stage.

Federation 6 had a stronger school supporting the other one. Examples of two joint appointments highlighted the value of working as a federation. One of the schools would not have been able to afford a business manager, but together they benefited from this position. They also shared a deputy headteacher who focused on data. Other examples of the positive impact of collaboration in this federation include:

- Joint CPD on enquiry based projects.
- Greater connection at year 7 for CPD.
- Sharing of coaching experience from 'Leading from the Middle'.
- Possibilities for staff to have a secondment from one school to the other.
- Shared Advanced Skills Teacher support.

## **2. Leading learning to raise pupil achievement and attainment through strong and relevant CPD in federations**

Federation 1 enabled enhanced transition opportunities between infant and junior phases; particularly when year 2 and year 3 teachers swapped. This was not possible before federation as the infants and juniors worked with a minimum of links between staff. This transition work helped to develop curricular teams, professional dialogue and more wide-ranging experience, impacting on pupil achievement. The year 2/year 3 model is also reflected in our own federation, as possibilities for cross phase professionalism have opened up. Federation 1 has found that the federation status has had a greater impact on CPD, resulting in the staff developing a more creative curriculum together. This in turn, has raised attainment; particularly at key stage 2, evidenced through year on year SATs results.

The headteacher found that the involvement of all staff in school improvement had been greater because of the federation. Federation 2 had a main focus of raising standards, so that both schools are comparable. Progress was clearly evidenced, and the deputy head noted that:

“The impact of the federation is high and the reputation is growing, escalating, building on success?”

This statement was made considering the improvement in enrolment figures in the less successful school and the increase in exam success. This federation also looked to expand by having a primary partner; feedback from stakeholders on federation developments was extremely positive.

The head of federation 3 explained how their partnership schools were given a substantial amount of funding to enable creative structures in organisation to take place, which impacted on raising pupil attainment. Joint visits were timetabled across the federation on a regular basis in order to access the sports centre, as there was no equipment on site.

This provided enhanced opportunities for all pupils, but particularly for the talented. There was now a part-time teacher across the federation for gifted and talented pupils and modern foreign languages. Staff meetings were always taken together so that they could debate issues and ideas and have professional dialogue together. Pupils at both schools attended residential visits together and both pupils and staff learned a lot from each other. Staff shared leadership responsibilities for their learners; they brought their own skills and encouraged joint projects.

At federation 6 there was a focus on using the federation to raise standards. There was a huge commitment to CPD (e.g. every Tuesday afternoon) particularly the investment by the two schools to share a deputy headteacher who was very experienced in using data, to focus on pupil needs and raise standards. Others were learning from this skilled practitioner as he raised their awareness of the benefits of the use of data during staff training sessions and also worked alongside teachers to help them understand data analysis in the classroom. One of the deputies said, 'It was just fantastic to be working closely and learning with a colleague', however it was evident that the commitment of the two headteachers to the schools, was key to raising standards. Another deputy felt that when leading in this way it was important to retain 'true passions about children's learning and have an openness to change.'

### **3. Staff retention and leadership succession planning through federations**

The visit to the rural federations gave us good examples of how they can be used to retain staff. The federation provided opportunities for career progression which would not otherwise exist for teachers, non-teaching and administration staff in small rural schools. This was certainly the view of the primary headteacher:

"Small schools do not have the capacity to offer promotional positions – federations do."

The move to one governing body as a hard federation facilitated this further and it proved to be very proactive and supportive of school developments. Pre-federation, one member of staff who felt that she was not given a lot of support in her school found that when the schools federated, the members of staff who embraced the ideal of the federation were able to develop and access CPD opportunities.

Federation 4 gave good examples of staff retention. For instance when an NQT in one school could not be employed at the end of her course because of falling pupil numbers, a partner school was able to give her a position. The assistant headteacher has stayed within the federation because of the expanding leadership opportunities that have arisen through the partnership. Benefits in this federation were also associated with headteacher recruitment and retention. The schools in the partnership had been able to continue and improve due to keeping quality people, which would not have been possible in one small school. The federation has also had success when bidding for funding because of the partnership.

Staff retention is also an element of federation 6. As one of the schools was less successful, there was a danger that staff could have moved on. Developing the CPD programme, employing key people and the chance of secondments across the federation was motivating.

#### **4. Change of culture and outlook through staff employed on federation contracts**

In our own federation it has been important to build trust between colleagues who had not worked together to ensure a collaborative culture was created across the schools. Trust and collegiality play a major part in a successful federation - any successful collaboration does not happen overnight. This was mirrored in other federations, as one headteacher said:

“The beauty has been its natural development, gradual over a period of time. We achieved something very tangible without any angst.”

In one federation, we discovered that staff were now being employed on federation contracts and that they did want to work in both schools. There was an expectation across the federation that staff develop professionally, either through ‘in house’ programmes or accessing other external courses. Also, the federation supported staff who wished to study for a further degree. Although this federation was a partnership of two schools where one was more successful than the other, it was acknowledged that there were strengths in both schools and that they learned from each other. It was also understood that sometimes the needs of the staff were different when accessing CPD, and getting this right helped them to be able to work successfully across the federation.

Some local authorities promoted their development and acknowledged the input that the school improvement partner (SIP) had in working with a federation as a unit rather than separate schools. Ofsted’s (2008) most recent review recommended that federations should be inspected as one. This was evident in one federation where the schools were inspected at the same time, albeit with two teams, but their federation leadership and management structure inspected jointly. As dual headteachers in our own federation, SIP visits are shared and focus on the same priorities. Another federation had shared visits from HMI and SIP, an Ofsted inspection was expected during autumn 2008 and will be a federation inspection.

The primary/special/nursery federation we visited had changed the culture in a dramatic way, bringing together the three schools in a new building. The headteacher and governors worked together to employ the right mix of people in school. Once again, the headteacher said:

“It’s about the people, how they relate and how they are led.”

A secondary federation had changed the culture in both schools and had a ‘can do’ approach across the two. The federation is non competitive as the schools serve different areas, the mirrored leadership structures across the two supported a uniform approach to learning. The shared good practice was having a positive effect from the leadership and throughout the staff, particularly through CPD developments.

One headteacher commented that ‘a federation is really working if the headteacher/principal/ executive head is not needed’. At first this appeared to be a strange quote from a head, however, further discussion clarified the view that if all systems and procedures are in place, the headteacher could operate in a more strategic manner. This was essential for a federation to work effectively.

## Leadership in federations

All the hard federations that we looked at in depth had different models of headship and different leadership structures. There was a definite connection through all the federations we visited that led towards dispersed leadership rather than a centralised model. The following 3 examples show a wide distribution of leadership responsibility across federations, tailored to impact on specific school improvement:

- Dual heads in federation 1 (hard federation of 2 schools: infant and junior) worked in a strategic partnership with overarching management and leadership teams. Their two experienced deputies had responsibility for the operational nature of the federation alongside an assistant head who led the curriculum supported by teaching and learning responsibility (TLR) post holders.
- Federations 2 and 6 (both hard federations of 2 secondary schools) both appeared to have a traditional two head, two deputy and leadership team structure using the deputies to manage data and timetabling across the federation.
- Federation 5 (hard federation of 3 schools: special, primary and nursery) had an executive head, head of mainstream and head of special school, supported by a team of three assistant heads, an early years headteacher and a director of resources. There was also a team of 6 TLR post holders in the structure.

There was also an example of how a specific focus was enabled by redesigning leadership:

- Another two school infant / junior federation had one head, two deputies and a business manager who had an overview of the finances across the federation despite the fact that there were still two budgets.

Leadership structure was seen as an opportunity to concentrate on creating new leaders at an early stage in some federations:

- One head in federation 4 (soft federation of 3 primary schools) had two assistant heads and a leading teacher. This was seen very much as a school where leaders of the future were being developed.

A federation was used as a way to enable different leadership roles to emerge, strategic and operational:

- One head leading federation 3 (hard federation of 2 primary schools) relied on a deputy and 'teacher in charge' for day-to-day management, enabling the head to focus on strategy and staff development.

Although there was evidence that many structures and titles had been created to enhance the effectiveness of the federations – for example the sharing of an HR assistant or joint ICT technician – many of the roles had evolved as the federations had evolved. Interviewees reported several occasions where re-energised teachers were sharing good practice and grasping opportunities to lead initiatives that positively affected the whole federation.

One teacher commented:

”Both Leading from the Middle and becoming the ICT subject leader allowed me to develop my skills as a leader, and gave me confidence to share my expertise with more colleagues. It has been a journey of developing self-belief, and a knowledge that I can offer a valuable contribution through my expertise and enthusiasm to the children and colleagues I work with.”

Examples of middle leaders stepping up on a part time basis because senior leadership roles had been enhanced were also evident. Heads themselves reported feeling that their skills were being sharpened as they found more time to look at the wider picture.

## **New roles**

Although we found roles that are common to many federations such as executive head and school business manager, we encountered a number of new roles and teams that have evolved and were highlighted by our research.

In one federation the TLR team was a four teacher unit that had responsibility to monitor the delivery of the whole curriculum and the impact on learning and standards. They were line managed by an assistant head. They also led specific initiatives under guidance from the headteacher. One TLR post holder said:

“This responsibility has helped me understand the wider picture for our federation and I can see my place in it. Actually it has been quite fascinating to reflect on how my role has developed.”

A senior HLTA team comprising of three higher level teaching assistants had responsibility to lead and manage the other 11 TAs on site. They each had elements of leadership linked to performance management, timetabling and inclusion. One had a specific responsibility to engage her non-teaching colleagues in CPD appropriate for TAs.

Various roles for individuals included the federation ‘associate principal’ who had a specific responsibility to manage data across the federation (although this does not need to be the exclusive responsibility – the prestige and standing of the role within the federation was the crucial factor). The chief finance officer operated on a full time basis to manage the budgets at the schools in the federation and contributed to all decisions that have financial implications. One leadership team had its own personal assistant (PA). This was an innovative role that enabled the leadership team to focus on professional dialogue and decision making. The PA minuted meetings, communicated to staff, linked with external agencies and ensured relevant administration tasks were carried out.

All federations referred to the importance of effective communication and the value of sound ICT systems. In one federation a technician had been employed across both schools as both the ICT hardware ‘troubleshooter’ and also as a teaching assistant for small group work. Responsibilities included updating the school website and having input into the audit of ICT across the site. This technician commented:

“It’s not that I have just worked with more people, it is working with more people who have the same ideas and principles. I understand more about the longer term goals of the federation and how ICT fits into the future of teaching and

learning.”

The individuals ‘grew into the new roles’. In one example, the school manager, who was appointed when two secretaries retired, restructured the admin team and introduced a one day bursary support for the head. The school manager also managed the welfare assistants. According to the headteacher, the benefit of this was that:

“Money was saved, but the thing that had the greatest impact was the streamlining of the system.”

The important thing about all of these examples is the ability of the federated organisation to identify the unique elements within. Federation opened the door to a creative approach which works for the schools, making maximum use of people, their roles and resources.

### **The evolution of new leaders**

The response to the questionnaires highlighted the significance of CPD in federations. The headteachers we spoke to gave substantial reinforcement, speaking passionately about the professional development of their staff as leaders of the curriculum, of initiatives or of areas such as the extended school agenda. Although they were fully aware of the potential ‘national leadership crisis’ they did not consider that all staff would necessarily aspire to headship roles but felt they could ‘spot the talent’ and nurture it. The federation model made this easier. Bringing together a group of schools and working with more teachers provided greater opportunities for them to evolve as leaders. As one head stated:

“I am able to groom more staff to lead at all management levels.”

Another feature that we found in three of the federations was the opportunities that were available to access enquiry based projects, many of these were being carried out with support from NCSL or the Teacher Learning Academy. In each instance the teachers were able to reflect on their practice. By definition their research involved some form of leadership practice – when presented and recognition received, the teachers were motivated to lead and promote their area of study across the federations. Such a positive and forward thinking learning environment also sustained the workforce and provided rich opportunities to plan for leadership succession.

In federations of smaller rural schools, we found that there was a definite change in culture. They were able to share facilities and staff. Teachers who would previously have needed to apply to larger schools to gain promotion and develop as leaders could now take on further responsibility across a number of schools. As one said:

“I stayed here because there are expanding leadership opportunities due to the formation of the federation. Our headteacher supports this and so do the governors.”

Where these federations operated, joint staff meetings were often led by staff from different schools even when schools were miles apart! These changing environments and contexts enabled teachers to develop confidence and implement changes in their leadership behaviour. Another example we found of a venture across a federation was a residential visit involving three schools – joint leadership of the project encouraged staff development.

Federations have helped to retain good staff by providing them with the opportunities to work collectively as part of a wider group of professionals. The new agenda to focus on gifted and talented (G&T) pupils and the re-emphasis on modern foreign languages (MFL) provided a challenge for even the larger schools. Teachers in leadership roles are required to implement these. In all the federations we visited there was either a teacher for G&T or MFL who was able to lead and provide support to a wider range of colleagues than just those in their own school. Other quotes from the questionnaires were generally supportive of this model of collaboration.

There was evidence in all the federations visited that showed examples of staff retention; particularly securing key leadership roles such as headteacher, assistant headteacher, deputy headteacher, teaching assistant and bursar/school manager. In all cases the larger institution of the federation enabled opportunities to engage and challenge staff in the ongoing vision. There are some quotes from the questionnaires sent out which indicated that this was a more wide reaching factor. These are just a few of the comments that support this view:

“Federation has had an impact on the quality of leadership in that better quality staff have been attracted to working at the schools due to the unique nature of a federation, coupled with a strong focus on school improvement.”  
Hard federation in Southern England (questionnaire).

“Probably the best thing I have done in 20 years of headship. The impact on the curriculum, on progression, on ethos and on extended school has been massive.”  
Hard federation - town in South East England, (questionnaire).

“There is a need to ensure that each school is valued and has the same level of input from leadership and governance.”  
Hard federation - town in North East England, (questionnaire).

## **The development of middle and senior leaders**

National leadership development programmes such as Leading from the Middle (LftM), Leadership Pathways and NPQH were frequently referred to by interviewees, highlighting the impact these NCSL programmes have had on individuals and on the federation as a whole. In some instances a coach operated across the federation and this in turn provided a richer professional dialogue. At our federation we have provided a mix of staff for the last four cohorts. Currently three higher level teaching assistants are accessing the LftM training. As in other federations this has not only improved qualities of leadership but also the development of a coaching culture. Our evidence suggested that as teachers developed coaching skills, their credibility as leaders was enhanced. Within our federation, one coach went on to assistant headship and another into a TLR post. We avoided using the head or deputy as the coach. The federation benefited from the advanced skills teacher (AST) in a coaching role followed by a successful LftM participant evolving as a coach for the last and current cohort. This small-scale succession planning within the context of LftM was easier to implement across a federation.

During our visit to federation 2 we learned they were proud of their in house CPD programme where middle and senior leaders often led the training. They had a middle leaders' conference on site and these middle leaders worked jointly on developing policy



across their federation.

Senior leaders also developed further skills, for example the deputy principal at one federation extended his understanding of higher level teaching assistants by managing their professional development.

There was an expectation that an advanced skills teacher (AST) supported other schools. Sharing one AST across a federation was a huge professional development opportunity, enabling teachers to have an impact on their own workplace. The federations that had an AST took advantage of this situation. One such example was of an AST who developed a peer-to-peer learning programme with children from the different schools in the federation and ensured it was sustained by involving other teachers in the project. In another instance, the AST was seconded to lead and manage a SCITT consortium. She then had a direct impact on the federation's teacher training programme. In one federation we visited, the weaker school was supported by the AST from the stronger school. However, the weaker school still had some expertise and this was managed by the AST and shared across both sites. In both instances, the headteachers were challenging and supporting these ASTs to develop their leadership skills so that they could, in turn, develop the staff in their federations.

There is substantial evidence that the roles of deputy headteachers in federations have changed. In one federation, the two deputies felt as though they were taking on a different range of responsibilities. One deputy head commented:

“There are occasions when the head is out and we are running the school.”

This was, of course, an expectation of deputies in general. However, heads of federations, who move between sites or work strategically alongside the school bursar and chair of governors for example, are now giving deputies more operational responsibility. The federations have provided the evolving role of assistant headteacher, with opportunities to lead specific initiatives or operational areas linked to the curriculum. Headteachers planning for succession saw the assistant head as a valuable part of their structure. As one headteacher said:

“Our assistant head is currently leading maths across the federation and this has certainly encouraged her leadership ambition.”

### **Enhancement of headteacher skills**

Just as staff development had been enhanced by leaders who were remotivated by the federation model, the headteachers we spoke to were also enthusiastic about leading their federations. There is no doubt they were motivated by the opportunity to work in a newer and wider context. For instance, one said:

“I have had personal CPD linked to aspects of the federation's development, for example SCITT tutoring, coaching a wider number of teachers, and a much greater awareness of collaboration. The federation has no doubt inspired me because of these extra opportunities it brings with it.”

They had all been instrumental in creating the federation and therefore had an awareness of how they are formed.

The headteachers all felt their leadership skills were being developed because of the changes to their working environment, as these two comments illustrate:

“Working with different people and creating new teams is a rewarding challenge.”  
(Secondary school headteacher)

“To lead a federation I think you have got to think creatively. I don’t just mean being a diverse thinker, although this helps, it is about using the skills and styles of a wider range of other leaders to provide direction. I have been able to create a more effective team across the Federation – there are more styles to choose from.” (Primary school headteacher)

The formation of federations has enabled each headteacher to lead and develop a workforce that has grown in number. Our evidence suggests that the workforce also grew in quality, as one headteacher remarked:

“We have more staff working together since we federated. I am now part of a staff of 53 instead of 29. It is good to feel part of it all.”

The heads of the federations in our study have had more opportunities to ‘step back’ and have a strategic overview without as much day-to-day business. Operational leadership was more devolved. This arrangement also allowed the headteacher to become more involved in national projects and consultancy work that had a positive impact on them and on the professional development of staff. As one head noted:

“I am able to see the future because I am more aware of the national agenda. I really can make good use of quality leadership time.”

It was clear from our discussions with headteachers of federations that they were all people who motivated and inspired others using particular skills, namely:

- The ability to be a key person in creating the federation.
- To be committed to collaborative working and sharing good practice.
- To think creatively, using the skills of others within the organization.
- To be able to lead and manage a larger workforce, often including other leaders.
- To be a strategic thinker and see the future.

## **Governors as leaders**

During this study we found that governors had a major part to play in the formation and running of these federations. The governing bodies had different levels of involvement and expertise, some proactive, some supportive and some which were less supportive due to lack of confidence at managing change. The approach they took to federating either positively or negatively impacted on the direction of the federation. The federation itself became a learning opportunity for all governors involved, when elements of governing the schools together became obviously advantageous in areas such as finance and staffing. Examples from the study show that:

- At one federation, governors took the initiative after understanding the benefits a federation could bring. The schools originally had two governing bodies working in tandem, with chair, vice chair and sub-committees. The governors saw the value of being one governing body, even though there were personal sacrifices to make.

“The governors’ aim was always to bring the schools together.”  
(Primary headteacher)

- One governing body was a necessity to support one headteacher across two rural schools. When one governing body was created, it was much more proactive and saw the needs and strengths of each school and how this could benefit both.

“One governing body relieves a lot of work.” (Primary headteacher)

- In another federation, the Executive Governing Body, although not directly involved in the CPD, provided a conduit that enabled a smooth transition from soft to hard federation, providing excellent support to the head teacher regarding strategy to manage change.

“We recognise the bigger picture across the schools and know that we now have a role which is a lot more strategic than one just guidance and support.” (Governor)

- Another federation had problems of managing a power struggle and control. Trust needed to be secured. The research found that bringing together governing bodies into one was not always an easy thing to do, especially if the federation was not a natural collaboration of schools. More ‘ownership’ of a federation made it easier for the leadership to drive it forward as the purpose and success was focused more easily between the corporate leadership.
- Schools were able to streamline the governing body and allocate more work to committees, avoiding bureaucracy and taking advantage of economies of scale. As governors were working more closely together it was also helping them develop and share skills in specific areas.

“This means that we can have joined up thinking, but retain unique identities.”  
(Headteacher)

## Conclusions

Federations have been promoted by the DCFS for a range of reasons but particularly to address the potential shortfall in headteachers. The findings from this research have given more of an insight into some of their potential advantages and pitfalls in relation to teacher and leader development. The opportunity to talk to leaders in these federations shows a pattern of links that fit together and which demonstrate a far wider impact. An overarching conclusion is that federations need to be 'fit for purpose' and need to be centred on the needs of the children within them.

The conclusions and recommendations from this study are generally positive. The findings indicate that where a federation works effectively, it is a model which proactively encourages individuals to see the bigger picture and understand their own purpose. The findings suggest that federations accelerate individual professional flair.

This study indicates that federations support professional development and succession planning in a number of ways.

- **They enable school leaders and governors to look at their unique situation and use it to greatest advantage for staff and pupils**

Each school in this study has a distinct set of qualities of which school leaders and governors are aware. Federations enhance the flexibility of the organisation and allow diversity when planning strategically. A culture has been established which promotes creative thinking. Crucially, a number of schools in each federation had chosen the same priorities for development – they opened the same 'box' at the same time!

- **They create opportunities for leadership roles which would not occur in individual schools**

Small schools and large schools can seize upon this outcome. The small schools visited were able to offer leadership roles across federations where normally they would not be available. In federations of larger schools, more complex leadership structures allowed earlier opportunities for middle leaders to take on responsibility.

- **Federations are in a position to offer highly successful and effective CPD to all staff**

We found many examples of how to organise CPD across federations, and schools are using expertise to enhance peer-to-peer learning. Federations provide greater capacity to adopt different organisational structures. Staff have the opportunity to lead small-scale initiatives and share the outcome with a greater number of colleagues.

- **Federations support staff retention**

Small schools in particular come across difficulties with retaining staff, either for budgetary reasons or the fact that promotional opportunities are non-existent. Federations play their part in the retention of good staff as the larger organisation provides greater opportunities for promotion.

- **They create a culture which develops its own succession planning**

There were varying lines of thought regarding leadership progression. This study found many positive examples of active succession planning. In general, the federation model supports a wider range of succession planning opportunities than is possible in a single school. A key factor in this is that federations offer the

scope to involve a broader range of people in leadership. This in turn protects the overall quality of leadership and helps to ensure that new leaders can be initiated, while at the same time, the wider work of the school does not appear to suffer.

- **Federations support greater diversity leadership structures**  
We found many different leadership structures within federations. The federations support creative approaches to leadership by allowing governors and school leaders greater scope in creating structures which are fit for purpose. From our own experiences, the more we have worked in a federation, the more ideas have occurred to us about how leadership structures can be created to enhance the working of the schools and how leadership qualities can potentially be developed in a number of individuals.
- **Contracting staff directly with the federations cultivated a different outlook than when they are contracted to the individual schools**  
To some staff in the study, moving to a federation model was a concern and we encountered instances where members of staff had left the school rather than be part of the federation. In other instances, staff had embraced the philosophy and found the vision and challenge exciting. Staff appointed to a federation appear to have a clearer understanding from the start of the advantages that a federation offers both to themselves and to pupils.

We found that involving staff more closely in the development of the federation could reduce the potential dangers of a 'top down model'. Meanwhile, new teachers were more familiar with what federations entailed and had a good understanding of how this different way of working supported the development of staff. Similarly, working in a federation brought a greater appreciation of the range of school structures which existed, and in many instances, appeared to have a positive impact on the practice of both teaching and non-teaching staff.

## Recommendations

In light of the findings from this study, the following recommendations are offered.

- **What's in it for us?**

While recognising the existing strengths of their school, governors and headteachers are encouraged to consider the additional benefits that could be achieved by federating.

- **Create leadership opportunities**

A particular area to address during such reflections is the extent to which federations can promote leadership development. This study found evidence that federations are able to offer a greater range of leadership opportunities at all levels both through the provision of formal CPD and offering practical opportunities to lead.

- **Develop slowly (but don't stop moving)**

There is a danger in any change process of moving too quickly and providing insufficient opportunity for those involved to reflect on, and become comfortable with the implications of this change. However it is essential that forward momentum is maintained, to avoid the change process from stalling. Schools entering into federation should therefore adopt a patient and measured speed of change, focusing on promoting a collaborative rather than competitive educational culture and sharing good practice and professional knowledge.

- **Adopt an inclusive approach to CPD**

All members of the federation leadership team have a part to play in promoting CPD. At the same time, the sheer size of many federations means that the development needs of individuals are likely to be varied. Extra efforts are required therefore to ensure that appropriate professional support is offered to address these needs to maximum effect.

- **Share models of creative CPD across federations**

Just as federations support the sharing of good practice between schools, there is a strong argument for promoting greater contact between federations to encourage professional dialogue and sharing of positive ways of working.

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## Acknowledgements

We would like to express our thanks to all those who gave their time in contributing to this study.

## Appendix A

### Description of federation case studies

1. Large city – hard federation - three form entry infant and junior school with 630 pupils, Infant and junior buildings were situated within a 150 yard radius The senior management team consisted of a dual headship, two deputies across the Federation and one school manager of 8 admin staff. One governing body.
2. Large city – hard federation - two large secondary schools, 1,420 and 720 pupils, 30 minutes travel time between the schools. There was an overarching federation leadership team with a chief executive officer. Each school had a principle and senior management team. One governing body.
3. Rural authority – hard federation - two rural primary schools, one with 53 pupils, one with 76 pupils. 10 minutes travel time between the two. There was one headteacher, a deputy in one school and teacher in charge at the other. They made up the senior management team structure of the federation.
4. Rural authority - soft federation - three partnership primary schools, pupil numbers at around 80, 70 and 40 with a triangular distance of 3 miles between schools. The leadership structure was headteacher, assistant headteacher in two of the schools and two leading teachers in the other. There were 3 separate governing bodies with one joint curriculum committee.
5. Northern town – hard federation – three schools, primary (210 pupils), special (60) and nursery school (90), physically moved together into a purpose built school. The leadership structure was executive headteacher, then a headteacher of mainstream with two assistant headteachers and headteacher of the special school with one assistant headteacher. In addition there was an early years headteacher and a Federation Director of Resources. There was one governing body, streamlined so that the majority of work was done in committees.
6. Northern town – hard federation - two secondary schools situated 20 minutes apart with recently appointed headteachers working closely together. There was an executive leadership team across the federation. Each school had a deputy headteacher and another deputy headteacher was shared across the federation with a particular remit for data analysis. There was a shared business manager, community manager and HR Assistant. Beyond that there were mirrored leadership structures in the schools.