

From soft to hard federation

David Kay details how governor workload and outlook alter during this process

My first exposure to the concept of a federation was attending a meeting as a parent when the secondary school my son was attending was proposing to form a soft federation with another secondary school. Within a year, I was a member of the governing body. The primary activity from a governance perspective appeared to be an improved mobility of teaching resources rather than the mass transfer of good teachers initially feared by many parents.

The significant change really occurred when we decided to move to a hard federation, initially of two and then of three secondary schools. All three schools shared an executive headteacher and the creation of a single governing body was both necessary and with hindsight the right step to take. For some governors it was the opportunity to step down, which led to me being elevated to chair of the finance committee.

Single bursar

With the funds – totalling over £12m – of three schools to manage we couldn't review every line of each trial balance every month. So with the restructuring of the finance teams under a single bursar, we developed a standard profit and loss statement to provide governors with a summarised but consistent view of each school's financial position. This immediately showed variations which were investigated and activity undertaken. This ranged from simple re-coding of expenditure to cost reduction initiatives and combined procurement exercises.

In terms of an individual governance role the change did prove more of a leap. I felt it was important that I quickly

established an understanding of and a relationship with the different senior leadership teams and an appreciation of the differences in each of the schools. I arranged to visit both of the other schools and was pleased at the positive reception I received from all staff. I have continued to see each school in operation at least once a year, plus extra-curricular events.

Front line impact

My other formal role is as part of the curriculum and welfare committee and it is here that we have seen probably the biggest front line impact. The majority of the teaching staff appear keen to work with colleagues across the federation, developing joint schemes of work, sharing good practice via combined training sessions and pursuing their careers via secondments and internal promotions. As a committee, we've had to get used to a large increase in our workload and we haven't yet cracked the concept of consistency in data and report presentation.

“ The creation of a single governing body was the right step to take ”

Academic results have improved and this wasn't just a function of the pupils' prior attainment. Teaching has improved as a result of the above activities and there have been a number of combined trips and activities (some of which wouldn't have been possible for an individual school).

Changes in local circumstances have seen one school move towards closure while the other two have converted to

academies. At the same time they have joined an educational partnership with five other secondary schools. Already this partnership has shown benefits in the wider sharing of teaching skills through joint staff sessions and workshops.

All seven schools purchased the same academy finance system and accountancy services. While most people will point to the initial cash saving, I am confident that the real benefits will come in future years as finance staff across the partnership develop a local network of skills and understanding that they can share. I'm keen to see if we can follow this up with an initiative on shared provision of IT services.

There is no intention to formally amalgamate but I'm sure we'll find mechanisms for peer review and joint briefing and training sessions so that we can share experiences and learning as well as helping each other through the 'interesting times' ahead.

Working as a governor in a federation brings an extra, but not impossible, workload and has benefits. It challenges you to think of a bigger picture and take in a different perspective. With a single governing body and an executive headteacher for a federation you have the authority and delivery mechanism to make change. Without this structure, I would be concerned that the effectiveness is reduced. You have to remember that you are 'a governor of the federation' not 'a governor of a school in a federation'. □



David Kay has been a secondary school governor for five years and works as a project/programme manager