

Federations: Ofsted gives its verdict



The NGA has published a number of articles about federations (*Matters Arising* March, May and July 2011). As with all structural changes the big questions are always – does it work and what will the impact be.

Ofsted has now published a report, *Leadership of More Than One School*, looking at precisely these issues and the results are mainly positive. The report looks specifically at the provision and outcomes for children, but also at the reasons for and barriers to federation. Ofsted visited 61 schools across 29 federations and analysed questionnaires from the leaders of 111 federations. Unfortunately Ofsted persists in using the phrase “soft federation” when what it means is collaboration – i.e. the schools concerned did not share a single governing body. In fact only two of its visits were to non-federated

schools and in those cases the schools shared a headteacher.

In those federations visited there were three main reasons for forming the federation:

- Stronger schools supporting weaker schools, often at the suggestion of the local authority
- Small schools banding together to increase capacity and protect education provision
- Federation across phases to strengthen education provision across the education community

The leaders and governors interviewed were positive about the benefits of federation. They saw professional development, staff retention, greater availability of resources and the ability to attract high-quality leaders as the key reasons why federation led to improvements to provision.

Ofsted found that provision and outcomes had risen in all the federations visited and that in the main

the improvements occurred in direct correlation to the reason for the federation. So where less successful schools had federated with more successful schools teaching and learning had improved along with pupils’ behaviour and achievement. Schools aiming to improve capacity and retain provision had been successful at enriching the curriculum and also care, guidance and support for pupils – it had also resulted in improved achievement for vulnerable pupils. In the latter case transition between phases was improved, resulting in less disruption to pupils’ progress between phases.

Effective leadership

Not surprisingly Ofsted identified effective leadership as the most critical feature in the success of the federation, noting that in the two federations visited where leadership was judged to be no better than satisfactory, there had been no clear strategic purpose for the federation – short of protecting schools from closure – and the senior leadership team had not adapted to the model of more than one school.

Governing bodies were found to have been instrumental in the successful establishment of federations, but Ofsted found less evidence of their continuing impact. It notes that in the best federations the governing body effectively held the senior leadership to account, but in some other federations although the schools as a whole were effective, the strength of the senior leadership team sometimes meant that the governing bodies did not offer sufficient challenge. Ofsted records that in 17 of the 29 federations visited governance was good or outstanding.

Common features noted in those federations where leadership was

judged to be outstanding were:

- A clear vision – driven by the headteacher but shared
- Good communication of the benefits federation would have for the pupils
- Well-developed strategic plans with success criteria shared with all staff
- Rigorous procedures for monitoring and evaluation and holding the staff to account
- Belief in and well-established procedures for continuous professional development for all staff and development and coaching of leaders at all levels

A number of benefits and barriers were noted.

Stronger schools supporting weaker schools

The barriers came from parents and sometimes staff in the stronger school concerned that the quality of education would suffer because the leadership would not be concentrating solely on one school. The review found no evidence that this happened and indeed in five out of the 10 stronger schools inspected since federation, achievement had been maintained at either good or outstanding and in a further two had risen from good to outstanding.

Although the weaker schools had issues, many also had areas of good practice and the stronger schools benefited from adopting this good practice. In addition, it was recognised that many of the stronger schools had retained their ambitious headteachers because of the additional challenge of leading a federation, where without that challenge the head would have moved on to pastures new.

Headteachers also noted that federation provided more opportunities for leadership development for all staff.

Protection of the quality of education in the community

These federations had been established to protect existing provision, rather than support improvement, as in most cases the schools already had at least good provision. The benefits to these schools were the ability to pool resources,

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particularly at senior leadership level, and shared expertise to improve English, maths and subject coordination. As a result pupils in these federations had experienced a richer curriculum.

The opportunity for extra-curricular activities, particularly sport, had also been improved with pupils in six of the federations having their first experience of residential visits as a direct result of the federation.

Stronger cross-phase links

Ofsted noted that in the federated schools the academic transition of pupils was much stronger compared to other schools – a previous Ofsted study of transition across phases had noted good pastoral transition but weaker academic transition. Federations had improved this, meaning pupil progress was less disrupted.

Leadership models

Although there was no single model a common characteristic was of a single headteacher or executive headteacher leading the federation and in many cases the leadership structures below this level were continuously developing. Interestingly, Ofsted found no evidence that one particular model was better than any other. The key factor in the success of the federation was that the leadership structure was both fit for the purpose of the federation and reflected the needs of the individual institutions and their communities.

Governance

There is of course one governing body for the federation, but each federation operated a different committee structure. In some, committees dealt with cross-federation issues with link governors for the individual schools. In others there were committees for each of the schools, particularly in relation to finance where schools retained their individual budgets.

The report highlights the fact that in all the federations the governing body was very clear about the reasons for establishing the federation and its ongoing purpose. Governors identified the need to learn to take a federation rather than an individual school perspective of strategic development as a key challenge. A key benefit where a stronger school federated with a weaker one was the improvement of governance in the weaker school.

Finance

Financial arrangements were perceived to be a barrier by 22 of the 29 federations visited. The need to have effective strategic management of the finances was seen as crucial and seven of the federations now had business managers as part of the senior leadership team. 📖

RECOMMENDATIONS

Ofsted makes three key recommendations as result of their survey.

- The strategic purpose and planning to achieve it must be focused on the benefits to pupils' education
- Ensure that governing bodies establish ongoing procedures to hold the senior leadership to account
- Ensure that consultation is meaningful and communication is open with parents, staff and pupils at an early stage so that mechanisms can be put in place to reduce any barriers to successful federation

The full report can be found on the Ofsted website www.ofsted.gov.uk. If you are a governor in a federation



we would love to hear from you about the challenges and how you have overcome them. Please contact me on gillian.allcroft@nga.org.uk