

Benefits for school improvement

When governing bodies are considering extending, and formalising, their current collaborations or developing plans for federation, the focus must be on ensuring that the structures strengthen the schools' capacity to support the best possible provision and outcomes for children and young people. Increasingly this is through a joint strategic committee or through the single governing body to a federation of schools.

Although the initial motivation is often about viability, sustainability, creating value for money or improving cost-effectiveness, maintaining a focus throughout on school improvement is essential. So how can increased (and more formal) collaboration or federation contribute to school improvement?

It can strengthen leadership at all levels through:

- ✓ Extending the influence and impact of leading practice in leadership across schools.
- ✓ Increasing capacity for strategic leadership at senior level, including through improved governance – a single governing body can make better use of the pool of local skills.
- ✓ Supporting succession planning and addressing retention of high quality, effective school leaders. By working across schools the pool for developing future senior leaders is widened. The opportunities to lead across a number of schools adds professional challenge, encourages creativity and provides exciting professional development opportunities.
- ✓ Attracting high quality leaders to posts because of greater responsibility and reward.
- ✓ Allowing the development of leadership structures across a wider group of schools, and giving senior and middle leaders (eg subject leaders) a wider group of colleagues to work with.
- ✓ Increasing breadth of perspective across leaders at all levels. Sharing expertise at all levels. Providing opportunities for phase and subject leaders to work across schools, to provide challenge and support for school improvement, through the sharing of exemplar practices, through the implementation of coaching, mentoring, peer tutoring and increased opportunity for professional dialogue.
- ✓ Developing particular specialist roles across the group of schools, for example through sharing a School Business Manager, a Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo), or particular subject leads. This can be cost effective but also add value through the effective use of time and through maximising valuable expertise. A shared School Business Manager can lead on site management, on recruitment processes, on governance and on some safeguarding and health and safety issues across the cluster, releasing senior and middle leaders to focus their time on teaching and learning. Similarly, a shared SENCo can fully develop their skills and streamline approaches to identification, provision, links with parents and agencies across a group of schools, adding significantly to the quality and impact of school-based provision.

✓ Supporting and challenging school improvement through systems-led school to school monitoring and evaluation

✓ Allowing the analysis of performance to be more rigorously and consistently applied across a group of schools to encourage an appropriate level of challenge and expectation, and well-focussed planning to meet key priorities for improvement. Again this can add enormous value to primary schools where year-on-year analysis on smaller cohorts is difficult. If a group of schools creates cluster data, analysis across a larger cohort becomes possible. A collaboration across a group of primary schools with their partner secondary school can analyse progress data in order to identify key priorities across the 3-19 age range and direct the action to be taken.

✓ Ensuring that the collaboration is sustained. Historically, liaison between schools has often been led by individuals and been very dependent on relationships. If collaboration becomes more formal, it is more resilient to changes that can happen, in relation to school leadership or governance. This is particularly relevant to federation. There are benefits for all partners, including the children, their parents and the wider community.

It can strengthen teaching and learning through:

✓ Ensuring that proportionately more of the schools' funding is spent directly on teaching and learning rather than on 'overheads'.

✓ Providing a wider forum for teachers' professional development, either through shared planning, through coaching and lesson study approaches or through planned continuing professional development. Again, staff can be grouped according to phase, single age or key stage specialists, or can work in more flexible groups on cross-cutting themes.

✓ Increasing opportunities for research-based development.

✓ Widening access to exemplar practices for peer to peer and school to school support.

✓ Establishing longer-term professional relationships, which provide greater opportunity support and confidence in 'taking risks'.

✓ Sharpening the teachers' use of assessment, including data outcomes, to inform the focus of their teaching. If the cluster analysis confirms some key priorities, groups of staff can work together developing their approaches to improving provision in these areas.

✓ Providing access to a wider range of resources to support teaching and learning.

✓ Providing healthy challenge and competition, tackling complacency and challenging the norm.

It can strengthen curriculum provision through:

- ✓ Extending the range of curriculum expertise amongst the staff, and allowing more flexibility and breadth in terms of the curriculum offer to all children and to groups of children, for example those with special educational needs and those who are more able.
- ✓ Developing the extra-curriculum provision through mixed school (and possibly mixed primary and secondary school) clubs and activities, sports teams, creative arts productions, trips and visits (including residential trips). All these can extend pupils' curriculum experiences, but also provide opportunities for personal and social development.
- ✓ Providing strength and accuracy to monitoring, quality assurance and bench-making, allowing for 'critical friend' approaches.
- ✓ Providing access for pupils to specialist teaching, which can be more easily funded across a number of schools.
- ✓ Increasing access to specialist resources.
- ✓ Providing opportunity for pupils to work with children / students outside their immediate school community, adding a dimension to curriculum provision and to social interaction. For example pupils coming together to debate and discuss issues related to British Values, or to respond to local, national and global events.
- ✓ Supporting cross-phase transition.

Benefits to children and young people can be provided through:

- ✓ Access to a wider peer group, increasing diversity.
- ✓ Richer curriculum possibilities and facilities, with enrichment opportunities for all pupil groups, including the more able.
- ✓ Access to higher quality teaching, with teachers empowered and freed to focus on teaching and learning as part of a wider professional learning community.
- ✓ Access to specialist support, for example nurture groups, speech and language specialist teaching assistants.
- ✓ Raised expectations and aspirations.
- ✓ Access to an improved, well-led, emotionally healthy, high quality and thriving educational learning environment.