

# The challenges and benefits of federation

Ellie Howarth looks at lessons from NGA's recent research

Last year, the NGA embarked upon a research project about the experiences of schools that have pursued federation, successfully or unsuccessfully (*Governing Matters* Mar/Apr 2013 p23). This research forms part of the Structural Reform Research Programme funded by the British Educational Leadership, Management and Administration Society (BELMAS).

The aims have been to find out why governing bodies consider federation (either as local authority (LA) maintained schools or academies), the challenges they have faced and key lessons from their experiences. Over the past few months, telephone interviews have been conducted with 15 schools/federations, six of which were then visited for face-to-face interviews with governors, headteachers and LA representatives.

## Collaborations and partnerships

Although the option to federate has existed for just over 10 years, a number of participants commented that they had felt like they were entering virgin territory, with some being the first in their area to consider federation. Some relished the opportunity to break new ground; others found their role as pioneers disconcerting. It is unsurprising that several schools decided to dip their toes in the water by forming less formal collaborations or partnerships – retaining separate governing bodies – before pursuing federation. In the vast majority of cases, schools were sufficiently convinced of the benefits to take the plunge and formally federate.

The initial phase of collaboration was often instrumental to the success of the federation, for a number of reasons. Many of the concerns and challenges from parents, staff, and governors themselves were overcome during the collaboration phase. Stepping into the unknown can be scary, so having tangible evidence of the benefits can be the key to getting everyone on board. One chair of governors said: “The difficulties were around the decision to initiate the partnership in the first place. That’s where we had the most heated discussions. Two years later everyone

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was like ‘Yes, this is working really well; it would be great for us to carry on.’ That’s much more straightforward.”

This preliminary stage also gives governors across the partnership, in particular chairs, the opportunity to begin building relationships. This does not necessarily have to be restricted to formal meetings. One participant described how the chairs of partner schools frequently met informally to share ideas, which played an important part in developing the collaboration.

Furthermore, seeing their chairs getting on encouraged the other governors to build positive relationships with one another. Another participant, when comparing the formal process of federation with informal collaboration, commented: “I think the informal level was really the important level for us... a great deal of work was done off the record.” His colleague went on to describe how important this informal level was in communicating to parents how vital federating was to their school’s future, even before partners had officially been chosen.

Many schools benefited from informal collaboration, which begs the question: why federate? In answer, participants spoke of benefits to the governing body. Several governing bodies cited greater strategic flexibility in terms of staffing to be a particular plus. For example, the opportunity to develop staff leadership skills can be hugely beneficial in succession planning. One participant described

how appointing extra staff to the senior leadership team has resulted in the federation now having three members of staff capable of taking on headship.

Where an executive headteacher is responsible for multiple schools, federation can also streamline governing body operations, as described by the clerk of a successful federation: “I was doing pretty much the same at each meeting, but for the different schools. So I could see the double workload for the head. I could see the double workload for the chairs, for the clerk.” Federation was the obvious solution.

### Challenges and barriers

As there was such variety between the participating federations, many of the challenges were unique to individual schools. For example, one federation consisting of a special school and primary school was stopped in its tracks after the primary school was put into ‘special measures’ only weeks after federating, and subsequently converted to an academy. The special school had been unaware of the primary’s failings before federating, highlighting the importance of undergoing a thorough due diligence process. Another governing body faced opposition from a small group of staff, whose complaints were based on historical issues unrelated to the imminent federation. In this case, the headteacher took HR advice from the LA and the federation was put in place. Experiencing the benefits has quietened the discordant voices.

Some barriers, however, were more common. In numerous cases there was opposition from stakeholders, sometimes parents and sometimes staff, often voicing valid concerns. Collaboration could be an effective way of showing those concerned the potential benefits of federation.

Unsurprisingly, keeping lines of communication open was found to be crucial all the way through the process, including once the federation is up and running. One participant experienced difficulties when admin staff voiced concerns over the restructuring of their roles. The same staff expressed further concerns several months into the federation, this time about the consequences of moving to a single budget. Following the governing body meeting finalising the budget arrangements, the governor phoned each member of staff personally to make sure they knew what was happening.

It was also important to be honest about why you want to federate. As one participant put it: “Don’t say ‘it’s not about finance, it’s all about improving the curriculum’ when it isn’t. Parents are not stupid and they need to be told the bottom line.” This school considered federation when it realised it could not afford to replace its headteacher if she retired. Since federating it has experienced many benefits in terms of school improvement, but initially the governing body was very honest about the situation: federation or closure. This honesty was vital in persuading parents that federation was the only option.

Good communication is also needed between federating governing bodies. Governors are often concerned that they’re handing their school over to a group of strangers, which can lead to a ‘them and us’ mentality. Making an effort to help colleagues get to know one another, and the other school, can help ensure a smooth transition.

One chair of a federation governing body put forward a simple solution: “It’s really easy to have conspiracy theories or fantasies around ‘that school wants to take us over and make us like their school’. One of the easiest ways to dispel some of those things is just having people together in the same room and talking.” This view was seconded by another participant, who said “I think as governors we haven’t seen any downsides as opposed to challenges, because we took the time to get to know each other.”

### Key lessons

This research has shown that there is no one route to or set model for federation – there are a vast range of combinations of school size, phase, type and location. However, in all 15 cases schools and governing bodies benefited from the federation process, even where it was ultimately unsuccessful.

In schools that have federated successfully, standards have risen across the board. Improved teaching and learning was a major benefit, largely because federation allows schools greater flexibility with staffing, such as being able to distribute staff across schools, whether for cover or to share specialist skills.

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Federations also offer a unique set of challenges, allowing them to attract more ambitious applicants when recruiting, as well as retain their best existing teachers.

Before these benefits can be reaped, schools must first navigate through the potentially daunting process of becoming a federation. There is some guidance available on how to do this, such as NGA’s Federation Q&A. One

participant offered the following advice: “Go through the process diligently, so that consultation occurs, due diligence occurs and everybody is happy at every stage.”

The importance of doing this well is demonstrated by the earlier example of the failed special school and primary school federation. Perhaps the most important aspect of this advice is ensuring that “everybody is happy at every stage”. Such a big change can be unsettling, and must be managed sensitively. Part of this is staying focused on what you as a governing body want to achieve from federation and frequently returning to this, asking “Is this still right for us?” Also keep in mind that, although you can learn from the experiences of other schools, you can’t simply copy what they’ve done. As one headteacher said: “Look at each case on its own merit. I don’t think you can just pick a model up and put it down.”

Federation can offer significant benefits, but making it work requires governing bodies to ask challenging questions, really know their schools, and build strong relationships; all of which are essential components of any effective governing body. 



Ellie Howarth is an NGA information officer