



## **Structural Reform Research Programme Final Reports December 2012**

### **STRUCTURAL REFORM: THE EXPERIENCE OF TEN SCHOOLS DRIVING THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN ALL AGE HARD FEDERATION ACROSS A MARKET TOWN IN NORTHERN ENGLAND**

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#### **Introduction**

The development of collaborative models for the leadership of schools is high on the current policy agenda and this small scale research project set out to examine the experiences of ten schools as they aimed to create and implement an all age hard federation across a market town in the north midlands. At the commencement of the project, all school leaders had already made a firm commitment to the hard federation, with the principal aim of creating a coherent and progressive education model across primary and secondary education in the town, which would raise achievement and improve opportunities for all pupils. Documentation relating to these proposals indicated that the school leaders recognised that the achievement of their objective would require greater collaboration in planning, the use of resources, staff development and deployment, and governance.

#### **Research Objectives**

The prime objective of the research project was to learn more about the complexities of developing a federated model and to identify practice that could be replicable to other collaborative developments. The initial focus of the research project was internal to the proposed federation in order to investigate how far the Head Teachers and Chairs of Governors of the ten schools shared an understanding of the drivers, enablers and constraints affecting the creation of the hard federation, and the implications of the federated model for leadership, management and governance. Shortly after the commencement of the research project, it became clear that the proposal to form a hard federation was not going to be straightforward, and the school leaders found themselves grappling with a series of external blockages. The unfolding of this unexpected external barrier has turned out to be the most interesting development and the most significant factor on the schools' proposals.

The initial aims of the research project were:

- i. To identify the enabling and constraining factors in the early development of an all age Hard Federation that will improve the outcomes for children in the whole town
- ii. To use these findings to inform the development of strategies to address the identified constraints and achieve the objectives of the federation
- iii. To investigate the various models of governance that could be adopted by the federation

By the time the research project began, a considerable amount of development work to create the federation had already been undertaken. The school leaders had drawn up a consultation document for the hard federation, which included a statement of vision and values, and proposals for its strategic and operational management and governance. Discussions were well under way with officers from the Department for Education, the Local Authority and the Diocese. The hard federation was proposed under the auspices of the 2002 Education Act, which sets out proposals for schools to be

given the power to innovate 'in order to facilitate the implementation of innovative projects that may contribute to raising standards of education.'

## **Methods of Research**

The research methodology involved structured interviews, informal discussion, attendance at meetings and analysis of documentation.

*Structured interviews:* each Head Teacher and Chair of Governors was interviewed face to face by the researcher, as part of a structured discussion and responses were recorded. Assurances were given that individual responses would be confidential to the researcher and all interviewees agreed that unattributable comments could be quoted in the research project report. A copy of the research questions for the structured interviews is included at Annex one.

Following the completion of the interviews, the transcripts were analysed by the researcher .

*Informal discussion:* the researcher engaged in informal discussions with the Chair and Deputy Chair of the proposed hard federation, both of whom are Head Teachers of schools involved in the hard federation. The main purpose for this was fact finding and accuracy checking. Informal discussions also took place with a senior representative of the local authority, with the purpose of understanding the Local Authority's level of support for the hard federation.

*Attendance at meetings:* The researcher also attended two meetings of the Strategic Management Board of the proposed hard federation, which involves all the Head Teachers and Chairs of Governors.

The interviews with school leaders provided a very rich source of information about what the individuals saw as the main drivers, enablers and constraints relating to the proposed federation, as well as identifying areas still to be addressed in the planning.

## **Context of the schools and background to the proposed hard federation**

The vision of the school leaders and their proposal to create a hard federation has been driven by the schools in response to a particular set of geographical, demographic and historic circumstances . The ten schools serve pupils in a small market town, on the edge of a moorland area. Although the nearest city is merely ten miles away, it is regarded as culturally distant, having more similarities to an urban inner city than a market town. The county town and local authority headquarters are over twenty miles away, a significant factor both for the schools and the local authority itself, since the transport infrastructure is poor and the town is perceived as being both geographically and culturally distant from the centre. Historically, there has been a perceived division within the town, with the west side regarded as more affluent and aspirational than the east. For many years, divisions existed between the schools. One of the two high schools, 'West High' is a large and successful school with a thriving sixth form, the other, 'East High' had previously been the subject of a proposed closure by the Local Authority. Although unsuccessful, this left a legacy of hostility and suspicion. The ten schools encompass two high schools ( age range 13-18), one junior high ( Church of England) and one middle school, and six first schools, three of which are Church of England Schools.

There has been a history of collaboration with schools on the west side of the town since 2008, when these schools formed a soft federation under the School Governance (Collaboration) (England) Regulations 2003. A joint strategic committee was formed with the stated aim of ensuring that the aspirations of all students within the schools was promoted, and subsequently the soft federation has overseen a number of joint projects across the schools. The appointment of a new Head teacher at 'East High' opened the door to a wider collaboration which also included its feeder schools, and in 2011, all ten schools in the town resolved that from 1st April 2012, they would enter into a Hard Federation, in accordance with The School Governance (Federations) (England) Regulations 2007. A Hard Federation is a formal and legal agreement by which these schools would have a single Governing Body that is formally re-constituted. The school leaders had anticipated that in a national

context where schools were being encouraged to work together through federations, chains and other forms of partnership, their proposal would be able to be realised under the Department for Education’s policy which gives schools power to innovate. The intention was for each of the schools to retain its own identity under a federated model, and that a separate ‘stand alone’ trading company would be created for the purpose of more cost effective procurement. The school leaders recognised that external political and financial drivers were likely to force upon them changes which they did not want, so an imperative was for them to take the lead in determining their own future.

**Findings from the Research**

The research findings are reported in terms of drivers, enabling and constraining factors, issues that the leaders had identified but not addressed, and emerging considerations. These are summarised below.

**Table One: Summary of the main drivers and enabling and constraining factors, indicating issues still to be addressed and emerging considerations.**

**Main Drivers: Educational, political, financial, community.**

<p><b>Enabling Factors:</b>          Commitment to the vision: common ethos and philosophy, willingness to be imaginative and courageous          Strong Leadership          Personalities          Time invested          Good Schools          Trust</p>	<p><b>Constraining Factors:</b>          Policy and Legislation          DfE conflicting advice          Skills in partnership working</p>
<p><b>Issues to be addressed</b>          Rural schools          Communications          Risk analysis          Governance          Timescale</p>	<p><b>Emerging considerations</b>          Head Teacher Development for wider role          Involvement and commitment of wider staff          Entry into group of new Head teacher          ‘Failing’ School          Curriculum, learning and teaching,</p>

**Drivers**

Initial discussions with the chair and vice chair of the Strategic Management Board and an analysis of documentation indicated that there were three main drivers which had led to the proposal to create a hard federation and that these were educational, political and financial. This was confirmed through the research interviews with school leaders, and several suggested that a further driver, that of ‘community’ was also significant. However, virtually all the leaders expressed a shared and strongly held view that education was the central driver. This was noted especially in the first schools, where there appeared to be even greater emphasis on the educational benefits and opportunities created through a federated model.

Several leaders commented on the diminishing role of the local authority, and its capacity to assist schools to develop and improve. One Head welcomed the national driver for schools to divorce themselves from central control, explained that the schools in (the town) wanted to be in charge of their own destinies, to create a model for local excellence. Several of the interviewees said that a localised approach would be in the best interests of all, and that they wanted to embrace the freedom to innovate as they saw fit. This was echoed by a first school Head:

‘The government changes the goalposts, if we don’t move quickly enough we might get outmanoeuvred, for example by the academies policy’

A third driver was financial. During the interviews with leaders, little reference was made to financial drivers, but it was evident through discussion that the school leaders has financial considerations in mind. Reference was made to reductions in local authority funding at a time when staffing and premises costs were increasing, meaning that smaller schools were struggling to afford to employ teachers to offer a full curriculum range. An increase in competition from post 16 providers outside the town, which included two colleges with brand new campuses was seen as having the potential to take post 16 pupils, and their funding away from the town.

A smaller number of school leaders, whose schools were in the east side of town identified community as a driver. This was concerned with developing greater equality and access to educational opportunities and was an important driver for some schools, as described by the Head of one First school:

‘The main advantage is that all children in (the town) will get the very best that all the schools can give them. Historically the perception has been that of ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’ and that there is an east/west divide. Previously the two sides of town did not speak and did not meet together. Culturally, the two sides were very isolated.’

### ***Enabling Factors***

The main enabling factors were internal to the group and concerned the shared ethos, commitment, positive relationships and strong leadership which had been developed within the group, although there was a recognition that the conditions to develop this were a reflection of external factors.

#### *Commitment and trust:*

In the main, the enabling factors were internal to the group and reflected the large investment of time which had been given to develop thus far.

The interviews with Heads and Chairs of Governors revealed a universally strong commitment and passion for the federation. Without exception, every leader articulated a vision that was about better opportunities for all children in the town, and a strategic response to the issues of declining demography, social and cultural challenges. Several Heads described the federation in terms of a self improving system, where schools would support and challenge each other.

One Chair of Governors described the federation as follows:

‘It will make better use of skills to improve outcomes for pupils. It could offer more control over local services, with potential to innovate. It will be a local mechanism to inform debate on local issues’

The federation’s focus on learning and teaching and curriculum development was of paramount importance to some Heads, who were excited by the pedagogical possibilities and strongly welcomed the fact that:

‘We have had more discussions about learning and teaching than ever before’

Likewise, some Heads reported that through the meetings of all school, they themselves were being developed, taking on a more strategic role which was stimulating and improving their professional practice in their own schools. This was described by one very experienced Head of a thriving but challenging school who saw beyond the immediate benefits:

‘This will improve me. It will enable the movers and shakers to challenge, to become the new leaders, it will contribute to learning beyond the years that the pupils are at this school.’

### *Leadership*

The vision for collaboration had been initiated and driven principally by one Head. The leaders recognised that core to the development was the strong, creative and visionary strategic leadership of this person, but some comments related to a ‘quiet suspicion’ on motives. This was not a concern for the majority, as summarised here by a first school Head:

‘The biggest enabling factors are the educational drivers, the people, the steering group. People are passionate about wanting a smooth journey and best outcomes for the children, they want the east - west divide to disappear. (The lead Head ) is an enabler, he will get things done, everybody benefits, we all feel like that’

Several leaders, including Chairs, also referred to the importance of having the right personalities involved at individual school leadership level, particularly as they had previously met blockages from one or two individuals who were no longer in post. The appointment of a new head teacher who was positively predisposed to collaboration was described by many as a key factor in unlocking collaboration, and the secondment to the local authority of another head teacher had opened up an opportunity to move forward, although this opportunity was potentially time limited.

### *Creating time*

The level of shared commitment was agreed to be a reflection of the immense amount of time that the leaders had invested in the development. Early collaborative work had been going on for three years before a more formal meeting structure was introduced, and although time consuming, Heads and chairs alike were positive about its benefits. Several of the group commented on the time aspect, recognising that it was essential, but expensive. The regular fortnightly meetings and clear meeting structures were unsurprisingly valued highly as key vehicles for building understanding and trust. One Chair explained that time was not enough, and questioned whether all members of the group had the skills for the partnership to deliver its aims:

‘Partnership is a huge investment of time, but outcomes don’t just happen. Good intentions are there, but have Heads got the experience and skills for partnership working? This proposal is laudable and aspirational, but there is a need to be clearer about what the drivers are. We need to be able to describe a picture of the future, aspirations are not enough.’

### *Other enabling factors*

*School Performance:* All schools in the group had received positive inspection reports from Ofsted and there was no external pressure for any of the schools to convert to academy status or to be the subject of other intervention. It was acknowledged that it was less risky for schools to collaborate when none was perceived as having problems, but one Head asked:

‘What would happen if one school went down - would the other schools close rank or be supportive? Such a situation would have implications for the town, and would affect the dynamic, particularly if the result led to a movement of pupils between schools.’

*Local Authority:* Rather than being a significant enabler, the local authority has been more of a non constrainer. The changing nature of the local authority role, the geographical distance of the schools, and the good performance of the schools has meant that they have largely been left alone to get on with their own developments.

## ***Constraining Factors***

### *Policy and Legislation*

The most significant constraint has been the conflicting policy advice given by the Department for Education. This has been an unexpected and powerful blockage to the realisation of the schools' vision for the town, and has resulted in changes in conceptualisation of the Hard Federation as the schools have attempted to meet the requirements set out by department officials.

Leaders reported that advice received from officials had not been consistent and had altered according to whoever was giving it. Added to this, lengthy timescales for meetings with officials, and apparent changes in policy have forced the schools to rethink their proposals on several occasions. This has led to considerable frustration, disappointment and anger on the part of the leaders. One first school Head Teacher described her frustrations as follows:

'The whole focus is about the best for every single child in (the town), Joining up opportunities, smooth transition, leaving this school with the best possible support to progress. It is frustrating that it is taking so long. The potential is tantalising.'

Another Head whose schools serves one of the more challenging areas described his fears for the education system:

'The biggest barriers are personalities, egos, Government, political agendas, Gove. We are fighting to keep a good education system and swimming against the tide. I am worried that the education system is crumbling.'

A timeline summarising the progress of the developments can be found at Annex Two.

### *Internal Capacity*

Although the Departmental response was by far the biggest constraint and barrier to development, several leaders recognised that it was not the only one, and that even if this barrier were removed, there were other potential constraints which would need to be addressed if the vision was to be achieved. The most significant of these concerned the translation of vision into practice. One Chair of Governors, who had previously held a senior strategic role in a public sector organisation was very clear about this:

'There is a lack of clarity about what the deliverables are - structures are the least important thing, we need to sort out what will be delivered.'

### *Time*

The time which the leaders have invested in the development has been considered above as an enabling factor. However, the leaders recognise that time is not a finite commodity and the fact that the timeline for the realisation of the hard federation had already stretched to over two years, was causing some leaders to question whether they could continue to invest such time, even though they remain committed to the vision.

## **Issues to be addressed and emerging considerations**

The research interviews revealed that there were some issues for the hard federation which the leaders had recognised that but not yet addressed, and as the development progressed new issues were emerging which had not previously been considered. These are noted in Table One, but not considered in this paper.

## **Implications for Theory and Policy**

The research has revealed a rich source of intelligence regarding the understanding, perception, intention and motivations of the school leaders and the tensions resulting from the implementation of current policy. Much of the literature on collaborative models highlights the positive aspects of collaboration, such as sharing good practice, widening curriculum opportunities, securing economies of scale and developing support structures in response to changing patterns of power and influence within the local authority and school arena.

The research revealed that school leaders understood and welcomed these aspects of collaboration, but highlighted a gulf between aspiration and implementation, which demands strategic leadership, political and relationship skills which not all school leaders possess.

The current policy drive to free schools from local and central control appears to offer opportunities for innovation and creativity, but the experiences of these school leaders indicates that in reality the freedom to innovate is limited, and perhaps should not challenge preferred departmental or ministerial preferences.

Changing patterns of power and influence within the local authority and school arena are placing greater responsibility on schools to develop their own self improving systems. The drive for competition between schools remains prominent, as does the agenda for new academies. This proposal for a whole town collaboration may have cut across Departmental priorities, despite a policy which prima facie offers school the power to innovate in order to improve educational achievement.

Much of the national debate around structural reform has focussed on concepts of autonomy and accountability. These concepts have been touched on during interviews with school leaders but require deeper consideration as the vision for collaboration is realised, in whatever form. The policy blockages encountered by the schools have provided such a significant hindrance to progress that energy has been focussed away from questions about individual school autonomy and decision making within a federated arrangement, to considerations about the tensions between national policy and its interpretation by different players and its implementation over time.

In terms of governance, the research indicated that the school leaders understand the need for a new level of governance through which the collaborating schools will work together and although shadow governance structures have been developed, these have not been tested.

### **Conclusion from this phase of the research**

This research has examined the experiences of ten schools as they set out to create a collaborative education model, a Hard Federation, with the aim of raising standards of achievement. The leaders described a strong and passionate commitment to their vision, and demonstrated a high degree of agreement in identifying the key internal and external drivers, enablers and constraints to their vision and these were considered above.

The most significant constraint came from the Department for Education's conflicting policy advice, uncertainty and slow response, which had extended the timescale for the development from under one year to over two years, without a clear resolution on the way forward ever having been reached.

One of the areas the research explored was how the vision translated into practice, and whether lessons could be learnt and transferred to other developments. The research findings suggest that it is possible to identify the internal conditions to support effective collaborative partnership, but that these would be insufficient without taking account of external factors, such as geography, demography and school performance.

Finally, frustrated with the slow progress, school leaders have changed their initial conceptualisation of the vision and turned to smaller scale developments. This has led to the establishment of a federated model involving the two High Schools and one middle school, with the remaining Church of

England junior high school, sitting outside the formal federation, but linked into it through an informal agreement. The development of this three school federated academy will doubtless have an impact on the operation of the wider collaboration, but it is too early to comment on this.

## **Concluding reflections**

In reflecting on the findings of the first phase of the research project I have attempted to make sense of what is happening at the levels of policy and leadership.

Owing to the protracted timeline and unanticipated barriers, the research project did not reach the point of exploring issues relating to the implementation of the proposed federation. The research thus far has focussed on policy and leadership. The important issue of implementation and its implications for pupils, school staff and parents will be explored in the next phase of this work.

### *Policy Considerations*

A central question arising from the project is that of what is possible in structural change, within the context of a highly centralised political environment. The policy rhetoric is about schools as autonomous organisations, freed from the constraints of local authorities but actors in a competitive market place, where successful schools are able to determine their own future, without political intervention. The evidence from this project suggests that even where schools are successful in terms of educational outcomes, as measured by Ofsted, they may not be allowed to innovate outside of the Departmental vision. This raises issues, which merit further investigation, about central control versus local enablement.

Interestingly, this research did not identify financial drivers as a reason for federation, although recently introduced changes to the funding of schools will no doubt drive some forms of federation or other type of collaboration on the grounds of affordability. The evidence from this project suggests that this driver alone is unlikely to be sufficient to secure a workable and sustainable collaborative arrangement.

There appears to be no robust evidence about the impact of federations and other forms of collaborative partnerships on educational outcomes. Indeed, it is too soon to be able to measure the impact of federations on educational performance, and there is therefore a need for some comparative research which will examine the outcomes arising from the different models.

The findings of this research project indicate that there is lack of clarity within the Department of Education about its policy on federation, as well as an apparent lack of capacity in Departmental staff to support the development of federated models.

Further large scale research work is required in this area.

### *Considerations for Leadership*

An analysis of the enabling and constraining factors internal to the group of schools in this project suggests that there are some elements which are key features of successful federated or other partnership models, and some features that may be pre requisites of success. Evidence from the research project suggests that the decision to enter into a federated model or other formal partnership should not be taken lightly. Forging successful alliances is problematic and the resulting alliance may be very fragile, particularly if untested in a potentially contentious area. By their nature, alliances tend to be very dependent upon personalities, and their survival may be limited if key people are removed.

Evidence from this project suggests that there is likely to be a greater chance of success where the schools concerned are united in terms of their vision and values, as well as their history, geography and demographics. They are likely to fare better under a visionary and creative leader, who is willing and able to challenge and influence across a range of levels and to manage the complex dynamics

between the Headteachers and governing bodies. This requires additional and different skills to those of running a school and the research findings support the importance of having someone who can take on this role. In addition, the findings suggest that by entering into a wider partnership, such as a federation, there are opportunities for school leaders to develop new experiences, skills and knowledge which will have a positive impact on their own professional development and which may translate into a more coordinated approach to the planning of curriculum and learning across all ages and phases.

## **Annex One**

### **Questionnaire for Head Teacher and Chair of Governing Bodies**

Please note that information relating to individuals and schools will be treated confidentially, and schools will not be identified in the research report, without their specific agreement.

Please consider the following questions about the developing partnership of schools.

1. What do you see as the main advantages of the proposed partnership?
2. What do you see as the main disadvantages?
3. Are there aspects of the partnership that you are unclear about? If so, what are they?
4. Do you feel fully informed about what is happening with the developing partnership?
5. What are the biggest barriers to the successful achievement of the partnership? How are these being overcome?
6. What have been the biggest enabling factors to the successful achievement of the partnership? What do you think would help most in the future?
7. What impact will the partnership have on your role as Head Teacher/ Chair of Governors
8. Do you have any other comments or questions?

**Annex 2**  
**Timeline**

Timeline	Event	Comments
2005	Establishment of West High School Pyramid. Objective was for schools to work together across age range to provide better learning opportunities. West High School put in resources to release time for first schools to engage.	This development formed the basis of subsequent partnership work and built the capacity of schools to work across age boundaries.
2007	Pyramid submitted bid to National College for pilot funding to create a School Business Director. Funding granted. West of Town Federation of Schools created and constitution drawn up. Schools' contribution of £3 per student to cover joint training events. Main focus on improving learning. Steering committee established with Heads and Chairs of Governors and action plan developed.	Further strengthened partnership working and delivered developmental opportunities to staff, as well as benefits for pupils.  Attracted interest across the town, but not all schools in the east of the town were willing to engage in a wider partnership.
2010	West Town Federation running parallel to development of a wider federation to include all ten schools in the town.	Appointment of new Head Teacher at East High opened opportunity for whole town collaboration
Early Spring 2011	Governors committed to the proposal for a hard federation of all ten schools to begin operation in April 2012.	
Early Spring 2011	Common Vision agreed for Hard federation	

Timeline	Event	Comments
Late Spring	Steering group and remit agreed and outline of steps towards achievement ( based on DfEE guidance)	
Summer 2011	Federation consultation document produced by Steering Group with the intention of establishing the Hard Federation January 2012	DfE rejects the proposal for a Hard Federation on the grounds that it did not fit with their planning
Summer 2011	Exploration of “Umbrella Trust’ a strategic partnership which would protect the ten schools as individual entities but enable the complementary establishment of a trading company for procurement and budget efficiencies	Proposals abandoned as advice received from Diocese that this was not an appropriate model
1 Dec 2011	<p>Development of proposals for trading company</p> <p>Main purpose would be efficiencies through joint tendering and contracting</p>	Concerns expressed by ‘expert’ Governors that trading company may not be the most appropriate vehicle for what the schools wished to achieve. Independent Legal advice taken as well as discussion with Local Authority about the most appropriate working model.

Timeline	Event	Comments
2012	Decision taken by Governing Bodies for West High school to form a Hard Federation and to establish a joint arrangement with the other high school and one of the feeder ( middle) schools. The second feeder ( junior high school ) is a church school. Agreement of this school to collaborate with the three academy schools but to remain as a distinct entity.	Federation becomes legal entity on 1 September 2012