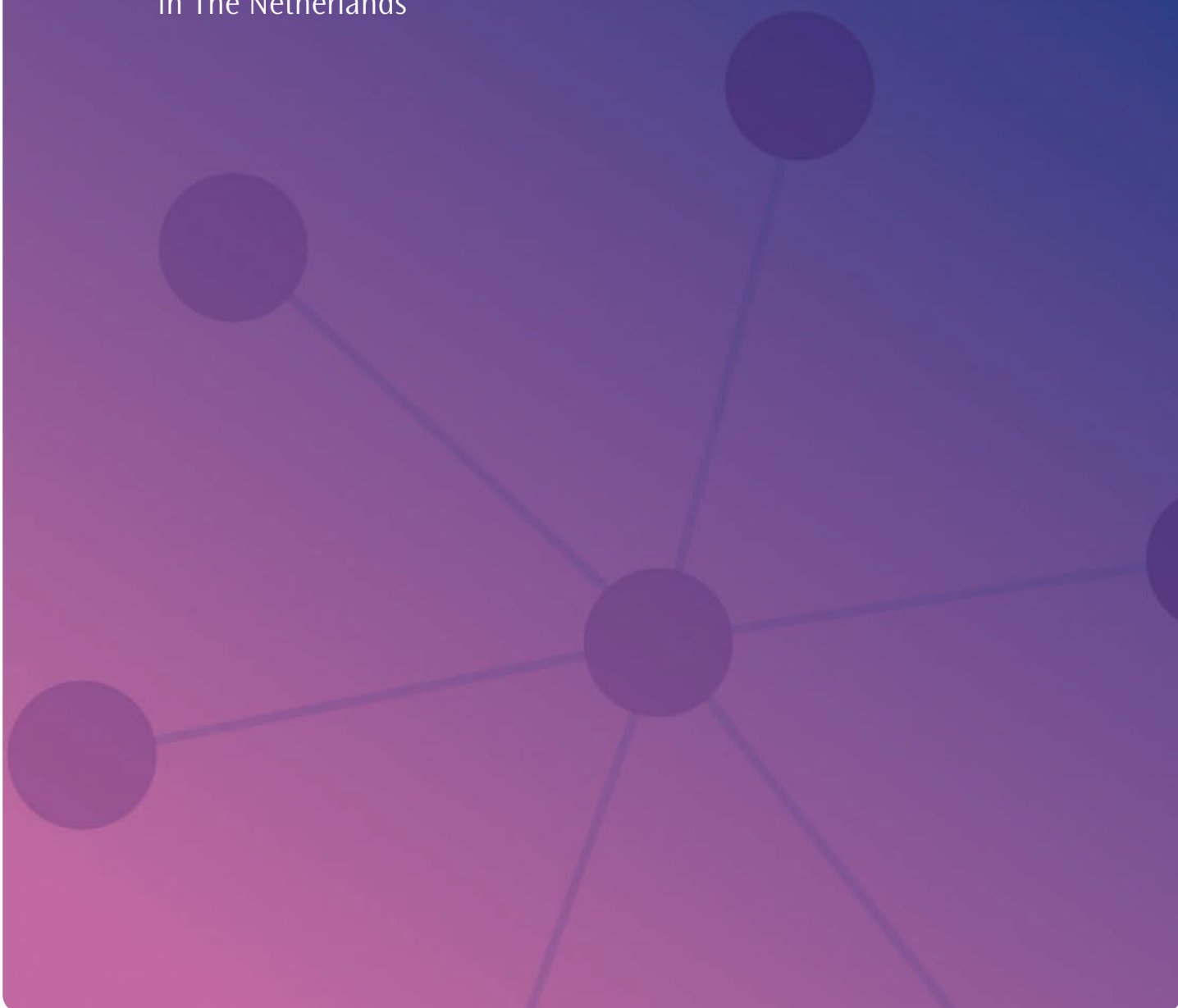


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New Models of Headship Federations

Does every primary school need a headteacher?
Key implications from a study of federations
in The Netherlands



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Key findings

- * There are considerable and wide-ranging advantages to federating for both schools and school leaders in England.
- * Federating could rescue schools with falling rolls, particularly small and rural schools, and those unable to recruit and retain headteachers.
- * Federations can offer headteachers more time for reflection, preparation and organisation and reduce pressure and stress, leading to a better work-life balance.
- * A collective vision and a strong sense of direction and purpose supported by agreed structures and procedures, formulated and owned by all involved, are crucial to the success of a federation.
- * The need for clear roles and responsibilities, excellent communication strategies and administrative support is also paramount.



Background and context

This study investigated the leadership of federations in The Netherlands, in order to challenge assumptions and stimulate discussions about alternative models of leadership and school organisation in England. It presented recommendations and implications for the future development of federations within England.

It is both timely and relevant as the schools sector is facing serious recruitment and retention problems for teaching and leadership posts. Alongside that, demographic changes, declining pupil rolls and overall viability are important issues facing the future of all schools in England, particularly small and rural primary schools.

One possible solution is for schools to federate, forming a larger unit across several locations under the leadership of a single headteacher.

The concept of system leadership is increasingly seen as a critical element in sustainable, system-wide educational reform (Fullan, 2004). As growing numbers of school leaders extend their sphere of influence beyond the immediate environment of their own school, there is a developing picture of the various forms that system leadership might take. The well-established federation system within The Netherlands presented the opportunity to gain a European perspective on system leadership.

The Education Act 2002 brought legal significance to the term 'federation' within England, and allowed the creation of a single governing body or a joint governing body committee across two or more schools from September 2003 (OPSI, 2005). Despite the legal interpretation of federations within England, a wide range of definitions exists, including syndicate, cluster, network and partnership (Potter, 2004). The DfES definition is 'a group of two or more schools with a formal agreement to work together to raise standards' (DfES, 2005).

The increasing importance of federations and other forms of collaboration was recognised in the government's 2005 white paper, *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All* (HM Government, 2005).

This said it expected schools increasingly to choose to work together with other schools to deliver the full range of opportunities that children and young people should be able to access, stating, 'in the primary phase, increased collaboration will be essential if schools are to meet the challenge of falling rolls'.

The research

The aims of the study posed the following research questions.

- * Does every school need a principal? If so, why?
- * What is the role of a principal and superintendent within a federation?
- * What does leadership look like within federations in The Netherlands?
- * What are the key characteristics of successful federations?
- * What are the disadvantages of federations?

The research was undertaken by three headteachers of small primary schools in the UK and one NCSL researcher during a week's study visit in The Netherlands in November 2004. They interviewed eight more-school heads and five superintendents.

The study was supported by the Nederlandse Schoolleiders Academie (NSA) (translated as 'Dutch Principals' Academy') in Utrecht and Professor Peter Slegers of the University of Amsterdam.

All schools in The Netherlands are governed by a legally recognised school board, which is responsible for implementing legislation and regulations in schools.

The definition of a Dutch federation is 'two or more schools which share one board' (Nederlandse Schoolleiders Academie, Berend Redder, personal communication).

The average federation in The Netherlands currently comprises 11 schools, with 237 staff members and 2,471 pupils (Nederlandse Schoolleiders Academie, Jan Heijmans, personal communication).

Schools within a Dutch federation are led and managed by principals. Within federations, principals may lead a single school or multiple schools. In this report the term ‘principal’ is used for a leader who has responsibility for a single school only, and principals who have taken on responsibility for more than one school are referred to as ‘more-school heads’. In some schools led by a more-school head, a specific teacher may take on the role of ‘location leader’. The location leader is the daily point of contact for parents and staff in the absence of the more-school head. A federation may also employ an educational professional as a superintendent who is responsible for the strategic overview of operational management within the federation.

There are currently around 7,000 primary schools in The Netherlands of which 80 per cent (5,600) have boards with two or more schools (Nederlandse Schoolleiders Academie, Berend Redder, personal communication). The remainder are single schools with their own board.

The move to greater decentralisation in education created a wide variation in the way that local areas reacted. As a result, many different models of school leadership have developed in The Netherlands, as illustrated overleaf.

It is important to note that schools in The Netherlands are staffed by a high proportion of part-time teachers and that this has implications for a range of issues pertinent to this research, for example the need for strong communication links, a strong sense of direction, shared values and clear vision.

Successful communication with colleagues, parents and pupils across the federations was seen to be dependent upon collaboration from the outset. As a way of maintaining strong communication, more-school heads developed a range of effective communication strategies including: newsletters in pigeon-holes or posted to teachers at home, emails, partner-teachers taking responsibility for passing on messages to their jobshare partner and compulsory staff meetings in the evenings every three weeks.

In terms of the reasons for federating, interviewees identified:

- * difficulties in recruiting leaders
- * principal's retirement or sickness
- * more time for educational leadership at the school level
- * difficulties in finding professionals to represent the board
- * reducing financial and personnel risks to schools by averaging costs and resources
- * changes in government policy encouraging federations to be set up
- * falling rolls
- * threatened school closures

In terms of their advice on setting up a federation, the interviewees suggested there is a need to:

- * have commonality and a purpose and vision
- * seek advice, plan carefully and take time to develop an appropriate structure
- * discuss the structure and range of staff and what you want them to do
- * concentrate on the teaching and learning; communication is vital



Models of headship in The Netherlands

1. Federations of schools with one board and a superintendent (Figure 1)
2. Federations of schools with one board, no superintendent and several principals or more-school heads (Figure 2)
3. Federations of schools with one board, without being overseen by a superintendent or more-school head (Figure 3)

Figure 1: Federation with one board and a superintendent

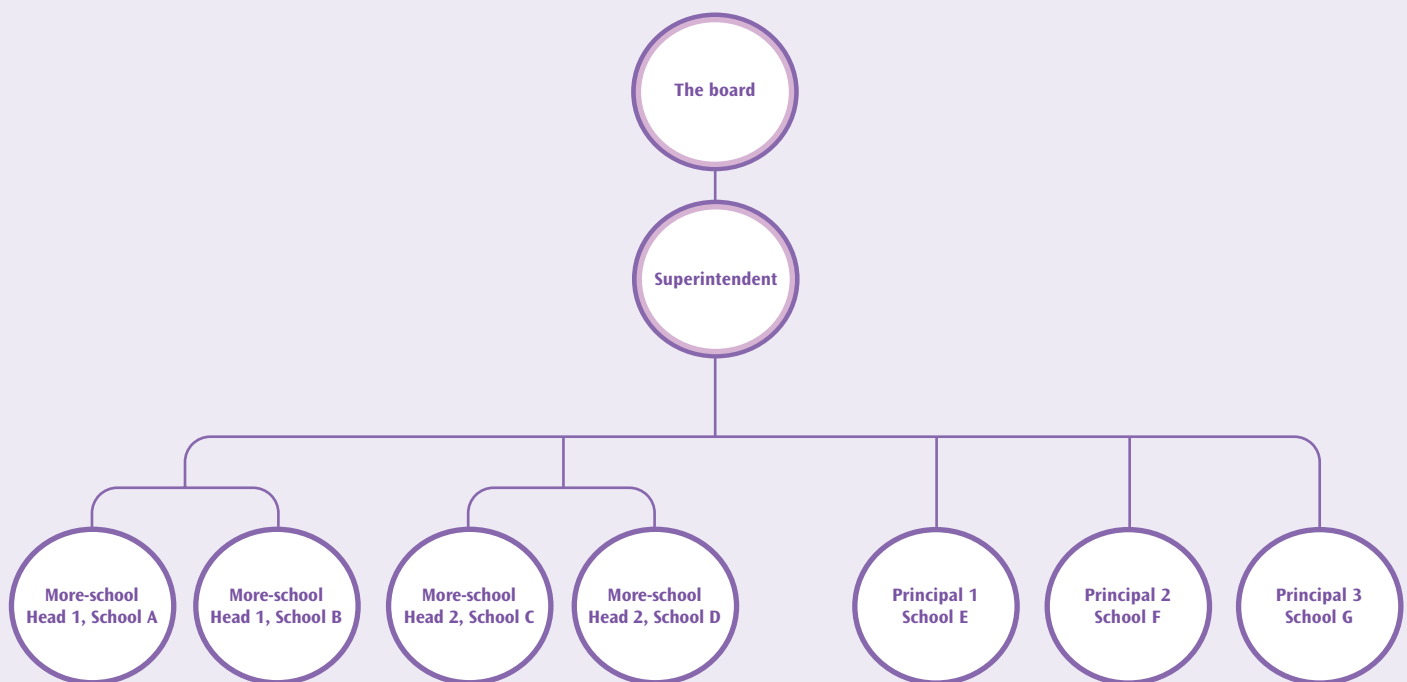


Figure 2: Federation with one board without a superintendent but overseen by a more-school head

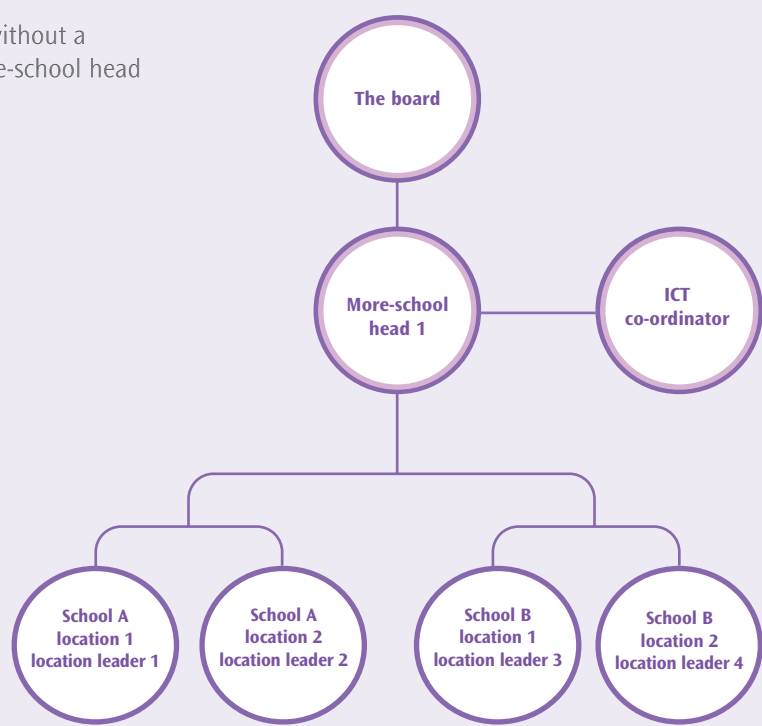
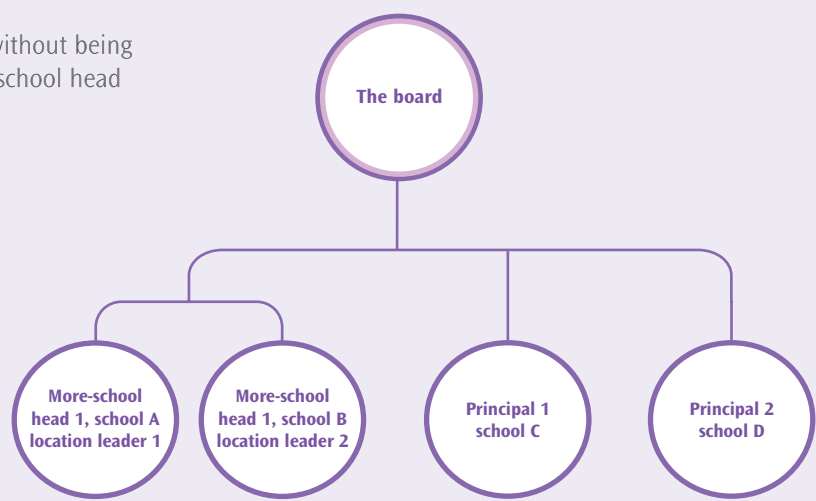


Figure 3: Federation with one board, without being overseen by a superintendent or more-school head





Advantages and disadvantages of being a more-school head

Interviewees were asked about possible advantages and disadvantages of being a more-school head.

Their advantages highlighted:

- * more time to lead
- * being more prepared and therefore feeling less tired and more relaxed
- * transferability of skills leading to a reduced workload
- * detachment benefits, making it easier to deal with potential staffing problems
- * benefits to other staff through distributed leadership
- * a sense of direction for some schools
- * reduced costs and risk of redundancy because an authority is paying one principal rather than two

The disadvantages were:

- * initial tensions with staff worried about losing the head
- * concern about no longer teaching and losing contact with children
- * being more remote and a sense of decreasing influence in the classroom and being a lesser part of the school
- * busy in both schools and potential to be “in the wrong place at the wrong time”
- * a need to adapt to different schools, different cultures and issues, which may result in burn-out for the more-school head

In specific relation to becoming a more-school head, the interviewees advised:

- * don't teach, concentrate on leadership
- * don't do everything by yourself
- * spend at least two days per week at each location
- * have someone in charge at each school who can act as a key contact

Benefits and barriers to federations

It was clear from the interviewees that there were significant benefits and barriers to federating.

Benefits

- * Principals had more time to manage their schools and could carry out core functions without getting bogged down in administration.
- * There were economies of scale both in terms of federations obtaining large discounts from suppliers and sharing costs, to economies in staffing from averaging teacher costs.
- * More schools means that shared problems can be discussed and overcome, advice sought and improvements and budgets discussed collectively.
- * Federating also allowed greater mobility of staff between schools and greater flexibility to cover illness and problems.
- * There is also a change in thinking, broadening horizons to more than your own school and federating encourages solidarity and a quality of community.
- * You can “keep your own identity, be your own boss, keep your own money but don’t have any of the problems – managing buildings and budgets, for example”.

Barriers

- * There are more structures and rules.
- * The main problem is getting the balance right – what is in it for everyone together and what is in it for individual schools? “One school’s problems can impact on other schools within the federation. If more money has to be channelled into one school, there is less money for the others”.
- * Staff mobility means that successful schools can find themselves with reduced staffing.
- * When the federation is implemented from the top down, without the consent of the schools involved, there may be problems and a lack of shared vision.
- * The board is more distant. “Older teachers regret the loss of relationship with the board, complaining that they are now too distant, never in school”.
- * Principals who were accustomed to managing their own school and deciding their own targets have sometimes had problems when they have had to ask a superintendent or more-school head for permission.



Perspectives from English heads on the Dutch federations

Kate Nash, Headteacher, Egginton Primary School, Egginton, Derbyshire

“I entered into the research with a completely open mind. Initially I wasn’t sure how it would work in the primary environment but am thoroughly convinced of the benefits of it having been over to Holland and looked at the issue subsequently.

“If we have federations in the UK it would be very important to make sure that it was a real collaboration, something that the community wanted for the benefit of the community and not forced upon them.

“It’s about changing the hearts and minds of parents and staff in the fact that you can maintain your colour, your identity as a school but still be partnered with another school and share the leadership. I feel it’s critical that schools retain their own identity within a bigger model and if we do so we’ll get the best of both worlds.

“Those heads who’d been teaching heads but moved up to be more-school heads in The Netherlands said they were far more organised, had more time for reflection, were better prepared, less pressured and stressed, able to go in and assist with teaching and they had a greater voice to shout and lobby.

“If we’re thinking about doing it here there would have to be clear guidance and structure and you can’t have one model that fits all. You could have the basic principles of what you needed to make a federation work but then it would be down to the individual communities to come up with a strategic plan that’s going to work for them and has involvement from all the stakeholders within the community so that they’ve all bought into the plan.”

Penny Burnside, Headteacher, Tipton St John C of E Voluntary-aided Primary School, near Exeter

“I’m personally concerned about any suggestion to take the teaching away from small school heads because I’m passionate about the role of the head in a small primary school being a teaching head. The Dutch heads did say they missed the children and that involvement in the classroom which is something much deeper around the nature of the relationship with the children which informs the teaching.

“The most important thing to me is the reason for federating in the first place and it strikes me that we’re looking at it as something which might be necessary because of the recruitment crisis and that, if you can’t get a head or you’re in danger of losing your school then it’s got to be a good thing to keep it open a bit longer.

“I can see the advantages of federations straight away. I can see that this might be a necessary solution but I don’t think it’s an ideal one if you don’t have to do it. I think we saw evidence that standards were not going to go down in The Netherlands but I personally don’t think we saw evidence that standards had improved because of federations.”

Simon Stubbs, Headteacher, Hallow C of E Primary School, Worcester

“There is potential for development of the idea in this country although there are a lot of problems which would have to be sorted out along the way.

“I always used to think that one of my most powerful tools was leading by example in the classroom but what I learned when I went to The Netherlands was that headteachers saw themselves almost as puppeteers in the sense that they can affect what happens for all the children in the school by working with the adults rather than primarily with the children and then the adults if there was time.

“The Dutch heads we spoke to had at one time been teaching heads of a small school and had been moved up to be heads of two or more schools and they said they now felt personally healthier and happier. That struck a chord with me.

“The Dutch heads kept asking me how I could do my old job as a teaching head and when I told them I taught four days a week they just burst out laughing – they said that’s impossible.

“Having freed heads up I think we in the UK would make more use of integrated staff training and look at ways of improving teaching and learning which I didn’t think had yet been addressed in the federated schools in The Netherlands.

“When we first looked at the complexities of the different structures in the various Dutch models of federation, we felt it was a weakness but I actually think that’s a strength because each area has looked at its own local circumstances and come up with a model that suits them and I think we should lay down a few ground rules here in the UK but allow local areas to work out how it would best work for them.”



Conclusions

The title of the research asked, 'Does every primary school need a headteacher?' The findings appear to support the view that the answer is 'no'.

There are considerable and wide-ranging advantages to federating for both schools and school leaders in England. The option to federate could rescue schools otherwise likely to close due to falling rolls, and provide a positive option to schools facing long-standing headteacher recruitment issues, reasons which seem particularly pertinent to small and rural schools.

Potential benefits for schools that federate include opportunities to share resources, staff expertise and workload. Leadership opportunities for staff within federations offer the potential for schools to build capacity and begin to address seriously the issues of succession planning. The study suggests that there is also a number of direct personal benefits for heads of federations, which would include more time for reflection, and being better prepared and organised as well as less pressure and stress.

Equally, the research outlined the key elements that need to be in place in order for a federation to be successful. A collective vision and a strong sense of direction and purpose, supported by agreed structures and procedures, which have been formulated and which are owned by all involved, were seen as being crucial to the success of a federation, as was the appointment of the right person for the job. Within these structures and systems was the need for clear roles and responsibilities, excellent communication strategies and administrative support.

A common purpose or reason for establishing a federation was seen as crucial by superintendents and more-school heads within The Netherlands, ideally one that was based on learning rather than on headteacher recruitment or falling numbers. It is worth noting, however, that those schools within The Netherlands that came together as a reaction to a particular crisis (rather than proactive planning) claim that the cynicism and negativity initially experienced quickly disappeared.

The Dutch study suggests that it is important for schools to retain their individual identities despite becoming part of a federation, and that the need for a face in each location as a first point of contact is of the utmost importance. Appropriate funding also needs to be made available.

It is clear that there is a need to build in time for the federation to be planned, established and developed and for decisions to be made about its optimum size and structure, geographical criteria and the potential strengths and weaknesses of the federation.

Clearly, the establishment of federations brings disadvantages as well as advantages and it is important these should not be overlooked. Many of the advantages perceived by some heads were viewed as disadvantages by others, and vice versa. Where some heads found themselves having more time, others felt there was less.

Implications and recommendations

In March 2005, DfES and the Audit Commission (2005 p4) suggested that local authorities (LAs) and primary schools faced with falling rolls 'need to take action to ensure they are equipped to deliver the best possible quality of education with the resources available to them.' Federating was one of three potential strategies proposed.

The definition given of a federation (sections 24 and 25 of the Education Act 2002) (OPSI, 2005) is that of a formal arrangement by which schools share a single governing body but remain separate legal entities in respect of their budget, admissions and performance tables. They are also subject to a separate inspection by Ofsted. Staffing and resources of all the schools within the federation are governed by a single governing body. This raises a number of issues which need to be considered.

The notion of schools being separate entities concurs with the views of the more-school heads within The Netherlands that schools should retain their individual identities. Surprisingly, the Dutch did not appear to have embraced either a collaborative way of working across schools, nor to have a strong focus on learning.

Although there is no direct evidence for this, it could be hypothesised that retaining the distinct individuality and identity of each school may actually inhibit rather than foster collaboration and networking around learning. This should be explored further.

Rather, we suggest a model in which a number of schools could be run as one school with one identity but with several units within it. The leadership of such a school would depend upon size, geographical criteria and financial implications, but could embrace a version of the current executive heads model, with location leaders (or deputies) in each unit. Current legislation in England, however, would make it difficult to achieve having schools within a federation sharing budgets and a single governing body.

As separate legal entities, schools would be inspected separately rather than as one school. This issue needs careful consideration by policy-makers, governors and potential heads. Collective accountability for pupil performance and inspection outcomes is, in our view, far more likely to encourage schools to work together to achieve improved pupil performance.

One of the key characteristics of successful federations in The Netherlands was the presence of a common purpose or reason for federating. In England, it is likely that recruitment issues and falling rolls will be the main reasons for federating. In view of this, heads in England will find themselves leading schools at different stages in their development and performance and with differing contexts and cultures.

Further detailed exploration of the potential models of federation will enable policy-makers to determine which would be the most effective in terms of leadership, financing and staffing implications and – most crucially – pupil learning and the potential benefits and barriers to that learning.

There is a need to consider a number of issues arising from this research, including the following:

- * What are the key leadership roles and responsibilities within the different models and what consideration should be given to headteacher preparation and training?
- * Is it possible to lead two or three schools and keep the focus on learning, as well as budgets and buildings? If so, what additional support structures, if any, are needed?
- * Do these schools also need a face in each location or not? If English heads lead large numbers of schools does their role become that of their Dutch superintendent counterparts and if so, who leads the learning?
- * Headteachers will increasingly find themselves needing to develop new and more sophisticated skills and competencies in order to lead in alternative models of headship.
- * Informed governor training at national level, coupled with local support and guidance and raising governor awareness, will be an important step in taking this work forward.

Leading schools in the 21st century will inevitably mean working in a context that will continue to be complex, relentless and accountable, and leading a federation will be no exception. We suggest that federations offer accountability that can be shared across and within schools and communities. They can also ensure opportunities for schools to include services and other agencies across their communities, to provide effective systems of learning transfer and to distribute and build leadership capacity for both now and the future.



With thanks

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Further information

For a copy of the full research report, please visit **www.ncsl.org.uk/modelsofheadship**.

NCSL is conducting further work on new models of headship, details of which will be available from **www.ncsl.org.uk/modelsofheadship**.

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