

Next Practice in System Leadership – Case Study

Central Leeds Learning Federation

Context for the Field Trial Site

The Central Leeds Learning Federation was established in September 2005 in a move to address significant and persistent levels of educational underachievement, disadvantage and low expectations amongst students attending two inner city high schools.

There are three schools in the Federation:

- City of Leeds School;
- Primrose High School; and
- Shakespeare Primary School and Early Years Centre

Primrose High and Shakespeare Primary share a new build PFI campus with provision for children from 3-19, which opened in September 2006. In total the Central Leeds Learning Federation caters for 2000 students across the three schools.

Historically, the high schools have struggled to raise standards. In 2006, 19% of students attending City of Leeds and 30% attending Primrose High achieved 5 A*-C at GCSE. Ofsted described Shakespeare Primary School as a good school in its 2007 inspection report.

In the run up to federation, central Leeds saw a sharp increase in numbers of children from refugee and asylum seeking families, with associated student mobility in evidence. Many children joined the schools with poor levels of literacy and attendance was stubbornly low. The children and their families brought with them an enthusiasm for education and its power to increase social and economic mobility and had the potential to re energise the schools, which had traditionally served disaffected and vulnerable white and black working class communities. However they also placed new demands for provision, for example the need to deepen EAL support.

Central Leeds Learning Federation set out to develop, through extensive consultation with stakeholder groups across the schools and in the local community, a new governance and leadership structure to serve the Federation. This was the focus for the Next Practice Field Trial supported by the Innovation Unit and the National College for School Leadership, from 2006 – 2008.

Organisational structure underpinning Next Practice

Central Leeds Learning Federation comprises a 'hard' federation of two inner city secondary schools, City of Leeds and Primrose High Schools, which joined together with a primary school, Shakespeare, to form a 'soft' federation involving a range of education and voluntary sector partners.

The Federation is led by an Executive Head Teacher, Liz Talmadge.

The secondary schools in hard federation share a governing body, whilst the primary school retains a discrete group.

Leadership management & governance practices being developed

The role of the Executive Head Teacher in the Central Leeds Learning Federation has been conceived as one with strategic responsibility for the overall leadership and management of the Federation and, to be fully appreciated, needs to be understood in the context of the roles of the two Heads of School. Essentially, the leadership of the Federation is distributed between them, with the Executive Head Teacher assuming responsibility for the strategic and organisational development of the Federation, enabling the Heads of School to focus on the hard work of leading learning and teaching in their schools.

There is an inevitable and complex tension inherent in this very new model. Where precisely authority and lines of accountability lie within and between the individual schools have occasionally been unclear to staff as the Federation and the roles within it have started to emerge. The Executive Head Teacher and the Heads of School are conscious of the need to bring clarity to their roles and relationships at the same time as ensuring that the EHT role does not become just another layer in the Federation hierarchy, and that opportunities to further distribute leadership responsibility continue to be developed. Adopting a coaching model of leadership after engaging in extensive training with the Hay Group and through the use of Coach in a Box has helped to provide a framework and practical ways of thinking about this.

The Executive Head Teacher has taken a lead role in brokering external support and resources on behalf of the Federation, in particular in her relationships with The Hay Group, who offered consultancy and practical support during the initial stages, and then later with The Innovation Unit and NCSL.

Most particularly though, it has been in her dealings with Education Leeds that the EHT has consistently represented and advocated for the Federation. In a context where persistently low standards in the high schools saw them marked for closure on more than one occasion, Liz has led the Federation in modelling an alternative scenario in which both schools can not only survive, but can add value to one another through increasingly close collaboration. At the time of writing, issues relating to the distribution of resources and the deployment of services remain a challenge for the Federation as the two high schools, despite being centrally located, are in different organisational areas within Education Leeds. However ongoing negotiations, led by the EHT and supported by The Innovation Unit, are making inroads.

Radical plans for the redevelopment of roles for the schools' Governing Bodies and the Federation Executive Board remain a priority. Governance arrangements in the schools are largely traditional, and there is an identified need both to recruit new governors and to offer development opportunities for existing governors. The energy with which governors successfully campaigned to protect the schools from closure and to get the best possible deal in the Federation needs to be refocused and channelled into the leadership of learning in order to raise standards. There has been some discussion of the possibility of introducing professional (i.e. remunerated) governor posts.

Governors from both the high schools and the primary school have taken responsibility for formulating and leading a systematic stakeholder engagement strategy that will involve consultation with parents, local community and business leaders and with children and young people.

Impact; actual and predicted benefits

The Federation is learning quickly how to collaborate effectively. In its three most recent inspections (2006, 2007 and 2008), the effectiveness and the impact of collaboration between staff within individual schools, with other professionals concerned with children's well being and between schools in the Federation has been consistently noted by Ofsted inspectors as making an important contribution to raising standards. In particular:

- Shakespeare Primary School was recognised as outstanding in respect of its partnership work with others to promote learners' well being;
- City of Leeds has been able to offer a broader range of resources and expertise to students as a result of federating; and
- In Primrose High, inspectors concluded that the school's federated status contributed significantly towards the provision for students, in particular in terms of alternative placements and increased learning opportunities.

Inspectors also noted the enhancements to staff training that the federation offers through its partnership arrangements.

For the Federation, changes to their leadership and governance structures are the means by which they hope to change the context within which they are working, in order to increase attainment in the high schools. In particular they expect to improve:

- post 16 retention;
- attendance and engagement in learning;
- aspirations and expectations for pupils and families.

Emerging issues

Federating was certainly a critical moment, but just one stage in a long development journey for Central Leeds Learning Federation. Staff, school leaders, governors, the local authority and the communities they serve came into the Federation with a history of working together over time; a slate which could not simply be wiped clean by the act of federating. So when the Executive Head Teacher assumed leadership responsibility for the strategic development of the Federation, she did so within an established context and for the most part alongside an existing cast of players.

This has had important implications for the speed of change that it has been possible to achieve. For example, the idea of using workforce reform and later TLRs to review the roles and responsibilities of teachers and middle leaders had to be put on hold, when it became apparent that the combination of anxiety about federating and hostility to TLRs together had the potential to put a strain on new leadership arrangements and relationships between schools.

The decision to retain the discrete identities and with them the existing leadership and governance arrangements of each school in the early days of the Federation also needs to be understood in this context. To begin with, stability and continuity were felt to be important for reassuring staff and parents that it was business as usual, albeit business that held out the promise of significant improvement over time.

As the Federation has matured, however, the need to maintain and to service these traditional structures at the same time as planning and implementing new ones

alongside them may have affected the pace at which the Federation has been able to grow and develop.

Moving one of the high schools and the primary onto a new build shared campus consumed a great deal more leadership energy than had been anticipated. Snagging problems with the building itself and later with behaviour issues which the new environment threw up have been swiftly and successfully dealt with. But doing so meant that the Executive Head Teacher has invested more than was envisaged into her co leadership of Primrose High. In the long run, this is may pay dividends, as increasing the leadership capacity has helped to build a sense of community within the new school, and has helped staff to identify more closely with the Federation than might otherwise have been the case.

The brokerage role of the Executive Head Teacher has been shown to be effective in managing external partnerships to the benefit of the Federation. However there may be case for mirroring the external brokerage role with an internal equivalent, which develops a strategy for stakeholder engagement. In the later stages of the Next Practice project, this has emerged as a role for the Federation governors.

Stakeholder engagement has been a complex challenge for Central Leeds Learning Federation as it was decided early on not to settle for traditional consultation i.e. to consult with a specific focus by inviting responses to centrally made suggestions. Instead the Federation leadership wanted to try for something more authentic, and to truly engage with young people and their families around issues that were important to them. In doing so they hoped to harness some of the optimism and enthusiasm of new migrant families and to revitalise relationships between the Federation and the wider community. There are significant benefits available if this approach is successful, but it can be hard to plan for and to manage in a systematic way. The appointment of one of the deputy headteachers to a community centred role is beginning to develop this approach.

Implications

The outcomes of this case study suggest that leaders of federations could usefully consider the following questions:

How can leadership and governance be organised in newly forming Federations so that they can respond to future development and needs, as well as respecting the contributions of the past?

Where is the balance between valuing and building on the identities of individual schools and establishing a vibrant and shared identity for a new Federation?

Who in your federation has the high-level project management skills needed to ensure that planned innovation can continue, even when new challenges arise or changes in circumstances occur?

What are the skills and attributes that an Executive Head Teacher needs?

When is the right time to begin engaging stakeholders?