

Next Practice in System Leadership – Case Study

The West Wiltshire Federation

Context for the Field Trial Site

The West Wiltshire Federation is a soft federation of eight secondary schools with specialist status serving a diverse, largely rural area in West Wiltshire. Links are currently being developed with a local EBD School. The Federation grew out of effective partnership working between two of the schools in the 1990's to deliver joint A-Levels.

The West Wiltshire Federation works collaboratively to provide high quality education against a background of geographical distribution, relative rural deprivation and falling rolls. Recent changes to demographics, following an influx of migrant workers from the EU, have contributed to the increase in the numbers of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET). The West Wiltshire Federation has identified persistent low aspirations and low skill levels amongst an increasing number of young people in the community. Part of the problem is a low level of demand for skilled workforces in the area.

Recently, the Federation has set up a company – Learning Future West Wiltshire Ltd – with a focus on 14-19 education in order to broaden their offer by providing a curriculum that appeals to all young people and enables them to reach their potential. The Federation proposes a range of approaches to retention and raising achievement, including radical plans to alter their criteria for attendance to 25 hours per week, rather than having set times to be 'in school', and to find new and creative ways to accredit work based learning.

Of particular interest to Next Practice in System Leadership has been the establishment of the company, which includes headteachers, relevant businessmen/women and the Principal of the FE College as Directors.

Organisational structure underpinning Next Practice

The eight schools are in a soft federation, meaning that each school retains discrete arrangements for leadership and governance. A decision neither to formally federate nor to appoint an executive headteacher was seen as an important way to symbolise a voluntary and mutual commitment in a democratic arrangement between very different schools.

However, the headteachers do recognise the need for some more formal structures and processes, so the schools are working together and consulting locally to refine plans to incorporate as a company limited by guarantee. The company will sit within the existing Federation and will provide a framework for greater mutual accountability and a legal entity that can make joint appointments and enter into procurement contracts. Applying for charitable status will also enable the Federation to apply for a broader range of funding to support their development work.

The Federation has a steering group, which is chaired by one of the headteachers. In 2007, a Federation Director was appointed to facilitate communications and make connections between the schools to help them to move their agenda forward.

Leadership management & governance practices being developed

The Federation is seeking to reverse the upward trend in the numbers of NEET young people by:

- extending the existing collaborative arrangements to include Further Education, private training providers and Wiltshire Children's Services;
- developing a personalised 14 – 19 curriculum across the Federation;
- involving young people actively in decisions relating to such provision; and
- maintaining flexibility and some autonomy for schools within the Federation to enable local responsiveness to need.

They plan to achieve this by:

- developing a more flexible approach to what constitutes full attendance in order to meet the needs of challenging learners;
- developing a consistent and holistic approach to managing challenging behaviour across Federation schools; and
- recruiting stakeholders, including young people, to the existing governance structure.

Impact; actual and predicted benefits

By promoting partnership working with education providers outside schools, and broadening the offer to young people at risk of joining the NEET category, the Federation hopes to attract employers requiring higher levels of skill from their workers. They believe this will break the cycle of low expectations in the community and increase employment, wealth and opportunity in the area. Indicators that they are achieving this will include:

- increased engagement in previously low aspiration groups in schools;
- increased participation in post-16 education and a small reduction in young people in the NEET category;
- fewer exclusions due to their policy of managed moves.
- improved relationships between schools and employers; and
- higher levels of community engagement in schools.

Emerging issues

The West Wiltshire Federation is an established partnership that is trying to adopt new leadership practices and move into new relationships with one another. In many ways this is proving harder than setting up a new group from scratch. It can be difficult for busy school leaders to see how new arrangements and activities are preferable to established practice that works for them.

In particular, headteachers have to dig very deep to find the amount of energy and commitment it is taking to reform the Federation, at the same time as keeping up the pace of Federation development work, alongside raising standards in their individual schools. To be successful in this, headteachers may need to find ways of distributing leadership responsibility more widely and aligning school and Federation objectives more closely.

The schools in the West Wiltshire Federation range from highly successful to underachieving, and are dispersed across a wide geographical area with diverse and changing communities. The headteachers feel that their schools differ in many ways and that their needs and priorities reflect that difference. For this reason, retaining autonomy is very important to this group and balancing the needs of the Federation with the needs of the individual school is a constant tension for participating headteachers. Achieving consensus on important issues can be challenging in this situation.

The scale, distribution and diversity of the group also places considerable strain on communications, which can be time consuming and inhibit development. The headteachers

express a preference for face-to-face meetings where they can focus on Federation business. However as the Federation grows in depth and sophistication, and the pace of change accelerates, new and more efficient ways of communicating formally and informally and more frequently may need to be found. This may mean assigning some additional administrative capacity in participating schools and to support the director.

Implications

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

What are the structures and processes that enable a federation to function efficiently and to take development work forward? What are the roles and responsibilities that can be assigned?

What are the benefits and disadvantages of an entirely flat organisational structure?

What strategies for communication can be effective at keeping schools in a federation connected?

How can headteachers of participating schools build ownership and an infrastructure in their schools to support their contribution to the Federation?

What value might be added by forming a company limited by guarantee?