

Next Practice in System Leadership – Case Study

Winsford Education Partnership

Context for the Field Trial Site

Winsford is a small town in the centre of rural Cheshire with a population of around 36,000. Winsford has pockets of high deprivation and about 23% of Winsford children are educated in schools outside the town.

The local authority has been undertaking a school rationalisation review (TLC) as well as a review of special educational needs provision across the Authority. The two high schools federated in January 2008 and a Principal Headteacher has been appointed to run the new federation; an infant and junior school housed in adjacent buildings have amalgamated; a separate infant and junior school will be amalgamating and one other primary school is currently marked for closure.

A new build is being developed to house new provision for 14-19, and the SEN review has led to the Partnership and the local authority working together to develop a vision for a fully inclusive All Age school on a central site.

There are fifteen schools in Winsford; the federated high school, two special schools and twelve primary schools. All fifteen are involved in the Winsford Education Partnership (WEP). They are:

- Darnhall Primary
- Grange Primary
- Greenfields Primary
- Handley Hill Primary
- High Street Primary
- Leaf Lane NI
- Over Hall Primary
- Over St. John CE Primary
- St. Chad's CE Primary
- St. Joseph's Catholic Primary
- Wharton CE Junior
- Willow Wood Primary
- Winsford High School Federation
- Oaklands Special
- Hebden Green Special

The schools have a history of collaboration, first as a Single Regeneration Budget area and then as a Networked Learning Community.

Organisational structure underpinning Next Practice

The Winsford Education Partnership has a co-leadership model, which has operated on an informal basis for a number of years. The scale of the partnership led to the development of a range of sub groups, each taking responsibility for a strand of development. The group was very cohesive and shared a great deal of history and ideals, but was finding it difficult to make progress with its voluntary and informal structure.

The WEP leadership has therefore recently been exploring the potential of trust status to give them a focus to channel their considerable energy and goodwill and

move them more efficiently forward. Establishing a trust would offer the opportunity to secure whole town provision 0–19 with all the security and attendant economies of scale and extra bargaining power that this suggests. Winsford successfully applied to the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust to become a Trust Early adopter in December 2007.

However, WEP perceive significant barriers to be overcome. For instance, the Church schools already have trust arrangements and the implications of this for a whole town trust model have yet to be made clear. Some school leaders and governors have anxieties about the extent to which they will be asked to relinquish control over their school and how trust status will affect their individual identities and reputations with the communities they serve.

Leadership management & governance practices being developed

The distinctive characteristic of Winsford Educational Partnership is its large and inclusive leadership group of 15 headteachers. Apart from the Federated High School, the leadership of individual schools within the partnership remains on a traditional one-head-one-school basis.

This sustained partnership has led to significant collaborative capacity in key areas of development. The Partnership organises a biannual whole town INSET and offers an annual CPD programme. The Partnership's commitment to inclusion led to the development of an inclusion directory and a programme of work shadowing with staff from other agencies working in the ECM field.

Headteachers devolve funding annually from individual school budgets to finance the work of the partnership. The funding is proportional and calculated using a common formula. Pooling other resources remains a possibility.

The partnership is also committed to raising the profile of governance within the town so that it develops strategic educational vision and achievement across the community. Traditional governance models are being revisited to ensure that the infrastructure supports WEP's vision for inclusive education within the town.

Models under consideration include shared boards of governors, establishing an advisory board or an information sharing forum, or becoming a whole town trust that could also include partners from outside education, for instance the Primary Care Trust.

Impact; actual and predicted benefits

Winsford aims to use the collaborative capacity of the Partnership to take strategic advantage of 3 major developments in their context; a review of SEN provision, Transforming Learning Communities and a new build to house 14–19 provision.

They expect to achieve:

- faster decision making through slimmed down focussed governance;
- increased collaboration founded on trust both within the Partnership and between all the agencies implementing ECM;
- higher skills and knowledge levels for governors and leaders; and
- a leadership academy for TA's, specialist teachers, aspiring headteachers.

By mobilising the Partnership in this way, Winsford hopes to positively influence developments as they unfold, particularly as those developments relate to the inclusiveness of Winsford's offer to young people in the community. Specifically, the outcomes the Partnership hope for include:

- More families choosing to send their children to school in Winsford
- Raised aspirations with increased participation post-16
- More effective intervention strategies for children and families with challenging behaviours
- Improved access to improved and targeted provision for the full range of child centred services

Emerging issues

The Winsford Education Partnership's greatest strength is the security and resilience of relationships between partner schools. High levels of trust have been built over time and with care, and the partnership prides itself on its inclusive approach. Much has been achieved that could not possibly have happened without such a strong foundation.

As the pace and depth of the changes required to meet their ambitious objectives become apparent, however, the Partnership is increasingly finding that its broad based, voluntary structures are not always the most conducive to swift decision making and action. Exploratory discussions of possible ways to address this, by rationalising partnership leadership and governance arrangements have been met with approval in principle by partner schools. But the negotiations required to implement such measures, against the backdrop of a history and expectation of participation remains complex and challenging.

The Partnership is also coming to realise that the scale of their undertaking – whole town all-through schooling – has meant that the speed of their progress has been slower than they hoped at the outset. In the end the outcome is highly likely to merit the investment. But there may be important implications for sustainability, especially for key individuals and for funding, the longer it takes to achieve significant progress.

The idea of the Partnership has been based on a desire to influence the future of education in Winsford, through a period of externally imposed change and rationalisation, rather than assuming a passive role and waiting to see what would happen to individual schools. The depth of collaboration and commitment has made it more likely that decisions taken at a locality level can be both strategic and widely owned. It also means that resistance to undesirable change is easier to organise. For the local authority the existence of the Partnership simultaneously represents therefore both a challenge and an opportunity.

Implications

The outcomes of this case study suggest that leaders of large-scale partnerships of schools could usefully consider the following questions:

What additional bargaining power and influence can be gained by uniting all schools in a locality? What efficiencies in provision and economies of scale become possible?

What are the benefits and what are the costs of going to scale early in a change process?

How best can a new trust or federation take into account and build on existing arrangements? What are the legal and financial complexities and who is best placed to resolve them?

Who are the local authority officers who need to be involved in a whole town partnership? What opportunities can the partnership offer the authority?