

The road to federation



Governing bodies that consider joining federations and multi-academy trusts

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Association

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1. Background

Since the 2002 Education Act, local authority (LA) maintained schools in England have been free to collaborate with other schools in a variety of arrangements, including federation. In this research, federation refers to a formal and legal agreement by which multiple schools have a single governing body that is formally re-constituted. Historically this has sometimes been known as a “hard” federation (a “soft” federation being a collaboration in which the governing bodies of schools remain separate). A Labour government was in power at the time of the Act and promoted collaboration as a key driver for school improvement, much as the current coalition does with academy conversion. Local authorities were given the power to require failing schools to enter into federation, and it was expected that by 2007 all secondary schools would have formed or joined a partnership (DfES, 2005). However, this ambition never came to fruition, with Labour’s promotion of federation having far less impact than the coalition’s drive to convert all schools to academies.

Indeed, the coalition government’s focus on the academies programme has led to federation in LA maintained schools taking somewhat of a backseat in education policy. Schools minister Lord Nash referred to federation as a “second best model” in a speech to the Independent Academies Association (2013), as it doesn’t provide the “clear financial autonomy and feeling of ownership that comes with academy status.” On the other hand, there has been the proliferation of multi-academy trusts (MATs), which are established under a different legal framework than local authority maintained federations, but are similar in that multiple schools are governed under a single governing board or trust. The Department for Education (DfE) has released statistics about the number of MATs in England (DfE website 2013), but has not released equivalent information for the number of federations. In response to a parliamentary question submitted by NGA, David Laws MP said the DfE does not hold a complete list of federations and their composition. There is also a lack of government guidance available for governing bodies considering federation, especially when compared with the abundance of resources for those considering academy conversion.

Despite this, there is evidence that federation confers significant benefits. For example, Ofsted’s 2011 study *Leadership of more than one school*

made clear the advantages to pupils' attainment, cost efficiency, and governance. Aspects of provision and outcomes were found to be improving in all of the federations visited by inspectors. The reasons for federating generally influenced the areas of greatest improvement; for example, where a successful school was federated with a weaker school the greatest improvement was always in teaching and learning, achievement, behaviour and often attendance. Shared arrangements also strengthened governance, particularly in the weaker school in this type of federation.

The National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL) has also undertaken research about federation (e.g. Chapman et al, 2009), and has produced a number of resources for schools considering federation, including best practice case studies of where federation has had a positive impact. However, governors' understanding of federation varies enormously, with some never having come across the concept at all. Anecdotally, we know the processes for negotiating these arrangements, particularly when setting them up in the first place, can be difficult and time consuming, but there has been little work published on the detail of the process, to which schools beginning the process can refer. The National Governors' Association (NGA), as part of its role of supporting governing bodies, has undertaken this BELMAS funded study to help fill this knowledge gap.

2. Research Objectives

The aims of the research were twofold. First, to learn more about what motivates governing bodies to consider federation, including the perceived benefits of federating. Second, to learn more about governors' experiences of the federation process. In particular, previous anecdotal reports have suggested that the guidance available to governing bodies considering federation is limited, and this information gap presents a significant barrier. We wanted to find out if this is indeed the case. More widely, we were interested in how governing bodies navigate through the federation process, who was involved in making decisions, and any challenges faced.

We looked at the following key research questions:

- What are the drivers of the formation of federations/multi-academy trusts?
- Who is involved in the decision-making process, and how do they influence the decision?
- What are the barriers, perceived and actual?

In practice, many of the federations involved in the research had been federated for some time. This meant that they were also able to reflect upon the outcomes of federation. Although initially this was not intended as a research objective, the link between the potential benefits driving the decision to federate and the actual outcomes post-federation was of interest.

3. Methods of research

Governors volunteered to take part in the study after the research was advertised to the NGA membership in October 2012 – as a result the majority of participants were NGA members, although a minority were not. When recruiting participants for the study, efforts were made to ensure there was variety in demography and geography. However, in practice it proved difficult to recruit governors from certain areas of the country, and there were no participants from the North West and West Midlands. It is possible that this is due to a relatively low prevalence of federations in these regions, but there is no data available to confirm this hypothesis. In addition, although there were a variety of different combinations of school types, a disproportionate number consisted of just primary schools. It was decided that despite this uneven weighting, there was still sufficient variety in the sample group to draw meaningful conclusions. Representatives of 14 school groupings took part in the research. Information about the participating schools can be found in appendix 1.

The research methodology involved semi-structured telephone and face to face interviews, and analysis of documentation.

A total of 18 telephone interviews were conducted with chairs of governors, headteachers, and local authority representatives across the 14 groups of schools. Assurances were given that individual responses would be kept confidential. Initially, telephone interviews were used to gain an overview of each federation/MAT in order to select a final six for the face to face interviews. The same list of questions was used as a guide for each interview; a copy of this can be found in appendix 2.

Representatives from five federations and one MAT took part in face to face interviews. A number of participants from the initial telephone interviews volunteered to take part in this phase of the study, and the final six were selected based on the perceived scope for further investigation. A secondary factor was school type and location, as variation was required in the final group. After the final six federations/MATs were selected, telephone interviews were also used to record the experiences of governors and headteachers from a wider range of federations/MATs.

The aims of face to face interviews were twofold: first, to gain a more in depth understanding of the federation process and outcomes; second, to gain inputs from a wider range of stakeholders. A minimum of four

individuals were interviewed from each federation/MAT, representing at least three of the following: the chair of governors; headteacher/executive headteacher; the clerk; other governors; and a local authority representative. The majority of interviews were audio recorded, with permission being sought prior to recording. In two cases, this was not granted and notes were taken instead. In addition, there was one instance where an interviewee was unable to attend the face to face interview, so a telephone interview was conducted instead. Each interview was transcribed and the transcripts were analysed.

Analysis of documentation

Minutes from governing body meetings about federating and supporting papers were examined.

4. Findings

A note about multi-academy trusts

Three MATs were examined as part of the research. However, two of these were originally LA maintained federations, which then chose to convert to academies as a group. In both cases, the decision to convert to academy status was made separately to (and several years after) the decision to federate. Therefore, although the schools are now part of MATs, for the purpose of this research they have been treated as federations. This does not apply to the third MAT, in which the school interviewed was required by the DfE to convert to academy status as part of a MAT.

4.1. What are the drivers of the formation of federations/multi-academy trusts?

Ofsted's 2011 report *Leadership of more than one school* identified three main reasons for schools to federate: 'performance federations' consisting of a stronger school supporting an under-performing school; federations of small schools at risk of closure; and cross phase federations aiming to strengthen education across the community. Governing bodies in this study often considered federation for a number of reasons, and although ten fitted broadly into one of these three categories, within each federation/MAT, individual schools were sometimes motivated by different factors.

Performance federations

Interviewees from seven out of the fourteen school groups said that school improvement was the main driver for considering federation. Of these, six fall into the so-called category of 'performance federations' consisting of a mixture of high and low performing schools, with the aim of raising standards in the weaker school(s). The seventh was the only example of a potential cross phase federation, and is examined in more detail in case study 1 (Appendix 3). In every other instance, the headteacher of the stronger school was brought in to support the weaker school, in either a mentor role or as an executive headteacher. This usually started as a temporary arrangement; in four cases this was brokered by the LA, and in the other two by the governing body of the stronger school. The main reason given by these governing bodies was to provide a new challenge for their headteacher, in part to avoid them from seeking new challenges

elsewhere. For the majority of schools, this arrangement acted as a precursor to federation under the leadership of an executive headteacher. The exception involved a high performing grammar school supporting an under-performing comprehensive, resulting in a collaboration with the schools retaining separate governing bodies.

Small, rural school federations

Three federations fell into the second category identified by Ofsted, and included small, rural schools that were either at risk of closure, or faced difficulties recruiting a headteacher. The governing body of one school was told by the local authority that if the headteacher resigned, the school would be unable to afford a permanent replacement. For this school, federation was pursued out of necessity rather than choice, as explained by the vice chair: “I can now honestly say a federation offers all sorts of exciting and really lovely challenges; it’s been great to work with these other schools. But the initial driver was nothing to do with extending the experience of the children, it was about survival.” The governing body approached local schools inviting them to consider federation. One of these schools had not considered federation before this contact, as it was financially secure and felt no urgency to federate. For this governing body, federation was more about being part of the local learning community and “being in control of [its] own destiny.” Governors were in a position where they could *choose* to be looking to the future and looking at how they could work with local schools, whereas governors at their partner school *had* to consider federation as a means of survival.

The other two federations in this category appointed executive headteachers from within the federation. Here, both headteachers were ambitious, and the extra challenge of leading a federation allowed the schools to retain strong leaders. Other drivers included attracting high quality teaching staff, which the schools had previously found challenging. The governing body of one federation also wanted to tackle the insular nature of small village schools. It was concerned that students were isolated and believed federating with another local school would give valuable opportunities to socialise with a wider group of children. As the majority of children in the area progressed to the same secondary school, the governing body felt this was especially important to make easier the transition across phases.

Other drivers

The remaining four groups of schools do not fall easily into any of the categories identified by Ofsted. The first consists of two outstanding special schools. Federation was considered when one of the schools was unable to find a suitable replacement for their longstanding and highly successful headteacher. The headteacher of another outstanding special school was therefore asked to step in as a temporary executive headteacher. Despite some initial resistance from staff and a minority of governors, this arrangement ultimately proved successful and federation followed.

The second federation consisted of an infant and a junior school that shared the same site. The schools had initially been a primary school, but due to increasing rolls had split into two separate schools several years before. However, rolls had subsequently begun to fall across the county, which affected the infant school in particular. When the headteachers of both schools resigned around the same time, the schools began discussing federation. The relationship between the schools was somewhat strained, and the final decision to federate was only reached after a lengthy consultation period.

The third federation also consisted of two schools sharing a site, but in this case one school was a primary school and the other a special school. As in the previous federation, discussions were initiated when the headteachers of both schools left their posts around the same time. In this case, the two schools had a history of collaboration so the process of becoming a federation was much smoother. However, the fact that the schools had worked together so closely meant the governing bodies perhaps did not challenge as much as they should have. For example, they did not undergo a due diligence process, which would have revealed that the primary school was significantly under-performing. This is discussed further in case study 2 (appendix 3).

The final example involved a school that had received a notice to improve from Ofsted, and as a result was required to convert to academy status as part of a multi-academy trust. The chair of governors was disappointed with the lack of communication from the DfE following the announcement that they must become an academy, but the school eventually made the decision to create a MAT with four other schools and the Diocese as the sponsor. It is interesting to note that this is the only example where the governing body did not make the final decision whether or not to federate, and where stakeholders were not consulted at all during the process.

Schools minister Lord Nash referred to federation as a “second best model” because he doesn’t believe it gives schools the same “feeling of ownership” as do academies. It could be argued that, in this case, by becoming an academy, governors, staff, and parents lost much of the “feeling of ownership” they might have previously had.

4.2. Who is involved in the decision-making process, and how do they influence the decision?

The School Governance (Federations) (England) Regulations 2012 require that all governing bodies considering federation send their proposals to a number of stakeholders for consultation. These stakeholders include: the Secretary of State, local authority (LA), the headteacher of each school, parents, staff, and if relevant the Diocese and/or foundation governors and trustees. Schools should also consult “such other persons as the governing bodies consider appropriate,” which might include the wider community. Governing bodies must consider the responses from all these stakeholders when making the final decision whether or not to federate. On the surface, it may seem that taking into account such a range of views would make the process incredibly complicated, but in practice this does not appear to be the case.

Governing bodies

Usually, the governing body of each school is responsible for making the final decision whether or not to federate (an exception from this study is the primary school that was required by the DfE to join a MAT, about which the governing body had little say). Although this decision is made by the governing body as a whole, in practice individual governors will have differing viewpoints and a consensus will not always be reached. A minority of governing bodies voted unanimously for federation, in particular where it was either driven by financial necessity, or the schools had previously collaborated and federation was the next logical step. More frequently, there was some level of disagreement over whether federation was right for the school, with some governing bodies actually losing members over the decision. The nature of governors’ concerns varied, but often stemmed from a lack of understanding about what federation would entail and uncertainty about the benefits it could offer the school. The latter was particularly of concern to governors in the stronger school of a performance federation.

Another concern was whether all governors would be part of the federated governing body. The majority of governing bodies decided to give governors

the option to join the federated governing body or leave, sometimes to be part of an advisory or ethos board. Some felt it was important to invite all governors to be part of the federated governing body; as one said: “We didn’t want to sack any of the governors or ask them not to continue, you don’t do that to volunteers do you?”

In many cases, the governing body was very much a driving force in ensuring the discussions between schools continued and decisions were reached. Federation requires governors to be outward looking, and think about the benefits for the other school(s) in the partnership as well as their own. This was evident in the vast majority of federations and MATs taking part in the research, with several examples of governing bodies actively seeking to federate for altruistic reasons.

Local authorities

Although the Secretary of State must be informed of the proposal to federate, none of the participating governing bodies received any objections from the DfE. All received some kind of feedback from the LA, but in many cases the LA had been involved from an early stage (in several instances proposing federation in the first place) so was supportive of federation. Indeed, the input of the LA usually went far beyond simply replying to the formal consultation. It often played an important part in providing advice and support throughout the federation process, which the majority of schools reported to be invaluable.

Headteachers

Unsurprisingly, the influence of the headteacher on the decision to federate was significant. In the vast majority of cases, the headteacher was an enabling factor in the federation process. As many of the federations already had an executive headteacher as part of a previous collaborative arrangement, the very nature of their role meant the executive headteacher was enthusiastic about federating. This was also true for schools where the key driver for federating was to enable them to recruit a headteacher. There were no examples of a multi-head model in this research (although the unrealised federation in case study 1 had proposed this) and every federation or MAT had an executive headteacher.

There were two cases where a headteacher had opposed federation, with contrasting results. The first is explored in case study 1 (Appendix 3). The second concerns a performance federation that started out as a collaboration. It was proposed that this would include the headteacher of the

stronger school being appointed as executive headteacher, with the headteacher of the under-performing school becoming a head of school. The headteacher of the under-performing school was strongly opposed to this as he saw it as undermining his ability, and he believed that with time he could turn the school around on his own. As he was a popular headteacher, parents and indeed some governors were unwilling to lose him, despite the fact that the school had declined significantly since he came into post. The governing body decided to go forward with the collaboration, which contributed to the headteacher choosing to resign. Although this resulted in two governors also deciding to leave, his opposition ultimately did not influence the decision to federate. The school had been graded 'satisfactory' before federation, but since federating, has been graded as 'good' by Ofsted.

Parents

The level of response from parents varied. Some governing bodies reported that very few parents had responded to the consultation, which was generally assumed to mean that parents were indifferent to federating. Where parents did express opinions, responses ranged from support to concern. The majority of feedback fell into the latter category, and the basis for this is explored in section 4.3. However, in every case opposition came from only a minority of parents, and there were no examples of where this had precluded federation. Although governors were clear that if a majority of parents had opposed federation they would not have continued at that point, in practice, parental consultation allowed governing bodies to identify and address concerns rather than decide whether or not to federate. Federation did not negatively impact the Ofsted grading of any of the schools, and in some cases has actually contributed to an improvement.

Staff

As with parents, responses from staff varied between support, concern and apathy. Governors from four school groups reported that staff had expressed concerns, all relating to either the introduction of an executive headteacher or changes to their pay and conditions. In every case, these issues were addressed in meetings with staff, which generally led to a positive conclusion. There was one instance where this was not the case; this is explored in more detail in section 4.3. Feedback from staff did not significantly influence the federation process for any of the governing bodies.

The Diocese

Five groups of schools included Church of England schools, and as such had consulted the Diocese. The first was required by the DfE to convert to an academy as part of a multi academy trust, after being given a notice to improve by Ofsted. The Diocese became the sponsor of the MAT, so was heavily involved in both the process of becoming an academy and becoming part of the MAT. A further two federations were composed entirely of church schools, and governors did not experience any resistance from the Diocese.

There were two examples of federations consisting of a mixture of church and non-church schools. In the first example, the Diocese was supportive of federation, but in the second the Diocese had a negative influence on the decision to federate. Here, the Diocese objected on the basis that the federation would contain non-church schools. However, the school's rector (a foundation governor) supported federation, and the governing body ultimately voted to federate. It is interesting to note that the school was voluntary-controlled and therefore did not have a majority of foundation governors. Had the school been voluntary-aided, the majority of governors would have been foundation governors, who may have been more likely to vote in line with the Diocese.

4.3. What are the barriers, perceived and actual?

Stakeholder opposition

One of the most common barriers encountered was opposition from stakeholders, in particular parents and staff. As with any major change to school structure, some resistance should be expected, and the majority of participants had experienced some level of challenge from stakeholders, ranging from minor concerns to extreme opposition. Much of the former stemmed from a lack of understanding of what federation would mean in practice. For example, the primary concern from staff was whether their pay and conditions would be affected. Participants were unanimous in saying the best way to deal with such concerns is prompt and effective communication, which involved listening to what stakeholders have to say, but also making clear the reasons why federation was right for the school. As one governor advised: "Don't underestimate the fact that change is unsettling and frightening. You have to deal with that sympathetically but firmly."

A minority of governing bodies experienced extreme opposition. For example, one school had problems with a small clique of staff who opposed federating, but their arguments were largely based on historical issues unrelated to federation. The headteacher of this school took HR advice from her local authority, and as the vast majority staff supported federation, the governing body voted for it to go ahead. A few months into federation, the discordant voices had been quietened by its success and also by the appointment of new staff members, which has effectively broken up the clique.

Where federation involved a strong and a weaker school sharing an executive headteacher, the parents of students in the stronger school often had concerns that they were going to 'lose' their headteacher. As one chair of governors said: "There's something about people being very wedded to the importance of a headteacher at a school, five days a week, there on the school gate in the morning to see parents...because federations didn't exist when pupils' parents went to school." Indeed, some governing bodies of performance federations noted that their executive headteacher devoted more time to the failing school than the successful school, and in some cases, governors at the stronger school reported that standards had suffered in the short term. However, the executive head model does offer ways to ensure all schools in the partnership are led effectively. Most governing bodies put in place 'heads of school,' who took responsibility for the day-to-day leadership of each school in the partnership, with the executive head taking a more strategic role overseeing the federation. This had the added benefit of providing further leadership experience for talented potential leaders, and allowed schools to focus on succession planning.

There is only one example of a headteacher preventing federation from going ahead, explored in case study 1 (Appendix 3). Interestingly, this is the only example of where a multi-head model was proposed, with every other federation or MAT in the research having an executive headteacher. In every case, the executive headteacher was either already in post at the school, or was recruited specifically for the executive headship role. Therefore, it is to be expected that these individuals were positive about federation, but it is unclear whether this would be the case for headteachers considering federation under a multi-headteacher model.

Many of the governing bodies that had not experienced opposition from parents and staff attributed this to having previously collaborated with their partner schools, whether it be temporarily seconding staff, or whole school collaboration. A key advantage of having this collaboration phase was that

the concerns of parents, staff, and governors were addressed before federation was even proposed. Stepping into the unknown can be daunting, and having tangible evidence of the benefits of working together helped governing bodies convince dissenters that federation was a positive move. One chair of governors described his experiences of this: “The difficulties were around the decision to initiate the partnership in the first place. That’s where we had the most heated discussions. Two years later everyone was like ‘Yes this is working really well; it would be great for us to carry on.’ That’s much more straightforward.” This preliminary stage also gave governors across the partnership, in particular chairs, the opportunity to begin building relationships. This was not restricted to formal meetings; for example, one participant described how the chairs of partner schools frequently met informally to share ideas and frequently emailed one another, which played an important part in developing the collaboration. Furthermore, seeing the chairs getting on encouraged other governors to build positive relationships with one another.

Lack of information

A number of governors and headteachers commented that lack of information was a barrier. The most common source of information was the LA, and the quality of advice between LAs varied widely. In the majority of cases, the LA gave excellent support, with one participant describing the support from their LA as “an absolute confidence booster.” However, for a minority this was not the case. The chair of governors of one special school federation described how the poor advice of a governor services representative had left her federation without a governing body for the summer holidays. A governor from another federation commented: “We are very positive in many respects about the support we have had from the LA. But it did feel at some points...that they were making it up as they went along and I think they were because it was a very new situation.” In both of these examples, the LA did not purposefully present a barrier, but rather were themselves unfamiliar and inexperienced with regards to federation. Furthermore, a number of participants commented that the support available from their LA had diminished over the past three years, meaning they didn’t have the resources to effectively support federating schools. Where this was the case, governors had to turn to other sources for guidance, the success of which depended largely on individual governing bodies knowing where to look. For example, the headteacher from one federation was a National Leader of Education, so had close links with the National College for Teaching and Learning, and therefore sought guidance

from them. Other participants used resources from organisations such as Ofsted and advice from the National Governors' Association. A number had used articles on the DfE website, but reported that this information was limited and not always easy to locate. Several participants sought advice from other schools that had federated, which in some cases were part of a different local authority where federation was more widespread.

5. Conclusions

This research has examined the drivers, influential factors, and barriers to federation using the experiences of fourteen governing bodies. The key drivers for federation largely fall in line with those identified by Ofsted in *Leadership of more than one school*, with the majority being either a 'performance federation' or a group of small schools at risk of closure. In many cases, federation was driven by the governing bodies being 'outward looking,' particularly where a strong school federated with a weaker school in order to support school improvement. Autonomy and collaboration need not be mutually exclusive. Indeed, when one federation governing body decided to convert to academy status it actively sought local schools to join the newly formed MAT.

Leadership arrangements were a key factor for all governing bodies, and it is interesting to note that every governing body that went forward with federation chose to do so under an executive headteacher. In some cases, the introduction of an executive headteacher presented a barrier by way of concerns raised by parents and school staff. However, this barrier never precluded federation. Governors were generally positive about the role of the executive headteacher, with one commenting "the most important person is the executive headteacher." However, without comparable data about multi-head models it is difficult to draw clear conclusions about whether the executive headship model is preferable.

Governing bodies considering federation must consult with a number of key stakeholders, and take their views into account when making the final decision whether or not to federate. All but one governing body interviewed underwent the formal consultation process, and the majority consulted with stakeholders far more extensively than required (the exception was the school required to convert to an academy as part of a MAT). There were varying degrees of response, with the most vocal stakeholder groups being parents and staff. Indeed, the most common barrier to federation was opposition from these groups, which often stemmed from a lack of understanding of what federation means in practice. Despite existing for over a decade, federation retains a relatively low profile in terms of education policy, meaning many parents and staff are not familiar with it. Effectively communicating with these groups is vital.

A number of governing bodies reported that they had been uncertain about how to go about federating and found it difficult to locate relevant information on the process. In the first instance, many governing bodies had contacted the LA for advice. However, the quality of this guidance varied widely; in some cases the LA was a key enabler for federation, but in others it was a barrier. This was often because the LA itself lacked experience and expertise regarding federation, and was therefore unable to offer appropriate advice to schools. The diminishing role of LAs was also a factor, with a number of participants observing a decline in the LA support services on offer since the coalition government came into power. Where the LA was unable to give advice, not all governing bodies knew where else to look.

Although many of the governing bodies examined in this research faced barriers during the federation process, every participant said going through the federation process had been beneficial. Those that had successfully federated reported numerous benefits, from improved staffing to an enriched curriculum. Even those that had not gone through with federation or had defederated had benefited from the process, as one participant explained: “As two separate governing bodies again now, I think we’ve all benefited from the experience, because it has made us more aware of our need to challenge.” Recommendations and advice from participants can be found in Appendix 4.

This research has shown that federation still remains an attractive option for schools, especially in the increasingly fragmented education landscape where schools in some areas may well be at risk of becoming isolated. It is clear that governing bodies considering federation or forming an MAT need to make informed decisions about whether it is right for their school. It is hoped that the findings of this research will go some way to ensuring this is the case.

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Appendix 1: Participant information

Federation or MAT	Region	Composition	Status	Date became a federation/MAT
<i>A</i>	<i>South West</i>	<i>1 secondary school, 5 primary schools</i>	<i>Did not federate</i>	<i>N/A</i>
<i>B</i>	<i>South West</i>	<i>3 primary schools</i>	<i>Federation</i>	<i>2012</i>
<i>C</i>	<i>London</i>	<i>2 primary schools</i>	<i>Federation</i>	<i>2012</i>
<i>D</i>	<i>Yorkshire & Humber</i>	<i>1 primary school, 1 special school</i>	<i>Federated for 2 years, now de-federated</i>	<i>2011</i>
<i>E</i>	<i>South East</i>	<i>3 special schools</i>	<i>Federation</i>	<i>2008 (expanded 2012)</i>
<i>F</i>	<i>East of England</i>	<i>7 secondary schools</i>	<i>Multi-academy trust (formally an LA maintained federation)</i>	<i>Federation: 2010 MAT: 2012</i>
<i>G</i>	<i>North East</i>	<i>2 special schools</i>	<i>Federation</i>	<i>2011</i>
<i>H</i>	<i>South East</i>	<i>1 infant school, 1 junior school</i>	<i>Federation</i>	<i>2009</i>
<i>I</i>	<i>East of England</i>	<i>2 primary schools</i>	<i>Federation</i>	<i>2011</i>
<i>J</i>	<i>South West</i>	<i>5 primary schools</i>	<i>Multi-academy trust (from December 2013)</i>	<i>2013</i>
<i>K</i>	<i>South East</i>	<i>2 secondary schools</i>	<i>Did not federate</i>	<i>N/A</i>
<i>L</i>	<i>South West</i>	<i>3 primary schools</i>	<i>Federation</i>	<i>2007</i>
<i>M</i>	<i>East Midlands</i>	<i>2 primary schools</i>	<i>Federation</i>	<i>2011</i>
<i>N</i>	<i>South East</i>	<i>2 secondary schools</i>	<i>Multi-academy trust (formally an LA maintained federation)</i>	<i>2006</i>

Italics denote participants who took part in face to face interviews.

Appendix 2: Telephone interview questions

Who initiated the discussion about federating?

What were the initial motivations to federate?

What did governors and school leaders know about federation/multi-academy options at each stage?

What external advice was sought and was this useful?

Who made what arguments, when and why?

Were there any unexpected barriers?

To what extent were potential changes to governance and leadership structure considered?

Who was consulted and how did they influence the decision?

Appendix 3: Case Studies

Case study 1: An unrealised vision for a cross phase federation

There was only one example of a governing body that considered a cross phase federation. The federation process was initiated by the town's community college, which approached local primaries with the intention of creating a 'cluster' model. Each school would retain its own headteacher - the headteacher of the community college was clear from the start that he was not interested in pursuing executive headship. The governing body of the community college presented an altruistic vision of improving education in the community as a whole, across phases. There was a history of collaboration in the area. For example, the schools were all part of a local learning community and had recently embarked upon a business partnership based around sharing service level contracts. Community college governors saw federation as the next logical step, and believed it would give greater flexibility in terms of school improvement. A number of federations had already been established in the area and the time seemed ripe for the community college to pursue their own federation. However, despite having the key ingredients of clear leadership and purpose throughout the process, the federation did not go forward.

Five primary schools initially expressed an interest in the federation and went as far as undergoing the due diligence process. Two of the schools were church schools - one voluntary aided (VA), one voluntary controlled (VC) - and both had concerns about the impact of federating with secular schools on their Christian ethos. In particular, governors at the VA school were concerned about having a significantly smaller proportion of foundation governors on the federated governing body. These concerns led to the two church schools deciding against joining the federation.

This left three primary schools, the minimum number that the community college governors felt was required to make the federation viable. The largest primary school had 200 pupils, whereas the smaller two each had fewer than 30 pupils. For the federation to remain viable, it was therefore essential that the largest primary school was involved. However, the headteacher of this primary school was concerned about the vulnerability of the smaller schools' budgets. This was not helped by the fact that part way

through the federation process the local authority insisted that the federation had a single budget, despite this not being a legal requirement. Ultimately, the headteacher decided that the benefits of federation were outweighed by the risks, and convinced the majority of the governing body that federation was not right for the school. They voted against federating 2-1. The former chair of governors was pro-federation and consequently resigned his post. He believes that the headteacher's personal views contributed to his decision and that he influenced some of the governors unduly against federation.

Although the federation did not go ahead, some of the schools agreed to work together as a learning community, and the community college is open to revisiting federation in the future.

Case Study 2: The importance of due diligence

It is important that governing bodies seeking to federate are well informed, which includes knowing certain information about their potential partner school(s). Once a partner school has been chosen, it is good practice for the schools to undergo a due diligence process. The potential consequences of not doing this are exemplified by the experiences of a special school and primary school that federated, only to have to undo this months later.

The two schools were situated on the same site and the two governing bodies, and schools as a whole, had been working collaboratively for several years. The headteacher of the primary school left the school following a planned retirement, and the headteacher of the special school expressed an intention to retire shortly after. The governing bodies decided that appointing an executive headteacher and federating governing bodies would be the best way forward. The process of becoming a federation was relatively straightforward, although there was some resistance from the local authority, which was later revealed to be due to concerns that the provision of special educational needs in the special school would be put in jeopardy. This did not prevent the federation from going forward, and the governing bodies successfully federated and appointed an executive headteacher.

However, only weeks into the federation the primary school was targeted for an Ofsted inspection following poor SATs results the previous summer. It was judged to be inadequate and was required by the Department for Education to convert to an academy. It was decided that converting to

academy status would not be right for the special school, which meant that the schools had to defederate. This put the executive headteacher in a difficult position, and it could have resulted in him being left without a job. He is now headteacher of the primary school, and the special school has had to appoint a new headteacher.

Governors at the primary school had not intentionally withheld the fact that the school was under-performing, but rather were themselves unaware of the extent of the school's weaknesses. This obviously raises questions about how effectively the governing body was challenging the former headteacher, but also highlights the importance of undergoing a thorough due diligence process. Had this been done, the weaknesses of the primary school would have most likely come to the attention of both governing bodies and they may have decided against federating. Despite having to defederate, the two schools will continue to work together on an informal basis and believe the experience has encouraged them to become better at challenging the headteacher.

Appendix 4: Recommendations and advice from participants

Participants were asked what advice they would give governing bodies considering joining a federation or MAT. Common themes are summarised here.

Remaining focused

There are numerous reasons a governing body might consider federation, whether it be to drive school improvement or purely for financial survival. The process of becoming a federation or MAT can be difficult to navigate, but keeping in mind the desired outcomes is important. Being clear about the benefits not only helps the governing body persuade other stakeholders of why the school should federate, but can also help governors stay on track. As one participant said: “There’s something about the process of federating where it’s very easy to get drawn into navel gazing. Or be about the nature of the governing body and how the federated governing body’s going to work and who’s going to be on it. Those things are important but you want your focus to be on the children that come to the school and improving outcomes for them.”

Choosing a partner

Some participants decided to federate with a school with which they were already collaborating, and others were asked to federate with a particular school identified by the local authority. However, where schools considered federation without a specific partner in mind, choosing this partner required careful consideration. As one participant advised “choose your partners very carefully.” Many felt it was important to federate with a school that had a similar ethos. Geographical proximity wasn’t deemed essential by all, but it was desirable in order to make the most of benefits such as joint activities with pupils, sharing of staff, and joint CPD for staff, without losing a lot of time and expenditure to travel.

Choosing a partner is the first step, but before making the final decision to federate, governing bodies are advised to “go through the process

diligently, so that consultation occurs, due diligence occurs, and everybody is happy at every stage.” Undergoing a thorough due diligence process before making the final decision to federate is vital; the potential consequences of not doing this are demonstrated in case study 2 (Appendix 3).

Communication

Effective communication was identified as being key to the success of federation. At the beginning of the process, parents and teachers - and even some governors - will have little understanding of what federation is, which makes it easy for misconceptions to develop. Communicating the reasons why the governing body thinks federation is right for the school is important, in particular where staff and/or parents have voiced concerns. This might entail multiple meetings, but as one participant said “it’s better to tell someone something twice than them to feel they’ve been left out of the loop.”

Handle the situation delicately

Even when both governing bodies are in favour of federation, problems can arise if one governing body feels the other is “taking over,” especially where a strong school is federating with an under-performing school. Several participants advised that governors ensure they handle the process sensitively, including recognising that there is good practice in all schools, even those not deemed “good” or “outstanding” by Ofsted. As one participant reflected: “One of things we were incredibly cautious about when we started was to try to keep things very even handed, as between all three schools, so that no school had a sense that they were being taken over by another school or that they were the poor relation...I think that sensitivity has paid off because I’m not getting a sense from anyone that they feel that their school has lost out or lost its characteristics.”

Integrating governing bodies

One of the potential pitfalls when federating is deciding what the federated governing body will look like. The majority of the groups in the study gave governors the option to join the federated governing body or leave, sometimes to be part of an advisory or ethos board. This mechanism of natural wastage was intended to prevent the federated governing body from being excessively large, although, despite some governors leaving, the resultant governing body was often still larger than desirable. In this situation, governing bodies usually chose to wait until governors left and

then didn't replace them, consequently reconstituting to a smaller governing body.

Some participants felt it was important to invite all governors to be part of the federated governing body. However, there were a couple of examples where governance had been particularly weak in one of the federating schools, and participants commented that being more selective in who joins the federated governing body might have been beneficial.

Once the federated governing body is in place, it is also important to make a concerted effort to encourage governors to start thinking in federation terms. Strategies that proved successful include arranging informal meetings (in addition to full governing body meetings), visiting one another's school and having full day meetings. All of these helped governors to get to know one another and the school(s) in the federation. As one participant put it: "If you have conspiracy theories or fantasies around 'that school wants to take us over and make us like their school'...one of the easiest ways to dispel that is just having people together in the same room and talking."

The importance of being strategic

There was some disagreement about whether federation resulted in more work for the governing body. Some argued that in order to know all schools in the federation, governors need to spend more time reading paperwork for each school. They also have to spend more time visiting multiple schools, which can be particularly time consuming when the schools are far apart.

However, others said that federation hasn't led to increased workload, but rather forced them to become more efficient. As one participant put it: "We allocate the same number of hours per term to governance of the federation as we did to governance of just one school. We don't have extra meetings, but you need a lot more discipline."

Several participants commented that federation has made them more strategic. An additional benefit of this is that by being strategic, governors are encouraged to look at the federation as a whole as opposed to focusing on "their" school.

National Governors' Association

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