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improve children's lives



National College
for Leadership of Schools
and Children's Services

Schools and academies

Executive heads

Summary report

Resource

Executive summary

The role of executive head is not defined in education law but in this report it is used to describe any headteacher role that has some kind of lead managerial responsibility for more than one school.

In 2004, there were an estimated 25 executive heads. The research supporting this report indicates that by January 2010 the number in England has risen to an estimated 450, with most have been appointed in the last two years.

The increase in executive headship is part of a broader trend that has seen schools having more autonomy and school leaders being given increased responsibilities. As a result, many school leaders now share or distribute leadership to other colleagues and have developed a more strategic approach to their leadership role.

This has coincided with schools being encouraged to work together to bring about school improvement, address underperformance, provide a broader curriculum offer for 14-19 schools, introduce extended services and develop children's services through multi-agency working.

These trends, along with the growth of national leaders of education, the introduction of National Challenge trusts, the increase in the number of academies and problems with recruiting heads to small schools and faith schools, have brought about the rapid expansion of executive headship.

Two surveys – one of local authorities and the other of executive heads – provide the following picture about the current work of executive heads:

- Rural and shire local authorities who have done most to promote executive headship have the greatest number of executive heads.
- In around 9 out of 10 cases, executive heads are responsible for two schools, meaning that relatively few are responsible for three or more schools.
- 95 per cent of the heads were the substantive head of at least one of the schools they were leading, and in 60 per cent of the cases where executive heads were responsible for two schools, they were substantive head of both the schools.
- Just under two-thirds (63 per cent) of the executive heads are leading primary schools and just under one-quarter are leading secondary schools. In the majority of cases (57 per cent) they are also leading other schools from the same phase though in over one-third of cases (35 per cent), the executive headship involves a cross-phase arrangement.
- Just under one-third of executive heads are working within the context of a federation and just over one-third in a looser partnership or collaboration. The executive headship role is undertaken on an interim basis in 17 per cent of cases.
- Respondents aged between 51 and 60 (44 per cent) account for the largest proportion of executive heads, though one-third were aged below 51.
- Executive headteachers on average have over 10 years' experience as a head before becoming an executive head. Nearly three-quarters of those surveyed had been appointed to an executive headship in the previous two years and the median length of time for being in post is just one year.
- Difficulty in recruiting a suitable candidate to be headteacher and the need to improve the performance of a school are the two most commonly cited reasons for the creation of executive head posts; the former reason is more likely to apply to primary schools and the latter to secondary schools.
- The 'opportunity to take on new challenges' was the motivation that was most influential in respondents taking on the role of executive head. A strong sense of moral purpose was also evident from the value executive heads placed on being able to 'influence and improve standards more widely' and the desire 'to give something back to the community'.
- The majority of executive headteachers were approached directly to take on their role, with only 13 per cent formally applying to an advertised post.

The local context and reason(s) a school decided to enter into executive headship determine the scope of an executive head post and the role and range of tasks an executive head undertakes. However, there are features that are common to all contexts that will make it more likely an executive headship will succeed. These include the degree of prior collaboration between the schools, the leadership capacity within the schools, the support of the local authority and/or sponsor and the completion of a due diligence exercise to understand the background and identify the risks in advance of taking up the post.

Executive heads work in a variety of different governance and accountability structures and are, to a degree, selecting, adapting and creating different legal and governance structures to fit their particular circumstances.

Where executive headteachers are the substantive heads of all the schools they are leading, there are usually clear lines of accountability and they have authority to act. Where an executive head is effectively a chief executive officer for a group of schools, or is the substantive head for only some of the schools they lead, they have to rely for their authority on a contract, the pressure of local circumstances (such as a school being in special measures) or the authority that comes from being appointed by an overarching governing body.

Executive headteachers do not lead in isolation and the ways in which they exercise their roles are having a significant impact on other school leaders. In particular, senior leaders have the chance to act up to or assume more senior roles as the head exercises his or her executive responsibilities in other schools. This in turn creates opportunities for middle leaders to move into new roles in their home schools. In addition, many executive headteachers will use members of the senior leadership team at their home school, including leaders with specialist skills such as school business managers and ICT managers, to assist them in the school(s) they are supporting.

Executive heads identify eight skills that are needed to undertake their role:

1. Operating at a more strategic level
2. Getting the balance between standardisation and respecting difference
3. Being even-handed between schools
4. Staying focused on performance
5. Developing and practising interpersonal skills
6. Working closely with governors
7. Communicating effectively
8. Developing personal resilience

These skills provide the basis for developing a job profile for executive heads and mapping out the development support they need. Training should cover strategic, technical, behavioural and interpersonal issues. Executive heads also identified the need for practical support and mentoring and guidance from existing executive heads.

Evidence of the value of executive headship is at this stage indirect rather than direct. However, the practice of executive headship is associated with positive trends in improvements in attainment, school improvement, school leadership and cost-effectiveness.

There are also been a number of challenges, problems and risks involved in developing executive headship. These include:

- the absence of a clear legal framework (which in turn means that the statutory pay and conditions of service framework is limited in how far it can address the issue of remunerating executive headteachers)
- a lack of clarity over the role of executive heads in the inspection system
- tension between the strategic and operational roles of an executive head
- maintaining the confidence of staff and stakeholders, particularly in the early days of executive headship

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- drifting into a new executive headship model, rather than taking time to choose a governance model that is appropriate to the context and circumstances of the parties involved
 - underestimating the risks, including the reputational risk, in taking on another school
 - failing to develop the right relationship with the local authority at a time when the role of local authorities is evolving

Four recommendations would help address these challenges.

First, the post of executive head should be established in education law. Flexibility should be retained so that schools and governors can adapt the arrangements to suit their particular circumstances, given the significance that context plays in defining how each executive headship works in practice.

Thus, rather than trying to define precisely the respective roles of executive heads and heads in legislation, an alternative approach would require governors to designate for every school for which they have responsibility the person with responsibility for a defined set of tasks.

Those schools with a single traditional headteacher would designate their head in respect of all these roles. However, in those scenarios where there was an executive head, the governing body would agree those roles for which the executive head would be responsible and those for which the substantive head or the head of school or deputy head would be held accountable. The arrangements, which should be reviewed at least annually, would also provide a clearer basis for recognising the role of executive heads in the inspection and the remuneration frameworks and for principals of academies when acting as executive heads of maintained schools.

Second, the arrangements for training executive heads should be improved. Programmes should be based on a more strategic approach to development, starting with identifying potential executive leaders early in their career, facilitating the development of their skills, providing advice on strategic and technical issues, supporting them with practical coaching when they assume their first executive headship and enabling them to play a full role as system leaders.

Third, the Department for Education or the National College should produce a guide or toolkit for governors. This would take governors and executive heads through a series of questions based on the reasons and circumstances leading them to consider introducing executive headship to help them determine the appropriate remit of the proposed role and the appropriate governance arrangements.

Fourth, the Department for Education, in association with the National College, should consider commissioning longitudinal research into the impact of executive heads on the school system.

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