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Highly effective partnership working between small schools: West Tyne Church Schools' Collaboration

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Brief description

Three very small rural first schools are federated together under one executive headteacher. They work in close partnership with two other small schools nearby. Carefully managed joint working has secured exciting and very well managed curriculum provision and high achievement.

Overview – the provider's message

'We've chosen to work in close collaboration to provide the children with the best experiences we can. We make optimum use of everyone's expertise with a shared vision. We're not top down; everyone leads in some way. We're small schools with shared big ideas. We're on an exciting journey which has far reaching scope!

Judith Reay, Executive Headteacher



The good practice in detail

Very small schools, often at the heart of rural communities, can feel vulnerable to isolation; to being overstretched with too few people to cover all the bases; to keeping and motivating talented staff; and to closure. Alone, they cannot benefit from economies of scale. Three very small schools in rural Northumberland decided to federate together under one executive headteacher to change this situation, while keeping their separate identities. Two other nearby small schools kept their own headteachers but joined as partners. Altogether, five schools make up the [West Tyne Church Schools' Collaboration](#).

Highly effective strategic governance of the federation

In 1997, the governors of [Herdley Bank School](#) appointed Judith Reay as headteacher. They were pleased with the appointment and were keen to keep Judith, aware that she could easily move on to a larger school. They wanted to continue to provide her with opportunities to develop her career and the school. Accordingly, they encouraged her to work across the three nearby schools and beyond. They supported her in working through the [National College for School Leadership](#) and other networks and she has been a judge in the Teaching Awards. When the opportunities arose she became headteacher of the two other local schools: [Greenhead](#) in 2006 and [Henshaw](#) in 2010. While this might have appeared to be 'letting her go', governors realised that this enabled the school to retain her by increasing the challenge and breadth in her work. Astute governance thereby looked beyond immediate, parochial needs. Close partnership working with the governing bodies of the other small schools and their wider communities was also required. There was much open public discussion of how the schools might share together, what this would mean and how it would work. Consequently there was little opposition and the process led eventually to federation, shared headship and full collaboration.

Leadership factors which enabled change

Strong, visionary leadership enabled the following factors to support successful change.

- The three schools were at a similar development level when entering the federation, meaning that each could offer valid support to the others. They had worked together for a long time, starting with a simple sharing of ideas and expertise and then developing, over years, into the current sophisticated pattern.
- The school improvement partner, or local adviser, is shared across all the schools. She is a key person in providing oversight, challenge and support to all the schools. She closely observed and supported the development of the cluster from its beginnings to its fruition as a formal arrangement.
- Each school has retained their separate governing bodies but governors, while keeping their stake in their individual schools, have always worked well together. They are well informed as the schools share almost all information. The governing bodies and their chairs have learned from each other. Governors visit all the schools – which reduces insularity and widens responsibility. When the time is right the governing bodies may be reduced to one for the whole federation.
- The schools and their staff are used to and enthusiastic about wider networking with schools and organisations beyond the immediate locality. This adds significantly to the schools' work and reduces insularity or fear of exposure to others.
- The headteachers of the two schools in the collaboration but outside the three school federation feel very much a full part of all the shared arrangements. All parties are committed to the collaboration and high levels of trust have been established and maintained.

'We do five different exciting things. We see other children. We love the activities.'

Why does the collaboration work so well?

- The schools share staff, planning, policies, pupil tracking and other resources effectively and achieve high outcomes and rapid progress for pupils at reduced cost. There is a single **improvement plan** for all five schools and a single headteacher's report to governors.
- Each school has its own separate budget but these are dovetailed so that there is one 'bottom line'. The budgets are planned and evaluated together. To facilitate this, a careful system that involves invoicing and transferring money between schools' accounts has been developed. The schools took out a bespoke service level agreement with a local authority school support officer who devised a workable system for making the necessarily complex financial movements. Many economies of scale have been achieved, including the sharing of the headteacher's salary costs, and the release of staff to develop the exciting curriculum and raise standards.



- Because of the rural location, the schools are all several miles distant from each other. But staff are not isolated; they enjoy advanced professional discussion, sometimes face to face but often through video conferencing or Skype.
- The pupils and staff from the three federated schools meet together for one day each week when pupils have access to specialist teaching and learning. Core subject leaders have their preparation, planning and assessment time on this shared day, which ensures continuity and progression across the three schools.

- All five schools in the collaboration meet together periodically for friendship and partnership days. This broadens pupils' horizons. After joint events in the partnership some West Tyne pupils said: 'We do five different exciting things. We see other children. We love the activities. '; 'I started the day with 20 friends and ended the day with 200.'
- Subject leadership and schemes of work are shared consistently across all the schools, through networks in which several staff are involved. Only core subjects retain a coordinator in each school, each of whom works closely with the other coordinators. Expert or specialist teachers in religious education, music, modern foreign languages, PE, art, Latin and the Early Years Foundation Stage are shared across the schools. This is highly cost effective and provides a challenging and diverse curriculum that the schools would find hard to achieve individually. For example in music, pupils attain more than is expected for their age. In a Year 3 and 4 lesson, pupils, playing ukuleles, used a chord sequence effectively to produce a 12 bar blues motif. They were confident to question and explain their work, using some advanced technical vocabulary.
- The schools work in wider partnership with local middle and high schools to ensure a common approach and outcomes for assessment – a portfolio of moderated work is constantly developed across the collaboration and with other first schools.
- Any individual accolade, such as an outstanding inspection report, in one school is clearly seen and understood to be shared across the schools in the federation.
- All stakeholders in the schools feel that the shared arrangements are now sufficiently embedded (albeit constantly developing) to be sustainable in the longer term, even if key personnel were to change.

'I started the day with 20 friends and ended the day with 200.'

Provider background

West Tyne Church Schools' Collaboration is situated in western Northumberland, in the Tyne Valley, close to the border with Cumbria. The proportion of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals is above average.

The three federated schools – [Herdley Bank First School](#), Greenhead Church of England First School and Henshaw Church of England Voluntary Aided First School – have between them about 100 pupils aged from four to nine years. Two other schools – Newbrough Church of England First School and Whitfield Church of England Voluntary Aided First School – complete the partnership and provide for a further 100 children.

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch [here](#).

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