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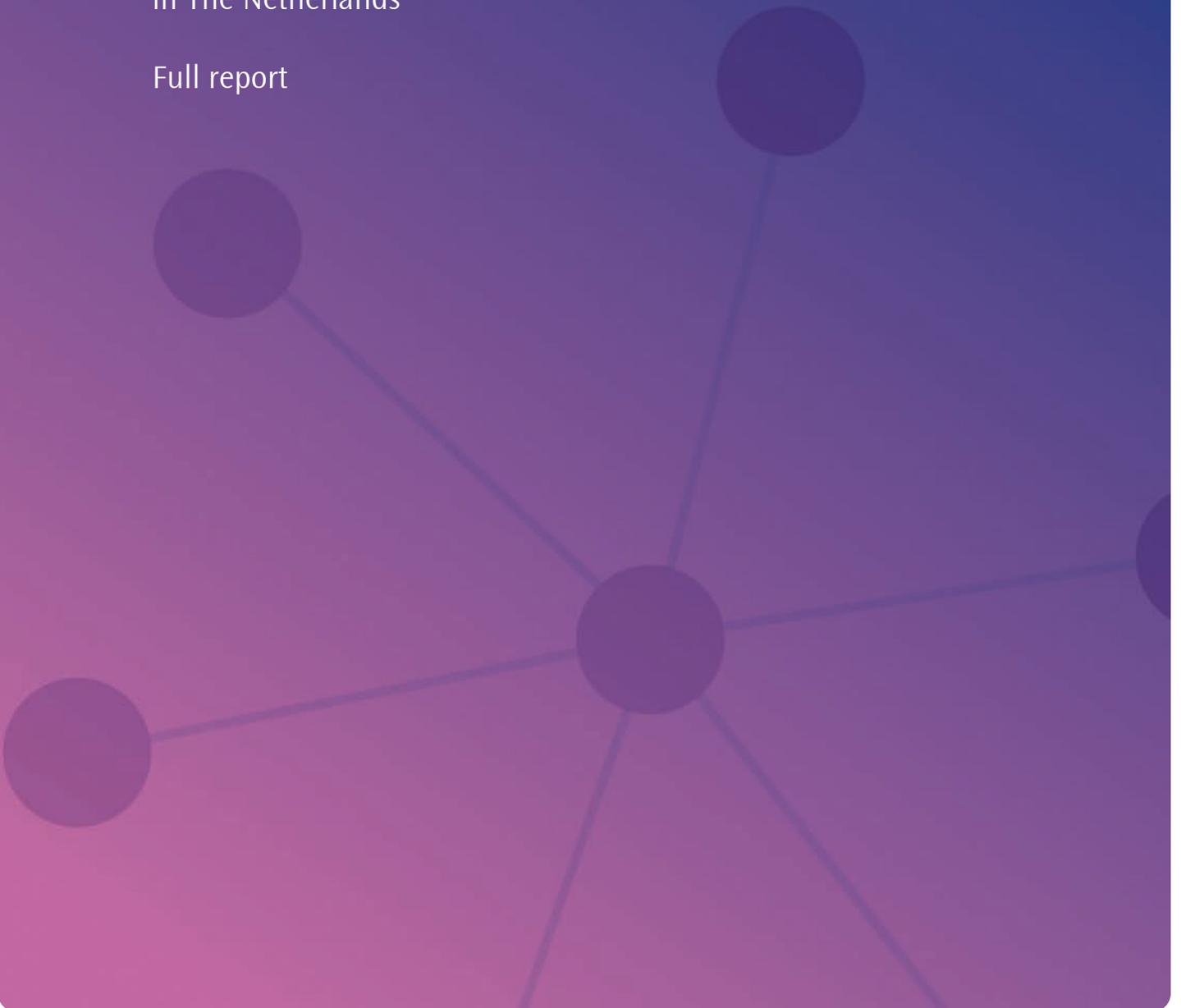


## New Models of Headship

# Federations

Does every primary school need a headteacher?  
Key implications from a study of federations  
in The Netherlands

Full report



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## Executive summary

In our title to this paper, we asked the question: 'Does every primary school need a headteacher?' The findings from this research suggest that the answer is 'no'.

In tackling the important issues of headteacher recruitment and retention, along with demographic changes, it is likely that schools will need to look for alternative ways of addressing these problems. One option is to federate, forming a larger unit across several locations, under the leadership of one headteacher.

The study investigated the leadership of federations, which have been established for some years in The Netherlands, in order to challenge assumptions and stimulate discussions about alternative models of leadership and school organisation in England.

There are considerable and wide-ranging advantages to federating for both schools and school leaders in England, according to the study. The option to federate could rescue schools otherwise likely to close due to falling rolls, and provide a positive option to schools facing longstanding headteacher recruitment issues — reasons which seem particularly pertinent to small and rural schools.

A limited range of Dutch federation models were considered. They varied in size and structure, and the leadership roles within them, as well as presenting information on their structuring, finance and other considerations.

This study identified a number of advantages associated with the Dutch federation model:

- principals have more time to manage their schools
- there is economy of scale and averaging of costs (staffing and resources)
- mobility of staff and resources
- a support and advice network
- joint planning and wider thinking.

However, there may be some disadvantages:

- balancing the needs of one school against those of the federation, ie a successful school can be disadvantaged in terms of staffing; more systems and rules
- a more distant board
- potential problems with a lack of shared vision if the federation is imposed against the will of the schools involved.

In terms of direct personal benefits for heads, the research suggested that federations offer more time for reflection, preparation and organisation as well as less pressure and stress and even the hint of a work-life balance.

Potential barriers for the success of a 'more-school headship' – a head who has taken on responsibility for more than one school – could be a feeling of being less a part of the school, of being busy in both schools and having insufficient time and of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Other issues that arose included coping with initial staff tensions, adapting to change and leading schools with differing cultures.

The key elements that need to be in place in order for a federation to be successful were also identified.

A collective vision and a strong sense of direction and purpose, supported by agreed structures and procedures, which have been formulated and which are owned by all involved, were seen as being crucial to the success of a federation, as was the appointment of the right person for the job. Within

these structures and systems was the need for clear roles and responsibilities, excellent communication strategies and administrative support.

The study did not look at the effectiveness of federations in relation to standards. If alternative models like federations are to be considered in England it is imperative to look not only at the effectiveness of these models in terms of recruitment and falling numbers, but also in terms of pupil learning and the potential benefits and barriers to that learning.

It is important also to remember that the Dutch study is based upon a model of federation that is different in many ways from those currently existing in England. As such, there are implications that would need to be considered in any debate around this area of school leadership, and a number of recommendations for future development and work in this area are made.

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Context of the study

The aim of this study is to investigate the leadership of federations in The Netherlands in order to challenge assumptions and stimulate discussions about alternative models of leadership and school organisation in England. This report will present recommendations and implications for the future development of federations within England.

This study is both timely and relevant as the schools sector is facing serious recruitment and retention problems for teaching and leadership posts. In England, 45 per cent of headteachers, deputy heads and assistant heads are now aged over 50, which poses major problems in securing sufficient numbers of school leaders for the future (Hartle and Thomas, 2003).

The issue of headteacher recruitment and retention, along with demographic changes, declining pupil rolls and overall viability are important issues facing the future of small primary schools in particular. It is likely that schools will need to look for alternative ways to address these problems. One option is for schools to federate, forming a larger unit across several locations, under the leadership of one headteacher.

The concept of system leadership is increasingly seen as a critical element in sustainable system-wide educational reform (Fullan, 2004). As a growing number of school leaders extend their sphere of influence beyond the immediate environment of their own school, there is a developing picture of the various forms that system leadership might take. The well-established federation system within The Netherlands presented the opportunity to gain an alternative, European system leadership perspective. This research also forms part of NCSL's wider remit to research and support alternative models of leadership such as executive headship, co-headship, federated schools and collaborative networks.

In response to these issues, and to inform future practice and policy, this study explores the leadership of primary school federations in The Netherlands and identifies key implications and recommendations for practitioners, policy-makers and other stakeholders. The experiences and perceptions of principals with responsibility for more than one school ('more-school heads', defined in section 2.2) and superintendents (also defined in section 2.2) involved in leading federations are examined. Factors contributing to the success of federations in The Netherlands and potential barriers are also discussed.

## 2 Federation terminology – England and The Netherlands

### 2.1 England

The Education Act 2002 brought legal significance to the term federation within England, and allowed the creation of a single governing body or a joint governing body committee across two or more schools from September 2003 onwards (OPSI, 2005). Additional guidance on the federation of schools was subsequently provided by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in 2003 and 2004 (see DfES, 2005).

Despite the legal interpretation of federations within England, there is a wide range of definitions and titles for the term federation, including syndicate, cluster, network and partnership (Potter, 2004). The DfES definition is 'a group of two or more schools with a formal agreement to work together to raise standards' (DfES, 2005). Although the DfES funds and approves 35 pilot federations in England, there are many more examples of federated schools that range from informal partnerships to single multi-site

schools, some of which have their origins in the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) from the late 1980s, whilst others are rooted in Education Action Zones (EAZs), Leadership Incentive Grant (LIG) collaborations, and families of schools.

In general, federations can be separated into either self-determined federations or support federations. Self-determined federations are based upon voluntary collaboration in which schools share goals and the perception that joint working facilitates the achievement of these. Support federations are characterised by an association between a successful school and one or more struggling schools. Such federations may or may not be permanent arrangements and are often brokered by a local education authority (LEA) or DfES, or both.

Some headteachers in England have taken on the executive responsibility for more than one school. NCSL is currently undertaking research to develop a picture as to what this sort of leadership looks like and this will be reported elsewhere. For the purposes of this report, we refer to the leader with executive powers over more than one school (in England) as the executive head.

## **2.2 The Netherlands**

The definition of a federation in the context of The Netherlands is 'two or more schools which share one board' (Nederlandse Schoolleiders Academie, Berend Redder, personal communication). The average federation in The Netherlands currently comprises 11 schools, with 237 staff members and 2,471 pupils (Nederlandse Schoolleiders Academie, Jan Heijmans, personal communication).

Schools within a Dutch federation are led and managed by principals. Within federations, principals may lead a single school or multiple schools. For the purpose of clarity, in this report the term principal is used for a leader who has responsibility for a single school only, and principals who have taken on responsibility for more than one school are referred to as 'more-school heads'. A federation may also employ an educational professional as a 'superintendent' who is responsible for the strategic overview of operational management within the federation. The largest federation in The Netherlands consists of 85 primary school and is situated in Rotterdam. The federation is led by a chief executive officer and is divided into five clusters with a superintendent leading each cluster (Nederlandse Schoolleiders Academie, Jan Heijmans, personal communication).

Throughout this report we use the Dutch definitions when referring to federations, principals, more-school heads and superintendents.

## **3 Research aims**

The study had the following aims.

1. Seek a European perspective on school system leadership, specifically within federations of small primary schools in The Netherlands.
2. Investigate the structure of federations within The Netherlands.
3. Investigate the roles of leaders within federations in The Netherlands.
4. Consider the key implications and recommendations for this leadership structure for school leadership within the UK.

The aims of the study posed the following research questions:

1. Does every school need a principal? If so, why?
2. What is the role of a principal and superintendent within a federation?
3. What does leadership look like within federations in The Netherlands?
4. What are the key characteristics of successful federations?
5. What are the disadvantages of federations?

## 4 Methodology

The research was undertaken by three headteachers of small primary schools in the UK and one NCSL researcher, who conducted a week's study visit in The Netherlands in November 2004. A key feature of this research was to offer practitioners the opportunity to engage in a collaborative leadership inquiry, with an international dimension (NCSL, 2005).

The study was informed by a previous scoping visit undertaken by NCSL researchers in early September, which involved discussions with several superintendents with responsibility for many schools, plus a school visit and brief interview with the respective superintendent. The study was supported by the Nederlandse Schoolleiders Academie (NSA) (translated into English as 'Dutch Principals' Academy') in Utrecht and Professor Peter Slegers of the University of Amsterdam. NSA subsequently selected and arranged the case studies and interviews for the week's study visit.

A pre-study residential, held at NCSL, provided the opportunity to inform the design and development of the study, in particular the interview schedule. The interview schedule formed the basis for conversations between interviewee and two researchers.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight more-school heads. The more-school heads were selected to ensure they represented leadership responsibility for a minimum of two schools, covering a range of geographical contexts and where possible with 100 or fewer pupils on role. In one interview, an English teacher acted as a translator throughout the interview (see example in section 6.2.3).

In addition, the study included interviews with five superintendents who were responsible for a federation with at least three schools, each of which had a principal or more-school head in post. Four of the superintendents were responsible for federations in which we also interviewed more-school heads.

## 5 School leadership in The Netherlands – an introduction

In order to understand the current school leadership structure within The Netherlands, it is necessary to consider briefly some of the historical context that has shaped the country's education system. For further information, please refer to the section on further reading.

### 5.1 Compulsory education and constitutional rights

In The Netherlands, education starts at the age of 4 and is compulsory from the age of 5 to 16 (Eurydice, 2005). Primary education (*basisonderwijs*) covers the ages 5 to 12.

One of the key features of the Dutch education system, guaranteed under the 1917 Constitution, is the freedom of education, ie the freedom to found schools (freedom of establishment), to organise the teaching in schools (freedom of organisation of teaching) and to determine the principles on which they are based (freedom of conviction) (Eurydice, 2005). The system is unusual because of the right for people to found schools on the basis of their own religious, ideological or educational beliefs, and this has led to almost 70 per cent of Dutch pupils attending privately run schools in 2002 (Eurydice, 2005). Another key characteristic is that public and private schools were placed on an equal state financial footing under the 1917 Constitution.

The freedom to organise teaching means that private schools are free to determine what is taught and how. This freedom is however limited by the qualitative standards set in legislation by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, which exercises overall responsibility and oversees the structure and

funding of the system, inspection, examinations and student support. These standards, which apply to both public and private education, prescribe the subjects to be studied, the attainment targets or examination syllabuses and the context of national examinations, the number of teaching periods per year, the qualifications that teachers are required to have, giving parents and pupils a say in school matters, planning and reporting obligations, and so on (Eurydice, 2005).

## 5.2 Changes in governance

All schools in The Netherlands, both public and private, are governed by a legally recognised school board. The school board is the body responsible for implementing legislation and regulations in schools. Municipal authorities have a dual role as the local authority for all schools in their area (whether publicly or privately run), and as the school board for public-sector schools. The school board of a private school is the board of the church, association or foundation that set it up.

In 1993, the Dutch government committed to a process of decentralisation of administration and management that culminated in the 1998 Education Act. This act encouraged school boards to fuse and a five-year incentive scheme was set up to encourage the administrative pooling of resources. These fused boards became known as federations. The number of school boards dropped from 3,851 in 1991 to 1,914 in 2001-02 as a result of the creation of federations (Eurydice, 2005). Currently, there are approximately 7,000 primary schools in The Netherlands. Of these, approximately 20 per cent (1,400) are still single schools with their own board. The remaining 80 per cent (5,600) are in the situation whereby the board has two or more schools (Nederlandse Schoolleiders Academie, Berend Redder, personal communication). The number of federations with more than 10 schools is still increasing and the number of boards with one school is still slowly dropping (Nederlandse Schoolleiders Academie, Jan Heijmans, personal communication). At present, 30 per cent of boards have one school, 10 per cent are federations with 2-5 schools, 48 per cent are federations with 6-10 schools and 12 per cent of the federations have more than 10 schools (Nederlandse Schoolleiders Academie, Jan Heijmans, personal communication).

The move to greater decentralisation in education created a wide variation in the way that local areas reacted. In some situations, principals made informal partnerships with other local principals. In other situations, outstanding principals might be invited to take on the management of two or more schools (see section 6.3.2.2). Several federations decided to employ an educational professional as superintendent to whom they would delegate the strategic overview of operational management (see section 6.3.3).

As a result, many different models of school governance have developed in The Netherlands, including:

1. Federations of schools with one board and a superintendent
2. Federations of schools with one board, no superintendent and several principals or more-school heads
3. Non-federated schools with one principal who leads one or more schools (a more-school head), with each school having its own board
4. Informal partnerships of principals (and/or more-school heads) pooling expertise
5. A covenant – a more formal agreement between different boards to work together on different projects, in order to share benefits and risks. Well-known covenants commonly involve personnel or ICT issues (Nederlandse Schoolleiders Academie, Jan Heijmans, personal communication)

Detailed descriptions of examples one, two and three can be found in section 6.2.

### **5.3 Other considerations**

It is important to note that schools in The Netherlands are staffed by a high proportion of part-time teachers. The 2001 Working Hours (Adjustment) Act allowed employees to make structural reductions to their working hours to combine work and care. This has implications for a range of issues pertinent to this research, for example the need for strong communication links, which is discussed further in section 6.4.1.

## 6 Research findings

This section explores the findings of the research study visit:

- an outline of the financial arrangements for Dutch federations
- presentation of three Dutch federation models, as well as variations to these models
- exploration of the various leadership roles and responsibilities within federations
- a discussion about leadership development in Dutch federations, in terms of leadership characteristics and qualities, as well as professional development
- a description of the key characteristics of the Dutch federations studied as part of this research

The final section discusses the recommendations and advice from interviewees with regard to: setting up a federation, and the benefits and barriers to federations, as well as discussing other advantages of federations.

### 6.1 Dutch federation funding

The Ministry of Education in The Netherlands allocates individual funding to each school regardless of whether it is part of a federation. The devolved funding is based on the number of pupils in the school (as of the 1 October each year), and is ring-fenced under the following areas: personnel and staffing, materials, and buildings. Schools in some areas of The Netherlands receive additional funding. For example, schools in the Arnhem area receive extra funding for social deprivation, immigrants and asylum seekers.

If a school is not part of a federation, it is the responsibility of the principal or more-school head to set and manage the budget for their school, which is then checked by the controlling board. When a school joins a federation, funding levels are still dependent on pupil numbers, but 20 per cent of the building budget and 2.2 per cent of the staffing budget are devolved to the superintendent overseeing the federation. The remainder of the budget will continue to be the responsibility of the principal or more-school head for each school. The federation's 20 per cent building budget from each school is used to undertake the maintenance of all school buildings within the federation. There is a mandate to superintendents with regard to the allocation of funds across the schools within the federation. The funding is disseminated to the schools according to pupil weighting. The 2.2 per cent staffing budget from each school is used to fund the superintendent's salary (and others if appropriate, eg assistant superintendent). This level of funding may vary between federations. Another fund is available through the federation to cover maternity and sick leave.

Schools within a federation can also bid for additional money (eg for staff training). The principal or more-school head must formulate a school improvement plan and present a case to the superintendent for funding to carry out the initiative. The superintendent then decides if this is viable. Superintendents also meet with principals and more-school heads to discuss the financial needs of individual schools.

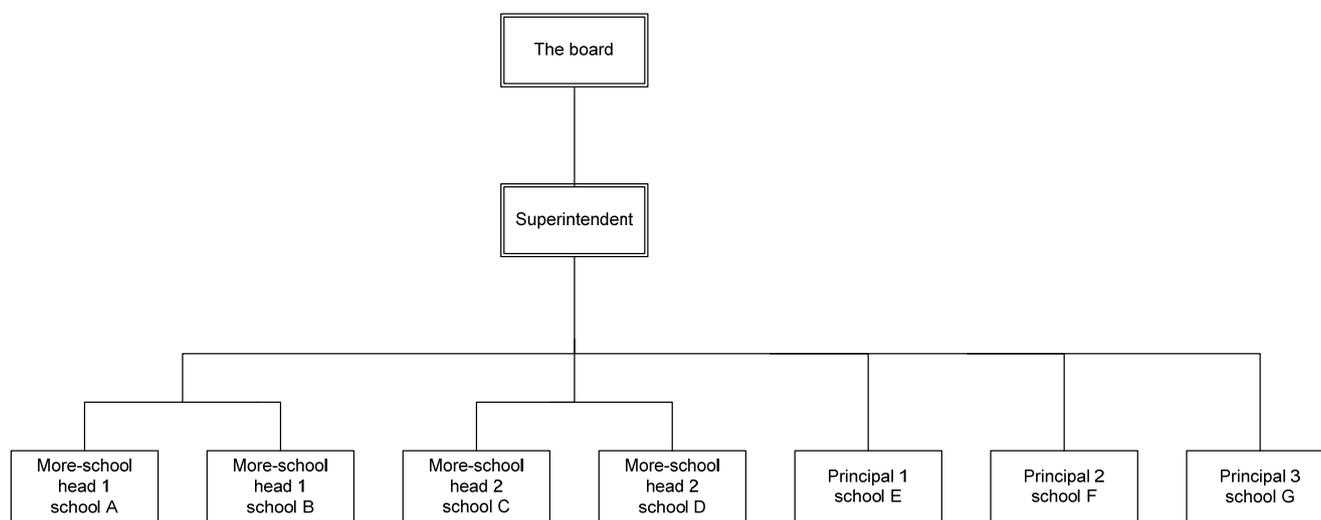
### 6.2 Federation models

A variety of models and structures exist within The Netherlands' federation system. The following sections explore a limited but representative range of models. This section also outlines interviewee's reasons as to why schools federated.

## 6 2.1 Example 1: federation with one board and a superintendent

The federation illustrated in example 1 (see Figure 1) was established in 1998 and has been successfully running and developing since then. There are seven schools within the federation that are within a 30km radius of the large town of Zwolle. There are five local directors (principals or more-school heads) within the federation, which also has a central director or superintendent. Within the federation, two schools (A and B - with 115 and 50-60 pupils respectively) are led by more-school head 1. Another two schools (C and D - with 115 and 62 pupils respectively), are overseen by more-school head 2. The remaining schools (E, F and G - with 300, 260 and 250 pupils respectively) in the federation are led by single-school principals (principals 1, 2 and 3). The superintendent and the two more-school heads were interviewed.

**Figure 1: Federation with one board and a superintendent**



Prior to the federation being established, each school (single location) had its own board. However, it became increasingly difficult to recruit governors from the immediate locality. The central board then appointed a central director (or superintendent) as a professional manager. The superintendent is responsible for the strategic overview of operational management within the federation, including a considerable amount of financial management.

The central board is responsible for appointing a superintendent. The funding for this post and that of the staff bureau (defined in section 6.2.1.1) comes from financial contributions made from each school within the federation (see section 6.1, 'funding'). The central board consists of representatives from several schools and the local community (who are not necessarily educational professionals). The board must have a minimum of seven people including a chairman, treasurer and secretary. Unlike in England, board members do not need to represent a specific interest group (eg church).

The central board is the official face of the federation. Its roles and responsibilities include:

- correspondence with government
- communication with school inspectors
- long-term federation strategy including a strategic plan
- staffing issues
- accountability for the effective running of the federation

The superintendent described his role as “the central director for seven schools” and remarked that he is “accountable to the central board for the running of the schools in the federation.” The function of the superintendent is to develop a global strategy and vision for the federation in collaboration with the schools, and write a four-year plan for the federation in consultation with the principals and more-school heads. This covers education, finance, staffing, buildings and community issues. The superintendent reports both verbally and with a written report to the central board once a month about the progress of the federation in relation to this plan. This always includes a financial report. There is also an annual report on the personnel status (recruitment, sickness) of schools within the federation. The superintendent can access and monitor the budget status of each school within the federation from a central office computer. The superintendent also represents the board, both internally within the federation and with external agencies.

The superintendent has little involvement with the staff in individual schools, apart from the principal or more-school head. In this federation, the superintendent is responsible for recruiting headteachers for the federation in consultation with the central board. It is also the superintendent’s responsibility to ensure that the principals and more-school heads have time each month to discuss leadership issues and problems. One day each month the superintendent meets formally with the principals and more-school heads of the seven schools. The superintendent also meets once a month with four other superintendents to discuss leadership issues and share experiences.

When the federation was first set up, the superintendent spent a lot of time working with the principals and more-school heads to set up systems and structures. Now the model runs successfully he has more time to engage in other projects such as mentoring new teachers and a new financial initiative termed ‘lump sum payment’.

Schools within a federation are led and managed by principals or more-school heads (see section 2.2 for terminology). Principals and more-school heads are responsible for the strategic management and leadership of the schools within the federation and for appointing staff within their schools.

All principals, more-school heads and teachers are funded by the government but employed by the board. However, principals and more-school heads do not report directly to the federation board on educational standards within their school. They report to the superintendent (unless there is no superintendent).

In some schools led by a more-school head, a specific teacher may take on the role of location leader. The location leader is the daily contact point for parents and staff in the absence of the more-school head. In such schools, the location leader may have extra responsibility to support the more-school head in maintaining and raising standards. They often have designated time to assist with the management of the school. In some cases, location leaders decide on the deployment of staff.

### **6.2.1.1 Variations to this model**

Typically, a federation will have one superintendent, with some administrative support such as a full-time secretary. In some larger federations, however, two superintendents may be employed, or an assistant superintendent may support the superintendent. In The Netherlands, 71 per cent of federations have one superintendent, 24 per cent have two, 4 per cent have three and 1 per cent have more than four superintendents (Nederlandse Schoolleiders Academie, Jan Heijmans, personal communication). There may also be a staff bureau, made up of other professionals supporting the superintendent, either on a full-time or part-time basis, who may have specific responsibility for finance, personnel and buildings.

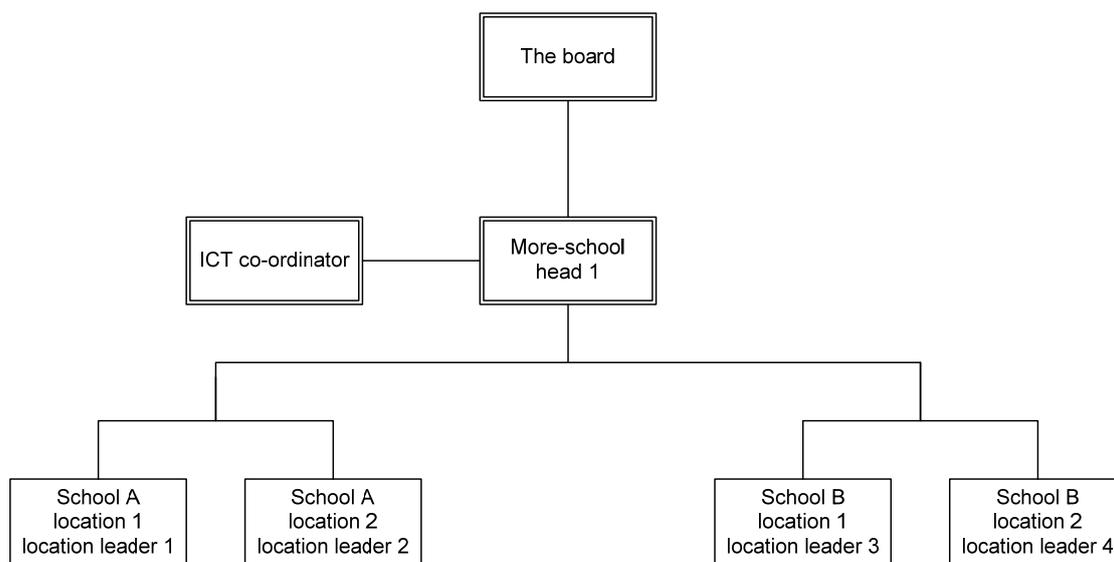
One federation visited as part of this study consisted of 18 primary schools (including one special and two schools for pupils with physical disabilities), and three secondary schools. In this model, there are two superintendents – one for the primary schools and another for the secondary schools. The board comprises five people, and there is also a staff bureau which includes a chair, a secretary, and two assistants each for the areas of buildings, personnel and finance, who support the principals and more-school heads.

In all the federations studied as part of this research, none of the superintendents were involved in issues directly related to learning and teaching. However, this was an area highlighted for development, and all the superintendents commented that they were intending to appoint additional professionals to take specific responsibility for learning and teaching across the federation. In one of the federations visited, the assistant superintendent's role was to cover teaching and learning, which involved regular visits into schools at appropriate times. For example, the assistant superintendent supports the principal and may spend two days a week in school if it is going through an inspection.

## 6.2.2 Example 2: federation with one board without a superintendent

In example 2, illustrated in Figure 2, the federation is led by a more-school head. The federation was deemed too small to merit employing a superintendent. There are two public schools in this federation, each with two locations. There are four location leaders deployed to each of the four localities, overseen by the more-school head who reports to a central board.

**Figure 2: Federation with one board without a superintendent but overseen by a more-school head**



The more-school head was interviewed. He took on this role for school A, with two locations and 365 pupils, in 2001. These schools are five minutes' drive apart and have the same name. In October 2004, one month before the study visit, he took on another nearby school (school B, with approximately 240 pupils) with two locations when the principal retired.

The board is made up of elected volunteers and it is their responsibility to provide financial reports for the federation to the municipal authorities. The more-school head's role is concerned with leadership whilst the board's role covers management, and they meet together every six weeks. The board has eight hours per week of secretarial time, whilst the more-school head does not receive any secretarial support.

The board is responsible for the budget concerned with improvements to the school buildings, which is delegated to the location leaders. The budget for building repairs is managed by the more-school head, who makes decisions in consultation with the location leaders. The more-school head also manages the budget with regard to curriculum, whilst the location leaders manage the budget for materials and consumables.

The more-school head describes his role as giving responsibility in school to the location leaders and being there to support, inspire and encourage them. It is also the responsibility of the more-school head to submit a four-year plan to the board and report on achievements. As part of his job description, he is also responsible for policy preparation and implementation. To help with his professional development, he has undertaken a training course for superintendents. Communication is seen as an important part of his role. For example, he hosts a monthly assembly with parents, an annual parents' evening and a Christmas dinner evening with staff, parents and pupils.

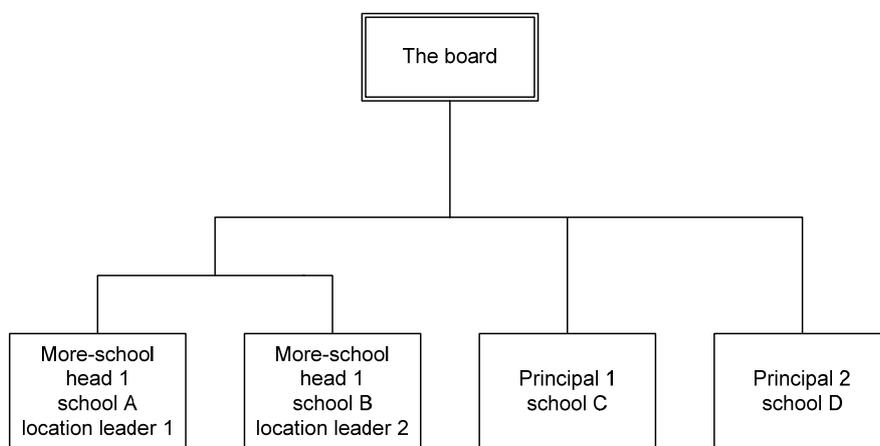
The location leaders are the first point of contact in their school location. They are also responsible for carrying out pupil administration tasks, for example authorising absences. They play an important role in communication for their location, for example writing newsletters and meeting with parents and prospective pupils' parents. The location leader is also responsible for the teachers' annual performance review, which involves visiting classrooms.

The teachers are employed by the federation, not just the school in which they work. The more-school head decides on staffing (for example, how many staff are required and their roles), whereas the location leaders decide on actual deployment. See section 6.3.3 for further information on the role of location leaders.

### 6.2.2.1 Variations to this model

In another model, illustrated in Figure 3, four schools federated with one more-school head (with a location leader in each of the two schools) and two principals. However, there was no superintendent or principal or more-school head overseeing the federation. The more-school head was interviewed. In this example the directive to federate came directly from above and the more-school head remarked that “the schools did not want to federate and there was quite a lot of opposition from the parents. When decisions are forced from the top they do not work. The [...] schools had nothing really in common.”

**Figure 3: Federation with one board, without being overseen by a superintendent or more-school head**



### 6.2.3 Example 3: clustering and schools in the process of federating

The third example, illustrated in Figure 4, is a problem-driven and ad hoc example of a cluster of schools in the process of joining a larger federation. In this example, four schools, each with its own board, have clustered together. However, early in 2005 (after this study was undertaken), the four schools will join a larger federation of 28 schools (with a superintendent) centred on the large town of Zwolle. The 28 schools will federate because they are in four surrounding municipal authorities. More-school head 1 remarked that “there is not really a choice. If they are a private school eg Christian or Muslim they can decide who to federate with.”

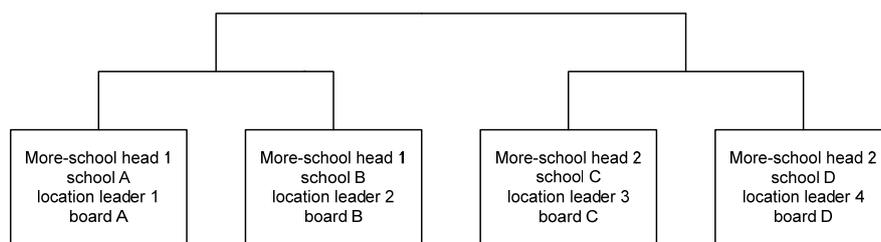
More-school head 1 originally ended up leading all four schools in the cluster as a temporary, emergency solution following illness, death or retirement of principals, a situation he describes as “not ideal”. He appointed a deputy or location leader in each school, coaching and briefing them to lead each school in

his absence (he later remarked that “such a set-up would be more effective than running two schools with no deputies”). Subsequently, a deputy in one of the schools was appointed to lead two of the four schools, leaving more-school head 1 with the remaining two schools (see Figure 4).

When more-school head 1 took on four schools, the staff of the school he was in originally did not like the arrangement. However, staff of the school with problems (having lost their principal) were grateful to receive his help. A teacher also remarked that “it still causes some problems when he isn’t at the school because a teacher has to answer the phone or field queries from parents and visitors, as well as teaching a class at the same time. This isn’t a good system but someone has to do it and they are not paid. It would be better to have a deputy that is paid extra and given some time out of the classroom.”

Currently, more-school head 1 oversees the cluster of four schools, supporting the other more-school head. Each more-school head is responsible for managing and leading their two respective schools, which also includes managing the budgets. All four schools have their own identity, created by the school’s location, social area etc and more-school head 1 remarked that “this will not be lost when the schools federate”.

**Figure 4: Cluster with four schools, each with its own board**



## 6.2.4 Reasons for federating

The following reasons for federating were identified by interviewees:

- difficulties in recruiting leaders
- principal’s retirement or sickness
- more time for educational leadership at the school level
- difficulties in finding professionals to represent the board
- reducing financial and personnel risks to schools by the averaging of costs and resources
- changes in government policy encouraging federations to be set up
- falling rolls
- threatened school closures

When asked if finance was a major incentive to federate in The Netherlands, one more-school head commented that “money is an important part of it, but we also want better schools with happy children. We want a good headteacher and if teaching, then not a good headteacher” (meaning that if a head is teaching, they are not as effective at leading).

## 6.3 Leadership roles and responsibilities within federations

This section explores the various leadership roles and responsibilities within federations in The Netherlands, as well as considering leadership development within federations.

### 6.3.1 Role of the superintendent

The five superintendents interviewed in this study were all very experienced leaders. All but one had previously been a school principal, whilst the other came from an academic position within a university. One ex-principal had initially been employed as a project manager overseeing the development of the federation, and had subsequently been offered the post of superintendent.

The role and responsibilities of the superintendent included the following:

- controlling and allocating the federation budget (see section 6.1, 'funding')
- setting the strategic vision for the federation, in collaboration with the schools in the federation
- writing the strategic plan for the federation, in conjunction with the board and more-school heads or principals. This plan covers the targets and objectives of the federation for the next four years
- overseeing buildings and the maintenance of schools
- developing and implementing policy
- achieving school improvement within the federation
- following the pedagogical instructions of the government, for example to discuss the reports of the inspectors of education with schools
- co-ordinating the self-evaluation processes across the federation
- reporting to the central board
- representing the board or federation at official meetings and public engagements
- making staffing decisions with regard to principals and more-school heads and well as deciding the budget for the number of teachers for each school and on occasion staff disputes and dismissals

Generally, the superintendent meets with the principals and more-school heads within a federation either once a month or every six months to discuss issues currently affecting the federation. A less formal part of the superintendent's role is the leadership development of principals and more-school heads. Several of the more-school heads interviewed remarked that they received a lot of support from the superintendent. This support appears to be very important in difficult circumstances, for example the dismissal of a teacher.

The frequency with which superintendents visited schools varied across the different federations studied – many only got into school once a year, whilst some managed to visit every six weeks or so. The purpose of these visits was usually to discuss with the principal (or more-school head) any issues affecting the school, as well as meeting with teachers, thereby gaining a deeper understanding of learning across the federation. One of the superintendents explained:

*There needs to be close examination of where we are and [where we are] going in the direction of learning. We try not to get schools to do lots of things all at once. We try with a few schools to implement new ideas and when they are working we invite other schools to come and see good practice.*  
(Superintendent)

A range of opportunities exists for superintendents to become involved in new initiatives. For example, one superintendent works with the teacher-training institutions to identify new teachers for his schools and organises induction training and support. Another superintendent remarked that it "can be a lonely job", and therefore involvement in superintendent networks offers opportunities to engage in regular discussion with colleagues in similar roles.

## **6.3.2 Role of the principal within a federation or cluster**

### **6.3.2.1 Principal with a single school**

The role and responsibilities of the principal (single school) includes the following:

- educational leadership within the school for which they have responsibility
- running the school they are responsible for
- monitoring the quality of learning and teaching
- administration
- continuous professional development (CPD) and staff development (including coaching other members of staff)
- assisting in the recruitment of staff
- contributing to decisions regarding buildings and maintenance
- pastoral care
- community liaison
- teaching commitment
- providing progress reports on learning in the school for the federation and government

### **6.3.2.2 Principal with multiple schools - more-school head**

The roles and responsibilities of the more-school head includes most of the points outlined in the previous section, but for multiple schools as opposed to a single school. More-school heads actively delegate roles and areas of responsibility to other members of staff, giving them power to act with authority in their absence. Typically the more-school heads interviewed did not have a teaching commitment (unlike principals leading just one school). Many spoke of the advantages of their non-teaching role whilst admitting that they missed teaching (see section 6.3.2.3).

When questioned about deployment of their time, principals and more-school heads in The Netherlands proved to have a surprisingly large administrative role, some admitting spending up to 50 per cent of their time on administration. Very few more-school heads interviewed had any administrative support or a school secretary.

Several of the more-school heads were very experienced principals who had been asked to take on additional schools. The reason for gaining an additional school was usually because of a problem, for example where another principal had been on long-term sick leave. One of the more-school heads had applied for an advertised vacancy. Another more-school head, with no previous experience as a principal, came from a secondary school background and was therefore unable to teach within the primary federation.

Salaries of principals in The Netherlands are based on pupil numbers. A more-school head is paid according to the combined pupil roll across schools. Superintendents are paid considerably more than this.

### **6.3.2.3 Advantages and disadvantages of being a more-school head**

As part of the interviews, questions were asked about the possible advantages and disadvantages of being a more-school head (compared with a principal of a single school). The following were discussed.

#### **Advantages**

##### ***More time to lead***

All the more-school heads interviewed felt that they had more time to concentrate on leading. For example, comments included: "I have more time to concentrate on the job of leading rather than leading and trying to teach – this is much better" and "[I'm] not doing two jobs" [teaching and leading]. Several more-school heads commented that when they were principal of a single school they did not have time to do the job properly, as they spent a lot of time teaching and just two days a week on leadership and management. As more-school heads, they have time to focus on leadership and management. One interviewee also felt this made their role clearer.

However, one interviewee, previously a principal of a single school, found that the distribution of his work as a more-school head had made little difference in terms of the time he was able to allocate to leadership. As a principal, he had a teaching commitment of two days, and spent the remaining three days in a leadership role. As the more-school head, he now spends three days leading one school, and two days leading a second school.

##### ***More prepared***

One more-school head commented that he was previously "running and not always keeping up", whereas now he has "more time to think about things and is more prepared". Two more-school heads also remarked that this has health benefits in terms of feeling less tired and more relaxed.

##### ***Transferability of skills***

One interviewee remarked that there is transferability of skills and jobs from one school to the other which means a reduced workload.

##### ***Detachment benefits***

Detachment from staff may also be advantageous in certain situations. One interviewee commented that by not having a teaching commitment he was more detached from the team, which made it easier to deal with any potential staffing problems.

##### ***Benefits to other staff through distributed leadership***

There may be advantages to other members of staff through distributed leadership. It was apparent from the interviews that more-school heads gave other staff more responsibility, which in turn gave them confidence to follow their own approach.

##### ***A sense of direction for some schools***

One interviewee remarked that a school previously without a principal may regain a sense of direction and identity when they are subsequently led by a more-school head.

##### ***Financial implications - reduced costs and redundancy risk***

One interviewee commented that employing a more-school head has reduced costs because the authority is paying one principal rather than two. Another interviewee also remarked that there is a reduced risk of redundancy for a more-school head.

## **Disadvantages**

### ***Initial tensions with staff***

Two of the more-school heads commented that there were also some initial tensions with teaching staff. Some teachers were worried about losing the head “they thought that they were losing 50 per cent of a headteacher”, yet the same head went on to say that “after a couple of months, everyone could see the benefits and felt positive.”

### ***No longer teaching***

When asked about the initial change from being a principal of one school to a more-school head, many of the more-school heads remarked that they were concerned about no longer teaching, and losing contact with the children. However, once in post this was less of an issue. Two of the interviewees maintained contact by sustaining a small teaching commitment or providing cover (for a couple of hours a week), eg, “I try to keep contact with the children by carrying out cover when staff are absent or give a music lesson or perhaps read to the younger children.”

### ***More remote***

One more-school head also felt he had a decreasing influence on what is happening in the classroom because the teachers do not see him everyday. Some interviewees also mentioned feeling a lesser part of the school, particularly if they miss whole-school gatherings when they are elsewhere. One more-school head remarked: “I see the children much less and I sit at a computer more.”

One more-school head remarked that “each school deserves its own headteacher. If each school does not have its own headteacher there is no one to be as passionate about the school and fight for the cause. You become less emotional. It’s less my school, more business.”

### ***Busy in both schools***

One interviewee remarked that a disadvantage of being a more-school head was that they were now busy in both schools, and were invariably “in the wrong place at the wrong time.” Indeed many of the more-school heads commented that they had insufficient time to fulfil the role properly. Another remarked that “it costs time to let other people do more”, describing a situation when he had watched other staff carry out tasks less efficiently than he would have done himself.

### ***Different schools, different cultures and issues***

There may also be problems when a principal takes on another school with different issues to the first school. A couple of interviewees spoke of the potential difficulties of managing schools with two (or more) differing identities, as there may be a conflict of cultures. The principal may need to adapt to change and may not feel the same for both schools, preferring one school to the other. Different leadership in different schools may result in a burnout issue for the more-school head.

## **6.3.2.4 Changing policy**

Some federations in The Netherlands are now starting to make it policy for a principal to lead two schools (Nederlandse Schoolleiders Academie, Berend Redder, personal communication). One more-school head remarked that the effectiveness of such an arrangement may depend on pupil numbers across the schools, ie if there are “more than 250 pupils then it doesn’t work.” Currently, if a school exceeds a certain size (400 pupils for primary) then it has one principal without responsibility for another school. One more-school head commented that pupil numbers are not the key to how many schools a head could run – it is more the numbers of staff, suggesting that “20 is the maximum number of staff that one leader can effectively work with.” Other interviewees remarked that it was also dependent upon whether deputies or location leaders were appointed (see section 6.3.3).

### **6.3.3 Role of location leaders**

In some federations (or clusters), location leaders are appointed to deputise in the absence of the more-school head. The role and responsibilities of the location leader include the following:

- first point of contact for parents, pupils and staff
- member of the school management team
- contributing to the educational policy of the school
- staff work allocation and target-setting as well as appraisal
- day-to-day control of financial expenditure

Location leaders are often the daily contact point for the parents and therefore need to have highly developed leadership and communication skills to be able to deal with incidents and possible complaints from parents. All the more-school heads were confident that their staff were able to manage and deal with issues that arose, but would always make themselves available if the issue was of a serious nature. In some cases, location leaders were teachers who had previously held more senior posts, for example one location leader had previously been a principal.

Currently in The Netherlands there are no differential salary scales for teachers to recognise additional skills and responsibilities, although there may be a bonus payment for leadership roles. Location leaders are not necessarily given additional pay for their deputising role. The work may be allocated as a task allocation part of their job role.

#### **Task allocation**

As part of their job description, each teacher in The Netherlands is allocated a number of tasks within the school, which form a certain proportion of their time. All full-time teachers are required to work 1,659 hours a year. Their time is split as follows: 920 contact hours with children; 400 hours for planning, preparation and assessment; and 116 hours for working with documentation. This leaves 200 hours for the other tasks that were shared amongst staff (ie ICT, library, sport, pastoral care etc). Tasks are allocated and decided at staff meetings. Tasks are considered to be part of the job rather than a paid extra. Task allocation can allow staff to develop new areas of expertise and interest, but one of the more-school heads remarked that it can also lead to people being dissatisfied with their allocation and encouraged clock-watching.

### **6.3.4 Leadership development**

#### **6.3.4.1 Characteristics and qualities of leaders**

All interviewees expressed the opinion that the success or failure of the federation was dependent upon the leadership characteristics of the principals, more-school heads and superintendents.

The leadership styles of more-school heads varied considerably within the federations studied. In some cases, the more-school heads distributed the leadership role and empowered location leaders to be the face of the school. In other cases, the more-school heads had a more direct leadership style and a visible presence within the school. There was a sense that many were forward-thinking and wanted to develop the concept of working together to move the schools forward.

All of the more-school heads spoke passionately about teaching and learning and many showed an obvious commitment to developing staff in their schools. Coaching appears to be an important

leadership development area within the Dutch education system. Many of the more-school heads and superintendents interviewed employ a consultant coach to assist in developing their personal strengths and the leadership of their schools and federations. The coach is not necessarily from an educational background, for example one was a naval officer. The more-school heads in turn acted as coaches for other members of staff.

The more-school heads and superintendents interviewed were clearly dynamic, charismatic and dedicated individuals who were committed to providing the highest quality education for the pupils in their schools or federations. These individuals were innovative leaders who were not afraid to take risks. They each had a clear vision for their organisation, and a drive and determination to improve standards and the effectiveness within them. In all the schools, the more-school heads spoke with passion and energy about their schools and their vision for improvement. When asked about his motivation and love of the job, one of the more-school heads replied: "I do it for the children".

### **6.3.4.2 Developing leadership and continuous professional development**

The more-school heads and superintendents interviewed recognised the need both to keep abreast of leadership developments and undertake personal professional development. They felt it was important to have structured time to reflect and focus on leadership and its impact on vision, values, strategic direction and learning. They valued opportunities to develop personal and interpersonal skills to a higher level. Time spent with colleagues to discuss issues and problems was also greatly appreciated.

The superintendent interviewees mentioned that they undertook training courses and study, had leadership coaches, attended superintendent networks, and met informally with other superintendents. There are also special training courses for superintendents.

More-school heads also undertook a range of professional development, which included the following:

- study, conference attendance and training courses. These courses cover things such as policies and time management
- use of a personal coach - "you have to look for a coach with the appropriate skills for the problems that you are facing"
- supervision from an educational consultant
- on-the-job professional development and learning

Although not asked directly how they felt about the possibility of becoming a superintendent, one more-school head remarked that it was "too far from the children".

Interviewees were also asked what professional development opportunities exist for teachers, particularly in relation to their obtaining a headship, and the following comments were made.

- Teachers may have a personal development plan which is reviewed and revised periodically.
- Some teachers employ a coach. The more-school heads interviewed also commented that they coach teachers.
- Staff may also undertake video training in which they can review their own teaching.
- Some teachers observe each other periodically.
- There is specialist training to become a principal. Historically there was no such training, but this has recently been introduced. The Nederlandse Schoolleiders Academie also gives periodic advice on qualifications for the profession.

The development of a federated network appeared in many cases to provide an element of collegiality and support, although there was evidence to suggest that this was perhaps not as developed as some

interviewees desired. Within most of the federations visited, there are regular meetings and collaboration between principals and superintendents. This is less developed for teachers, although in some federations, subject co-ordinators meet and learn from one another (see section 6.4.1, 'communication'). Some federation plans make specific reference to learning across schools, and this appears to be a potential area for further development. Indeed, several of the more-school heads commented that they would like teachers from their more-schools (or the whole federation) to work together more in the future and possibly hold joint study days. One more-school head describes teachers as "lots of kings and queens in their own islands".

## 6.4 Key characteristics of Dutch federations

The final section describes the key characteristics of the Dutch federations studied as part of this research, and includes discussion of the following areas:

- communication
- vision
- shared commonality across federations
- individual school identity
- geographical issues and the balance of time across schools
- face of the school
- flexibility of staffing and movement of staff
- curriculum and pedagogy

### 6.4.1 Communication

All interviewees discussed the various communication networks across the federation, colleagues within school, parents and pupils. Federations also have formal and informal communication networks, and exchange information in a number of ways. These are outlined in the following sections.

#### Communication across the federation

*To be successful, transparent leadership is vital, both in terms of the superintendents and principals.*  
(Superintendent)

Successful communication within federations was seen to be dependent upon collaboration and teamwork from the outset. Transparent and open communication with staff was seen to be essential in the formation of a federation because "there will be lots of worries." All interviewees articulated the need for the federation structure to be well-planned, with options considered and communicated to all relevant bodies and staff. The need for good relations with the board was also seen to be essential if a federation is to operate successfully. Superintendents meet and report to the board regularly to maintain communication.

Superintendents meet regularly with the principals and more-school heads in the federations, typically once a month or every six weeks. In this meeting, they discuss leadership, management and professional development, as well as issues affecting the federation and policies. In one federation, they have started to develop this more and are looking at teacher competencies.

The superintendent also visits the principals or more-school heads once a month or every six weeks (although this can vary from once a year to once a week) to discuss issues relating to leadership and school improvement. The superintendent and principals or more-school heads also have email and telephone contact with one another. In federations with additional staff, the assistant superintendent may also visit schools as and when required. One-to-one meetings between the superintendent and the

principal or more-school head may also be held to discuss individual school problems regarding staff, parents or children.

Liaison and collaboration between schools within a federation appear to vary amongst federations, and these were identified by some interviewees as potential areas for development. In some cases there were clear examples of collaboration and liaison: for example, one federation hosted an education day where all schools were involved in workshops and demonstrations. A couple of interviewees also mentioned cross-federation liaison of co-ordinators for ICT, special needs and teacher coaching. These co-ordinators meet their counterparts from other schools in the federation, for both planning and support, several times a year or monthly. Another interviewee also mentioned that newly qualified teachers from the federation meet together three times a year.

Superintendents also meet with superintendents from other federations four or five times a year to “share problems” and discuss new developments.

### **Communication with colleagues, parents and pupils**

The need for effective communication is particularly important in schools led by a more-school head. Because they are spread across sites, it is important that they articulate clearly their whereabouts to colleagues and parents so they are contactable at all times. The school guide (produced annually and sent to all parents) and newsletters are used to inform colleagues and parents of the more-school head's whereabouts and contact details. Communication with colleagues is mainly through regular meetings with teachers and other staff, typically once a week or fortnightly. More-school heads also talk to teachers daily and many visit classrooms frequently.

A noteworthy feature of schools in The Netherlands is the substantial number of part-time teaching staff. To keep all staff fully informed, more-school heads have developed a range of effective communication strategies. These systems included:

- newsletters in pigeon-holes or posted to teachers at home
- emails
- partner-teachers taking responsibility for passing on messages to their job-share partner
- compulsory evening staff meetings every three weeks, which all staff must attend

All interviewees felt communication with parents was also important. The main written communication with parents is through a newsletter, which goes out typically every two weeks or monthly. In one school, a calendar is sent to each family at the beginning of the year detailing dates for the year. In one school led by a more-school head, a novel diary of pupils' learning is on display at all times for parents to read. All more-school heads spoke with parents over the phone and met with them occasionally. Schools hold parents' evenings to discuss children's progress and may also host parents' information evenings. For example, in one school such meetings are held twice a year to discuss the vision and future of the school.

Various parents' groups were also mentioned by the more-school heads interviewed, including the following:

- parent and head group, where the head can engage in dialogue with parents to help solve problems and listen to parents' views
- parent and teacher group, where parents meet with teachers to engage in dialogue and help to solve problems, and teachers listen to parents' views. This occurs once a week in one school
- parent policy group, where a group of parents checks that the school has the policies it should and that they fulfil their intended functions

- parent social group, where parents meet together to organise social events for the children. They may also raise funds for the school
- a parent from each school sits on a federation parent council

Superintendents generally only have contact with parents if they are not satisfied with the way in which a situation has been handled in school. Superintendents may also consult parents. For example, in one federation parents were sent questionnaires asking for their opinion on the way the federation (and schools) operate.

The more-school heads do not have direct contact with the children unless they have a teaching commitment. If there are any particular concerns, the head or superintendent would go through this with the class teacher. The more-school heads interviewed keep in touch with the children by visiting classes and walking round the school. One stressed that he tries to know the names of all the children in his school. It was obvious in all of the schools visited that staff and pupils were comfortable with the more-school head and were used to his or her presence in and around the school.

## 6.4.2 Vision

Interviewees articulated the need for federations to have a strong sense of direction, with shared values and a clear vision in order for them to be successful.

A number of interviewees remarked that there needs to be effective communication to formulate and clearly articulate a shared vision across a federation. For example, in one federation the superintendent, more-school heads and principals work together for two study days to formulate a collegiate vision for the federation and a consensus of agreed practices. The vision for the individual schools within federations is generated by the staff (and sometimes children and parents), with the principal or more-school head taking the lead. There were some excellent illustrations where vision clearly underpinned the philosophy and practices of schools.

### Example of vision

One federation has formulated a collegiate vision entitled “*Samen voor GOUD*” (translated as “Together for GOLD”). The principals, more-school heads and superintendent of the federation worked together for two days to agree this vision.

In translation, this vision means:

G = goed (goed means making the right choices and acting according to standards)

O = open (open communication – internal and external)

U = uitdagend (challenge)

D = dienstbaar (to be a civil servant acting with moral purpose)

Everything within the federation refers back to this vision, and this is referred to in the school guide.

Almost all practitioners were passionate about the vision being discussed and reviewed regularly. The vision for the federation and school is articulated in the annual school guide and the federation’s four-year plan (these are mandatory for all schools and are inspected).

One interviewee commented:

*We have to keep talking about what we do and where we see our vision. Create it with each school (staff) team. Talk about it a lot. Keep asking, "What do we want for this school? Where do we want to be in 10 years?" Discuss it with parents and the board. It might change a little, but (by this stage) the line is already set.*

(More-school head)

One more-school head interviewed did not feel there was a shared vision in his federation, because the federation had been imposed upon them.

### **6.4.3 Shared commonality across federations**

The schools visited in this study were federated because of a shared commonality, for example they were part of the same municipal authority or same faith. There are no federations in The Netherlands with a mix of public and private schools (ie all schools within a federation are either all public schools or all private schools). The need for a shared commonality within the federation was seen to be an important factor in the development and success of the federation. Moreover, this was seen to help in creating a shared vision across the federation. Where the decision to federate had been implemented by the government (ie because the schools are in the same or neighbouring municipal authorities), and the schools involved had little in common, or a history of competition or poor relationships, it was difficult for the federation to be established:

*The directive to federate came directly from the government. The schools did not want to federate and there was quite a lot of opposition from the parents. When decisions are forced from the top they do not work. The three village public schools had nothing really in common.*

(More-school head)

The federations were most successful where there had been considered deliberation, with all parties coming to an agreement on the structure and vision, leading to a sense of ownership. The success of the federation structure is dependent upon all stakeholders being given the opportunity to have their views shared, and trust that their opinions will be noted and where feasible acted upon.

### **6.4.4 Individual school identity**

Despite the need for a shared commonality within federations, practitioners also recognised the need for each school within a federation (or cluster) to maintain its own individual identity:

*Whilst the Federation has a shared vision, every school within the Federation also has a 'local colour' or identity.*

(More-school head)

Several interviewees commented that for parents and children, the identity of their own school was seen to be more important than that of the federation. The individual identity of a school is created by its context (location, social area and local community). School plans take this into account and principals and more-school heads can make choices depending on local needs:

*The schools make their own plans. Each school has its own place in the village, among the community with parents or institutions. They can choose projects they want to do in their own school.*

(Superintendent)

School identity can also be an issue when a principal becomes a more-school head. There can be an initial loss of identity due to the fact that a school no longer has a principal present in the school on a full-time basis. More than one more-school head spoke of school staff, pupils and parents needing time to adjust to losing their principal for part of the week. However, this was generally only an initial issue (as discussed in section 6.3.2.3). Conversely, where schools had been without a principal for long periods of time (for example due to illness) and had gained a more-school head, this was seen to be a positive outcome, as the school not only regained a sense of identity but also a sense of direction and purpose.

### 6.4.5 Geographical issues and the balance of time across sites

Within a federation, a superintendent is generally situated in an office in a central location (not a school), whereas more-school heads tend to have a main base in one of their schools (alternating sites accordingly). There is a range of issues that arise as a result of leading geographically separate schools, and distance is considered to be an important practical factor in federations. More-school heads remarked that distances of less than 10km between schools were preferable as this was considered a “good, workable distance.” A distance of 30km between the schools in a federation was deemed to be a maximum workable distance.

More-school heads agreed that geographical proximity was desirable in order to manage more than one school, and made remarks such as “leading has to be near” and “you have to be near to coach.” Geographical separation and travelling time between school mean there is less time for classroom visits and meeting staff individually. Consequently, there was a perception (made by one interviewee) that as a more-school head they had a decreasing influence on classroom practice. Interestingly, nearly all more-school heads interviewed commented that geographical distance from staff was advantageous when managing personnel issues. However, geographical separation may create a psychological barrier. For example, one more-school head remarked that it created a mental block for some parents.

In order to balance their time across different locations, the majority of more-school heads had established routines and whereabouts on given days. These whereabouts are clearly articulated to colleagues and parents. For example, one more-school head spends Mondays and Wednesdays in school A, and Tuesdays and Thursdays in school B. Friday is alternated between schools A and B. Other more-school heads have more complicated schedules, for example:

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
am	School A	School A	School A	School B	School A
pm	School B	Work for board	Pupils free	School B	X

In some cases, the more-school heads felt that there were difficulties with alternating time across different sites as they were inevitably “in the wrong place at the wrong time.” In the absence of a location leader, classroom teachers are sometimes left to field queries from parents and answer the phone. One more-school head felt that “no problem was so important that it couldn’t wait until tomorrow.” Another interviewee had a clear strategy to avoid such issues arising in his schools. He:

- identified a member of staff as the key contact in school, to ensure parents know who to contact if necessary
- maintained clear communication with parents as to his whereabouts, including full contact details and a mobile phone number

Other potential difficulties in balancing time across schools may arise when a more-school head takes on a new and perhaps more challenging school. For example, the more-school head may wish to spend more time settling the challenging school, thereby reducing the time he or she can spend in the other school(s).

#### **6.4.6 Face of the school**

A number of more-school heads commented that there needs to be a face of the school – someone in charge or deputising in the absence of the more-school head. Some of the schools visited specifically appointed location leaders (see section 6.3.3) to undertake this role, whereas other schools made arrangements for a teacher to undertake the role.

One of the more-school heads remarked that “every location needs someone who is the face of the school – who is visible and can take the responsibility for the location.”

#### **6.4.7 Flexibility of staffing and movement of staff**

In federated schools, staff are employed by the federation rather than the school. However, principals and more-school heads make decisions with regard to who is employed within their schools. Within The Netherlands, the number of teaching staff allocated to a school is dependent on pupil numbers and this is determined by the government (ie for 100 pupils there are five teachers, for 130 pupils there are six teachers and so on).

There may be financial benefits for some schools when staff are employed by a federation rather than individual schools, because staffing costs are averaged across all schools within the federation. Schools with older and more expensive staff have a reduction in staffing costs. The converse applies in schools with younger staff.

Mobility of staff across federations exists as a policy within the federations visited as part of this study. This can be beneficial because it allows greater flexibility to cover problems such as illnesses or curriculum deficiencies. This can be used in a positive way to strengthen a school. A superintendent (or more-school head with responsibility for leading a federation) can make decisions with regard to the deployment of staff across schools within the federation. They can also decide if a teacher is not effective and move them to another school. Most of the time the board must also agree on such decisions. One more-school head, who had trialled the movement of one teacher from one school to another, recalled that “it doesn’t work” because of the individual culture of each school and the attachment of staff to their workplace.

#### **6.4.8 Curriculum and pedagogy**

The main framework of the curriculum in The Netherlands is set by the government. It is the responsibility of the government to inspect the quality of education in schools (each school is regularly inspected every three years) and to comment on what the pupils must have learned by the end of the school year. Local directors (principals and more-school heads) meet with the central director (superintendent) to discuss pedagogy and curriculum. Following discussions with staff in each school, a curriculum is formulated to best meet the needs of the children in that location. Individual schools also decide on teaching methods.

The principals and more-school heads are responsible for ensuring the quality of learning that is taking place in their school(s). However, the superintendent will ask the principal or more-school head to make a report on learning in each school. In some cases, where the principal or more-school head is not a

primary practitioner, they use their middle managers to report on the quality of learning and teaching. In one of the federations, the assistant superintendent goes frequently into schools to talk about pedagogical issues and subjects. He also talks about integral personal policy (an obligatory subject in all primary schools in The Netherlands) – which is how to develop the competencies of teachers and principals.

When asked how they influence learning, more-school heads made the following comments:

- discussions with teachers
- monitoring or inspecting the classroom (annually or twice a year)
- making arrangements for teachers to monitor one another
- discussions with parent councils
- through teaching when covering absent colleagues
- video lesson observations, to help coach and develop teachers

## **6.5 Recommendations and advice from interviewees**

### **6.5.1 Setting up a federation**

As part of the study, interviewees were asked what advice and recommendations they would make with regard to setting up a federation. The following five sections summarise the main discussion points:

1. Commonality, purpose and vision
2. Advice, planning and structure
3. Staffing
4. Communication
5. Specific advice in relation to becoming a more-school head

#### **1. Commonality, purpose and vision:**

- Schools involved in the federation process must want to participate, and all school boards must agree the plans to federate. Improved learning and high-quality education are the key reasons to federate.
- Decide how big you want the federation to be.
- Consider distance – geography is important – the schools must not be too far away from each other.
- “Schools must have something in common – it’s easier then to make it a success” but also let schools have their own identity.
- It is important to have a vision and make decisions about it as a team.

#### **2. Advice, planning and structure:**

- Take time to set up the federation, typically two to three years.
- Have a strong model for the federation structure. Discuss the likely structure of the federation with all parties involved. The key to establishing a strong federation is relationships.
- Have contracts and policies in place before you federate. There is a need to be very clear before you start who will be responsible for what. Establish the financial arrangements, especially if you are to employ a superintendent on a large salary.
- When starting the process of federating, be honest. Describe the advantages and the disadvantages. Take the time to discuss things – ask questions such as: ‘What do you want?’, ‘How does it solve the problem?’, ‘How does it help?’ and ‘What are the financial risks?’

- There is a need to discuss the consequences of federating because many of the issues are emotional rather than practical, for example issues of identity, loss of school board and change of role.
- Seek assistance from professionals with regard to personnel, financial and in-school issues. Seek advice from other organisations who have already federated, for example universities and city governments.
- Identify what the strongest points are in the existing structure, and what needs to be kept.

### **3. Staffing:**

- Determine the structure and range of staff. The ideal situation would be to have a leader in each location with an overall director overseeing this.
- A project manager could also be employed temporarily to effect transition to the federation. This post would cease once the transition had been completed.
- It is an advantage to have one manager (a superintendent) to oversee the federation. Appoint personnel to deal with buildings and management issues.
- Employ experienced local directors (principals or more-school heads) and listen to them. Have regular meetings so there is awareness about what is going on in each school.
- Discuss the competencies of the superintendent and principals (or more-school heads) and what you want from them and make this clear. For example, one interviewee (a superintendent) remarked: “to be a successful federation, the superintendent must be proactive rather than reactive. He must communicate well and seek to convince rather than impose.”

### **4. Communication:**

- The most important thing is to not be isolationist – you have to want to learn from each other. Concentrate on the teaching and learning.
- Try to keep communication lines short and management structures as flat as possible.
- Communication is important – you must inform teachers and communicate with them at all stages in the process.
- Mention leadership. To be successful, transparent leadership is vital, both in terms of the superintendent and the principals or more-school head. Be open and transparent.
- There needs to be parental representation for each location.

### **5. Specific advice in relation to becoming a more-school head:**

- Every school needs attention so at the most as a more-school head you can manage two schools, maybe three if they are small. You need to be at each location two days each week to see most of the teachers and enough of them.
- If you have more than one school, don't teach – concentrate on leadership.
- Don't do everything by yourself.
- There needs to be someone in charge in each school – the face of the school - someone who can act as trouble-shooter with extra time to carry out the necessary duties.
- Administrative support is beneficial.

## 6.5.2 Benefits and barriers to federations

Interviewees were also asked what benefits and barriers there were to federating. The following summarises comments that were made.

### Benefits:

- Principals have more time to manage their schools. It frees principals and more-school heads to carry out their core function and not get bogged down in administration.
- Federations allow economy of scale – a federation can obtain large discounts from suppliers, and sharing costs can cover financial risk. If a school has a problem, the effects of that problem can be lessened because of the larger collective budget.
- There is also economy of scale in terms of staffing – the more schools you have, the greater the number of staff and the more likely you are to have average teacher costs. Hence, there is no need to replace experienced staff with newly qualified purely for financial reasons.
- It allows mobility of staff between schools in the federation and greater flexibility to cover illness and problems.
- Support and advice can be gathered from a range of schools. The more schools there are in a federation, the greater the chance of finding another school with similar issues to discuss ideas with. You can plan many things together, for example improvements and budget.
- Federations encourage people to think wider than just their own school. It encourages solidarity and a quality of community.
- You get to “keep your own identity, be your own boss, keep your own money, but don’t have any of the problems [with managing buildings and budgets, for example]”.

### Barriers:

- The main problem is getting the balance right – what is in it for everyone together and what is in it for individual schools. “One school’s problems can impact on other schools within the federation. If more money has to be channelled into one school, there is less money for the others.”
- Staff mobility means that successful schools can find themselves with reduced staffing.
- Overcoming potential opposition: “at first people didn’t want to spend money on expensive staff [superintendents], they wanted all the money for education to go into schools.”
- There are more structures and rules.
- The board is more distant: “Older teachers regret the loss of relationship with the board, complaining that they are now too distant, never in school.”
- When the federation is implemented from the top down, without the consent of the schools involved, there may be problems and a lack of shared vision.
- Principals who were accustomed to managing their own school and deciding their own targets (they had their own board) have sometimes had problems when they have had to ask a superintendent (or more-school head) for permission.

## 6.5.3 Other advantages of federations

Federations may also offer other advantages, which were not raised directly in the specific interview question asked with regard to this, such as the following.

- There is potential for the movement of pupils between schools for social reasons. For example, in very small primaries it may be beneficial in particular cases (eg single sex) to move children for certain lessons.
- It is clear that federations offer a clear support mechanism for principals and more-school heads. The superintendent plays an important role in this, and there is also support from other principals in the federation. Clusters may be good places for new heads to learn from other heads, under the guidance of a superintendent.
- In terms of system leadership, for superintendents, principals, more-school heads, teachers and parents within a federation structure, there is an opportunity for them to extend their sphere of influence beyond their own school (ie coaching, collaboration, federation representation etc).
- Federations can provide new development opportunities for teachers and principals to aspire to (ie the roles of location leaders, more-school heads and superintendent) which is beneficial in terms of CPD and motivation.
- A federation may be able to protect a school with a falling roll that is on the verge of closing by linking it with another school led by a more-school head.

Section 6.2.3.4 also discusses the advantages and disadvantages of being a more-school head (compared with a principal of a single school).

## 7 Conclusions

In our title to this paper, we asked the question: 'Does every primary school need a headteacher?' Our findings from this research would suggest that the answer is 'no'.

This study suggests there are considerable and wide-ranging advantages to federating for both schools and school leaders in England. The option to federate could rescue schools otherwise likely to close due to falling rolls, and the appointment of an experienced head to a school where recruitment has been a longstanding issue could provide a positive option to temporary headteacher appointments. These reasons would seem particularly pertinent to small and rural schools.

The increasing importance of federations and other forms of collaboration was recognised in the government's 2005 white paper *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All* (HM Government, 2005). This said it expected schools increasingly to choose to work together with other schools to deliver the full range of opportunities that children and young people should be able to access. 'In the primary phase, increased collaboration will be essential if schools are to meet the challenge of falling rolls' it declared.

The implications of Every Child Matters (HM Treasury, 2003) and The Children Act 2004 (Waterman & Fowler, 2004), which will see schools bringing together the services and learning agendas, could arguably be more effectively implemented within schools which offer differing sites and staffing flexibility with a headteacher or executive head who has the capacity and skills to lead such a school.

Potential benefits for schools which federate include opportunities to share resources, staff expertise and workload. Leadership opportunities for staff within federations offers the potential for schools to build capacity and begin to address seriously the issues of succession planning.

This study suggests that there is also a number of direct personal benefits for heads of federations, which would include more time for reflection, and being better prepared and organised as well as less pressure and stress. Some of the heads interviewed suggested they were not as tired as when they had been teaching, as they were leaving school earlier in the day and even hinting at a real life.

Equally, this study outlines the key elements that need to be in place in order for a federation to be successful.

A collective vision and a strong sense of direction and purpose, supported by agreed structures and procedures, which have been formulated and which are owned by all involved, were seen as being crucial to the success of a federation, as was the appointment of the right person for the job. Within these structures and systems was the need for clear roles and responsibilities, excellent communication strategies and administrative support.

A common purpose or reason for establishing a federation was seen as crucial by superintendents and more-school heads within The Netherlands, ideally one that was based on learning rather than on headteacher recruitment or falling numbers. It is worth noting, however, that those schools within The Netherlands that came together as a reaction to a particular crisis (rather than proactive planning) claim that the cynicism and negativity experienced initially quickly disappeared.

The Dutch study suggests that it is important for schools to retain their individual identities despite becoming part of a federation; and that the need for a face in each location as a first point of contact is of the utmost importance. Appropriate funding also needs to be made available.

It is clear from this study that there is a need to build in time for the federation to be planned, established and developed and for decisions to be made about its optimum size and structure, geographical criteria and the potential strengths and weaknesses of the federation.

Clearly, the establishment of federations brings disadvantages as well as advantages and it is important these should not be overlooked. Many of the advantages perceived by some heads were viewed as disadvantages by others, and vice versa. Where some heads found themselves having more time, others felt there was less.

A number of the more-school heads who were interviewed expressed their sadness at losing touch with the children and at their distance in terms of relationships with other staff. For some staff there was anxiety about sharing or losing their headteacher and equally, their schools identity. Staff mobility can potentially result in reduced staffing for successful schools and schools with differing contexts, issues and cultures can prove problematic when federating. Overcoming opposition, more structures and rules and having to ask superintendents for permission to set targets were also seen as disadvantages by some of the more-school heads.

It is important to remember that the Dutch study is based upon a model of federation that is different in many ways from those currently existing in England. As such, there are implications that would need to be considered in any debate around this area of school leadership, and a number of recommendations we would make for future development and work in this area.

## **8 Implications and recommendations**

In March 2005, DfES and the Audit Commission (2005 pp 4) suggested that local education authorities (LEAs) and primary schools faced with falling rolls 'need to take action to ensure they are equipped to deliver the best possible quality of education with the resources available to them.' The report suggests that working together may be one way of tackling the resource issue in the face of reductions in budgets (associated with falling rolls) and proposes three potential strategies, one of which is to federate.

The definition given of a federation (sections 24 and 25 of the Education Act 2002) (OPSI, 2005), is that of a formal arrangement, by which schools share a single governing body but remain separate legal entities in respect of their budget, admissions and performance tables. They are also subject to a separate inspection by Ofsted. Staffing and resources of all the schools within the federation are governed by a single governing body. Despite this clear and concise definition, there appears to be

some confusion and misuse of the term, which will need to be addressed in order to provide clarity and guidance for heads, parents and governors who may be considering this option for their schools.

In the light of this research, if schools are to remain separate legal entities, especially in respect of their budgets and performance tables, this raises a number of issues which need to be considered if federations are to maximise the opportunities they offer for improved learning and leadership, and become a feature of the English education system.

The notion of schools being separate entities concurs with the views of the more-school heads within The Netherlands that schools should retain their individual identities. The federations within The Netherlands (surprisingly) did not appear to have embraced either a collaborative way of working across schools, nor to have a strong focus on learning. Although there is no direct evidence for this, we could hypothesise that retaining the distinct individuality and identity of each school may actually inhibit rather than foster collaboration and networking around learning.

We would argue, therefore, that the need for schools to retain their individual identities within a federation should be explored further and that it may not be either the most effective or practical way forward.

Rather, we would suggest a model where a number of schools could be run as one school with one identity but with several units within it. The leadership of such a school would depend upon size, geographical criteria and financial implications, but could embrace a version of the current executive heads model (see section 2.1), with location leaders (or deputies) in each unit. This model would offer greater continuity and consistency across and within the units in terms of communication, curriculum, vision and direction. Flexible staffing across the federation, where staff are appointed to the school rather than the individual units, would encourage greater sharing of expertise, knowledge and understanding. It would also provide ideal opportunities for coaching, mentoring and leadership development. Joint accountability for pupil performance and the adoption of a common moral ambition for all pupils within a federation would foster the need for collaboration and networking both within the federation and across the school's wider communities.

Units of schools, supporting and collaborating with each other, would also offer the chance for schools to develop alongside each other, at their own pace, irrespective of their differing contexts and stages of development. Those who may be less successful would have the time to stand back and breathe a little, consolidating progress already made, whilst other schools might opt to trial new initiatives and implement new strategies on their behalf.

This model reflects the main rationale of federation in England, as outlined by DfES and the Audit Commission (2005), which identified the following benefits:

- a stronger senior and middle management team
- a stronger teaching team through the appointment of shared staff, including specialist teachers, better training, wider career opportunities
- better support and development opportunities for school governors
- economies of scale
- savings in planning and administration time

There are, however, legal and financial implications for the above proposed model. Under the Dutch system, schools within a federation share their budgets and a single governing board is responsible for all aspects of the federation. Current legislation in England would make both of these criteria difficult to achieve. Potential savings in the appointment of a single executive head would also need to be offset by increased travel costs and potential increases in staffing costs for those in senior roles within each unit.

As separate legal entities, schools would be inspected separately rather than as one school. This issue needs careful consideration by policy-makers, governors and potential heads. Individual inspections may inhibit rather than encourage schools to work together. Collective accountability for pupil performance and inspection outcomes is, in our view, far more likely to encourage schools to work together to achieve improved pupil performance.

One of the key characteristics of successful federations in The Netherlands was the need for a common purpose or reason for federating. In England, it is likely that recruitment issues and falling roles will be the main reasons for federating. In view of this, heads in England will find themselves leading schools at different stages in their development and performance and with differing contexts and cultures. Further detailed exploration of the potential models of federations will enable policy-makers to determine which would be the most effective in terms of leadership, financial and staffing implications and – most crucially – pupil learning.

The Dutch study did not look at the effectiveness of federations in relation to standards. If alternative models of leadership, including federations, are to be considered in England, it is imperative to look not only at the effectiveness of these models in terms of recruitment and falling numbers, but also in terms of pupil learning and the potential benefits and barriers to that learning.

There is also a need to consider the key leadership roles and responsibilities within the different models. The prospect of having a leadership position overseeing a federation has implications for the wider educational system in England. It could increase the attractiveness of school headship, as well as creating new career aspirations for school leaders. It also brings with it the need to consider headteacher preparation and training.

The federation model within The Netherlands offers two key leadership roles – that of superintendent and the more-school head. In England, although there is no directly comparable role to that of superintendent, the one most similar is that of the primary executive head, and heads who lead more than one school – usually small schools – have some parity with the Dutch more-school head role.

There may also be a link between leadership roles and the size of the federation. Is it possible to lead two or three schools and keep the focus on both learning, and budgets and buildings? If so, what additional support structures, if any, are needed - for example a bursar or buildings manager? Do these schools also need a face in each location or not? Where heads are leading larger numbers of schools, is it necessary for the role to become more closely akin to that of the superintendent's role within The Netherlands? If so, who leads the learning? This is a particularly relevant question in the current climate of system leadership, where schools and school leaders need to be able to look both outwards to the community and inwards to a tight focus on learning (Fullan, 2004).

Headteachers will increasingly find themselves needing to develop new and more sophisticated skills and competencies in order to lead in alternative models of headship. NCSL's remit letter (NCSL, 2005 pp 4, 13) specifically states that 'advice is needed as to what support leaders may need if they are to take on leadership roles within "alternative" leadership structures such as federations'. Headteacher preparation and training will need to support and reflect these new developments. Through this study, along with a number of other research strands, NCSL aims to support these developments.

Informed governor training at national level, coupled with local support and guidance and raising governor awareness of the implications and reasons for these new and alternative models of leadership and of the differing roles and responsibilities within them, will be an important step in taking this work forward.

Leading schools in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will inevitably mean working in a context that will continue to be complex, relentless and accountable, and leading a federation will be no exception. We suggest that

federations offer accountability that can be shared across and within schools and communities. They can also ensure opportunities for schools to include services and other agencies across their communities, to provide effective systems of learning transfer and to distribute and build leadership capacity for both now and the future.

## **8.1 Recommendations for taking the work forward**

In the light of the findings from this research, the following recommendations are made with regard to ways of taking this work forward.

- Conduct a series of case studies of federations in England, looking in particular at leadership roles and standards.
- Explore the potential of various models of federation and their implications. Use a think tank of school leaders, governors, LEA representatives, policy-makers, NCSL and other stakeholders.
- Consider the inspection of federations in England.
- Research into the training and preparation needs for leaders and headteachers in federations.

### **With thanks**

We would like to thank Berend Redder and Jan Heijmans, on behalf of the Nederlandse Schoolleiders Academie, who organised and hosted this study visit and made valuable contributions to the research and commented on an earlier draft of this report. Geoff Southworth (NCSL) was also involved in the scoping visit and made contributions to the study. Colin Conner (NCSL) also made valuable comments on an earlier version of this report. Peter Slegers of the University of Amsterdam was also involved in the scoping visit.

We would also like to thank the following superintendents and more-school heads who generously gave their time to the study:

#### **Superintendents**

Wim Lengkeek

Jan Hamstra

Henk Norder

Karin van Weegen

Philip Vroomen

#### **More-school heads**

Gerco Andre

Henk Kok

Anja Oosteroff

Rob Oude Nijhuis

Johan Schat

Henk van IJssden

Maarten van de Steef

Gert Vermeulen

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