

FLINTSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

REPORT TO: **LIFELONG LEARNING OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

DATE: **THURSDAY, 23RD OCTOBER 2014**

REPORT BY: **CHIEF OFFICER, EDUCATION AND YOUTH**

SUBJECT: **COLLABORATIVE WORKING BETWEEN SCHOOLS & FEDERATIONS**

1.00 PURPOSE OF REPORT

1.01 To update members on the progress made with developing collaborative working and federations between schools.

2.00 BACKGROUND

2.01 Flintshire County Council has a responsibility to review and modernise all school provision, to make sure that we are providing the best possible opportunities for learners, so that they can achieve their full potential.

2.02 There remains a pressing case for continuing to renew local educational provision. Key issues for the Council include:

- continuing to raise educational standards;
- creating the conditions for school leaders to succeed;
- ensuring that school buildings are attractive learning and working environments;
- reducing the number of surplus places and the inequity of variation in cost per pupil; and
- providing resilience against falling revenue funding.

2.03 Our aim is that children and young people in Flintshire will develop essential life skills, a strong desire for lifelong learning and be very well prepared for the world of work. All children and young people will be supported to progress through the different stages of their education. Every child and young person will be entitled to a learning programme that will be personalised to make the most of his or her abilities. Children and young people will learn in an exciting and innovative range of styles and settings. These will include vocational, enterprise, voluntary, spiritual, cultural and sporting learning experiences. School organisation will provide opportunities for Welsh and English medium provision and also faith provision.

2.04 Flintshire County Council is committed to continuing to raise standards, with key tasks including securing:

- high expectations and a clear focus on improving teaching, learning and attainment in all school communities;
- all resources available to schools being focused on improving outcomes for children and young people in a context of annual budget pressures;
- a consistent approach to the collection, analysis and use of assessment information, including tracking systems, to target support and interventions; and
- continued commitment to the development of school staff.

2.05 Successful schools have strong leadership at all levels. The challenges associated with leading and managing a school have increased substantially during recent years and the expectations are continuing to increase. The leadership expectations on Headteachers in ensuring teaching and learning is of the highest quality, evaluating and raising standards, developing robust self-evaluation procedures and ensuring the continuous professional development of staff, are substantial. At the same time, the number of applicants for headship posts is declining, particularly in our smallest schools.

3.00 CONSIDERATIONS

3.01 In 2013 the Welsh Government commissioned Robert Hill to develop his report on the “The future delivery of education services in Wales”. It focused on looking at the effectiveness of the current education delivery at school and local authority level, and to consider what should be undertaken at school, local authority, regional and national level with a focus on:

- raising standards and improving learner outcomes at all ages;
- better support and challenge to schools to improve standards;
- developing and strengthening the leadership of schools and the quality of teaching and learning;
- ensuring value for money and effective use of resources; and
- bringing about coherence and strong links between all areas of the education system, including post-16 provision and the wider children’s services agenda.

- 3.02 Robert Hill's view was that the challenge facing the school system could be summarised in a single sentence. There is both a need and the scope to extend school autonomy but the systems and structures necessary to support that autonomy are not yet in place. He also asserted that "parts of the school system are characterised by a local authority-dependency culture – particularly in the primary sector, with schools overly reliant on the local authority for the provision of school improvement and support services to the extent that governors and heads do not feel accountable for the performance of their school."
- 3.03 He also noted that Local Authorities are also missing opportunities to devolve funding and services to groups of schools which can potentially result in a more effective and efficient way of delivering services. For example, federations and/or clusters of schools could be commissioned to play more of a role in providing education welfare services and services for pupils with additional needs including behaviour problems.
- 3.04 Robert Hill recognised that giving schools greater freedoms is unlikely on their own to lead to a substantial impact on classroom practice. However, there is a positive correlation between schools having greater autonomy (in the areas of hiring and managing staff, defining their curriculum and assessment practice and managing their budget) and higher student performance. Several aspects of collaborative working between schools are also associated with improved outcomes in areas such as higher student morale and commitment, less non-disruptive behaviour and a better disciplinary climate. In 2005, the DfES published the most important characteristics of a successful collaborative, based on the experiences of practitioners:
- A sense of shared identity between schools - for example, through geographical proximity, or a sense of being an inclusive community or church ethos.
 - A sense of common purpose - the groups of schools involved in collaboration should have a shared sense of what needs to be done and how it is to be done, and a joint vision for improving the attainment, achievement and progression of young people.
 - Leadership - a collaborative partnership needs a strong cohesive leadership, and should be interested in developing and sustaining leadership across all levels of the schools.
 - A strong management infrastructure - collaboratives must demonstrate that they have the capacity to deliver.
 - Trusting relationship - having trust between schools is fundamental to effective collaboration and should be built into every level of management. Schools need to share a sense of openness and a willingness to operate in a joined-up and united way.

- A system of review - collaboratives need to be monitored and evaluated to show that they are being effective.
- Commitment - schools must be prepared to commit both time and resources to ensure that the collaborative is effective and sustainable. They will also need a commitment to raising standards and achievement in all of the schools involved and to continually improve progression for young people.
- Communication - excellent communication mechanisms are required when introducing change, particularly where lots of schools are involved.
- Sustainability - there must be a clear sustainability strategy in place to enable a collaboration to cope. For example, if the leadership on one of the schools changes; if additional schools wish to join in; if existing schools wish to leave. If committing contracts or expenditure for any length of time, financial sustainability is vital.

3.05 The Hill Review envisaged that more schools should be structured (through federation or review) so that they are also large enough to have a Headteacher without substantial regular teaching commitments. This would give the Headteacher the necessary time to undertake the key leadership role within the school or federation. Schools also need to be sufficiently resilient in size to ensure suitable leadership development opportunities in individual schools to enable effective succession planning.

3.06 Flintshire County Council actively supports schools to develop closer working relationships amongst its schools. There are different forms of collaborative working. Most schools in Flintshire already work in a collaborative way with other educational establishments in their area. A federation, rather than a collaboration, is a more formalised agreement to work together. Perhaps the best way of thinking about this is as a continuum:

- Informal Collaboration: this is an informal and non-committal arrangement with no fixed agreement.
- Soft Federation: This is where schools have made a formalised commitment to work together, e.g. by creating joint committees on aspects of teaching and learning. The schools may also have more formal agreements such as service level agreements, joint committees with delegated powers and joint appointments.
- Formal Federation: This is where a number of schools have decided to operate under the guidance of a single governing body which allows for efficient, stream-lined decision making. More information about Formal Federation can be found at Appendix 1. It involves a specific statutory application process.

- 3.07 Flintshire also recognises that partnership between schools takes time to mature but if organised in a structured way brings benefits to participating schools, even where some schools are seemingly contributing more than receiving services to the partnership.

Benefits to Pupils

- 3.08 There are many potential benefits to schools from collaborative working. Collaboratives can often facilitate inclusion and diversity for their pupils more effectively than individual schools. Pupils are able to establish larger friendship groups which can help small schools address the difficulties of gender imbalance.
- 3.09 There are social advantages for children of small schools to work and play with pupils of a similar age.
- 3.10 Pupils benefit from accessing a greater range of resources, broadening their curriculum opportunities such as sports equipment and e-learning initiatives.
- 3.11 Pupils at different schools can be brought together for specific events, such as music, ICT, drama and team games.

Benefits to Parents and Local Communities

- 3.12 Cross-phase collaboratives can enable a smooth and effective passage for pupils on their education career path and possibly reduce anxiety for children and parents/carers.
- 3.13 Collaboratives are likely to find it easier to deliver childcare, family learning and other community activities and may be able to engage more fully in partnerships with business, industry and higher education.

Benefits to Schools

- 3.10 Collaboratives can help to stabilise a school population and accommodation sufficiency issues may also be addressed.
- 3.11 Collaboratives may benefit from streamlined working practices and the appointment of joint staff (such as ALNCO, Business Manager or Subject Leader), all of which leads to shared accountability and consistent/coherent performance management objectives.
- 3.12 Schools may be able to establish improved strategies for meeting pupils' additional learning needs, ranging from behaviour difficulties to providing challenge for more able and talented pupils.
- 3.13 Schools may also establish enhanced purchasing power, gaining economies of scale from single rather than multiple maintenance contracts for buildings and grounds, ICT equipment, school catering and caretaking, etc.

- 3.14 Where Collaboratives lead to a reduction of net costs, the schools are able to retain and reallocate any savings.

Benefits to Teaching Staff

- 3.15 Collaboratives can ease the feeling of isolation among teachers who are working in a rural setting. Teachers can provide support for one another in terms of collaborative planning, induction and training and covering absence. A larger team of teachers can provide a greater pool of expertise and can create additional opportunities for promotion. Staff remain on contract to their school.
- 3.16 The workload for some Headteachers at small schools can be excessive. Federation is likely to cause less duplication of certain duties, allowing Headteachers to concentrate more of their time on leading and management as well as monitoring and improving standards. This can, in itself, present a more attractive post when a Headteacher vacancy arises.

3.12 Models

Any type of school can agree to work collaboratively with another. However, in the Flintshire context a natural configuration would be local secondary school working with its partner primary schools. Similar models could work in both Welsh medium and faith pyramids. Primary schools can collaborate even if they have traditionally served two different secondary schools as places are allocated on the basis of parental preference and pupils' home addresses. Clearly, where there is more than one type of school, the local authority and Diocesan boards would need to work closely together. Although currently rare, cross authority boundary collaboratives are also possible in principle.

- 3.13 Schools in collaboratives continue to operate as individual schools. Admissions to each school continue to be determined by the appropriate admission authority. Schools continue to be inspected as single establishments. Schools retain their individual budgets and there is flexibility to use budget allocations across all of the schools within a collaborative. Powers of intervention are not affected by a school's membership of a federation.
- 3.14 It is important that all members of staff are kept informed of developments throughout the transition. Appropriate time needs to be allocated in order for staff to familiarise themselves with the arrangements, particularly if they elect to work at alternative sites. Existing staff are not obliged to travel to other school sites within the collaborative if they do not wish to do so, though new employees would have such a requirement written into their contract.

- 3.15 Where one Headteacher leads all of the schools in a collaborative, he/she should be as accessible as in a non-collaborative school. However, governors may wish to appoint a 'base manager' or a teacher in charge on each site to deal with issues that arise that require immediate attention. This positively offers opportunities for career development.

Accountability

- 3.16 Estyn has encouraged the partnership process by only according the judgement of 'excellent' to a school if it can demonstrate sector-leading practice. Estyn's definition of that term includes an expectation that leading schools are working with other schools. 'It is difficult for provision to be leading the sector if the sector knows nothing about it. So, inspectors need to ask whether the provider has already shared the practice they have seen with others, in networks of professional practice, both internally and externally.' Estyn (2010)

Overcoming Challenges

- 3.17 Robert Hill noted key challenges to deepening partnership and collaborative working in schools. They included that whilst there is a positive trend in terms of more schools committing to working with and supporting each other, the partnership culture is still relatively shallow and insular. Too much of the partnership working is of the 'come and see what we are doing' variety, rather than being based around leaders and teachers sharing data and then working jointly to improve learning. Even where schools are working in a really deep way with each other they would not expect their partnership commitment to oblige them to challenge a school and intervene to support it if they saw it was getting into difficulties.
- 3.18 He also concluded that too often there are clear limits as to how far many schools will go in working with others. Many headteachers and governing bodies were noted as reluctant to contemplate letting a bright and energetic emerging leader go to another school for a term or a year to support their development. They feel their school would lose out – even though it could be viewed as an opportunity to promote an aspiring leader from within the school or gain a reciprocal leader from another school who could bring in fresh ideas. Similarly, some schools are reluctant to move to formalised shared governance or single governing body models of partnership.
- 3.19 Professor David Hargreaves' research on collaborative working has described a clear link between schools increasing the depth of their joint work and developing formal governance and accountability structures. He notes that a key characteristic of mature school partnerships is how over time they move towards formalising the arrangements for how they work together as they deepen their joint activities to improve teaching and learning. This in turn provides the proper basis for increasing school autonomy and building a school-led improvement system.

4.00 RECOMMENDATIONS

4.01 That members note the framework for developing enhanced collaborative working and federations between schools.

5.00 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

5.01 In terms of funding, the Independent Task and Finish Group report chaired by Vivian Thomas (Welsh Government, 2011) noted that ideally 'funding goes directly to the level where delivery and performance lies'. It is important that federations and clusters build up their procurement expertise so that they have the capacity to test the market and ensure that they receive the best value for money for the services for the schools in their cluster or collaborative. Enhancing collaborative working between schools can enable improved value for money in provision of education support service provision, together with practical strategies for workload management between school leaders.

6.00 ANTI POVERTY IMPACT

6.01 The establishing of enhanced collaborative working arrangements can enable the pooling of resources and expertise to support the progress of children and young people from low income families.

7.00 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

7.01 There are no equalities implications from this report.

8.00 EQUALITIES IMPACT

8.01 There are no equalities implications from this report.

9.00 PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

9.01 Re-organisations of schools will impact in various ways on the personnel employed. Whenever there is an impact on the workforce of school modernisation proposals, Flintshire County Council policies related to personnel matters together with National School Teachers Pay and Conditions documents are adhered to in order to mitigate any negative impact.

10.00 CONSULTATION REQUIRED

10.01 No consultations are required for this report.

11.00 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN

11.01 No consultations are required for this report.

12.00 APPENDICES

12.01 Appendix 1 – Formal Federations – briefing document

LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION ACT) 1985
BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

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