



## SCHOOLS IN COLLABORATION

When entering into a partnership with other schools and colleges, first ensure that all are agreed on a definition and on what that particular form of partnership entails.

### SCHOOLS IN COLLABORATION

The notion of partnership between schools runs as a current throughout all the major initiatives introduced by the government in recent years, whatever their primary aim. In April 2005 the Secretary of State wrote 'In the future I think co-operation will become not only the norm, it will probably be the only way of delivering a decent all-round education for all pupils...We have to get schools to operate as part of a network to deliver a fully comprehensive education.'

The power to federate took effect from September 2003. Up to five schools might go ahead and form a federation, with a single governing body and budget, but beyond that figure they would have to apply to the Secretary of State, preferably having first consulted the local authority and the DfES on what was intended. In 2004 the government set up a pilot involving 38 federations, which were defined as having a formal written agreement with specified target, or a single governing body. This, however, is only one aspect of a scene of increasing activity. Across the country at large, partnerships have taken many forms, some of them 'hard' federations in the terms of the Regulations, others so varied in kind that the antonym 'soft' would not adequately describe them.

Wherever partnership is discussed, and in whatever forum, there is general agreement on its principal benefits.

- Partnership is a structured way for schools to learn from one other and to share best practice.
- It gives the opportunity for collective planning, with the strengths of each constituent school knowing no boundaries.
- It makes possible 'individual learning pathways', through which a student's needs and aspirations can be met by drawing upon a wide range of expertise and specialisms.
- It allows a cost-effective and coherent curriculum, increasing the opportunity to fulfil individual students' needs.
- It creates joint staffing opportunities and wider career structures across the federation
- It leads to improved senior and middle management.
- It has the advantage of economies of scale.
- It forms a basis for further partnerships with other providers, e.g. 14-19, community services.

No one doubts that difficulties can be met when partnerships are being developed. Chief among them is the climate of competition which many schools feel to have become the norm. In the words of one research study, '...the successful use of collaboration is far from straightforward in the English context, where competition and choice continue to be the driving force of national education policy. This is why powerful levers are needed that will challenge existing assumptions and, at the same time, move thinking and practice forward.' (Evaluation of the Federations Programme: 1<sup>st</sup> Interim Report, University of Warwick, 2005).

The most successful examples of collaboration are those which begin in a spirit of common resolve and sensitivity to the needs of others, and sustain that spirit. In their scheme of things there is no place for a concept of one or more 'cadet' schools steered by a 'superior' institution, nor for a culture of dependency. Some partnerships have gone beyond the notion of common curricula and shared resources, and have argued for common accountability in terms both of inspection and performance data.

This document is concerned chiefly with collaboration between secondary schools. Partnership between primary and secondary schools is the subject of the Launchpad on 'Transition'.

### **WHY IS COLLABORATION BETWEEN SCHOOLS AN IMPORTANT FOCUS IN THE EDUCATION OF GIFTED AND TALENTED PUPILS?**

The best way to present a case for collaboration between schools is to let some illustrations of good practice speak for themselves. All students have benefited from these initiatives, but there have been some particular

advantages for the gifted and talented, who have found so many more opportunities open to them.

One good introductory example is that of a local authority which set up Learning Alliances, with the intention to:

- 'Enable all young people to choose from a wide range of courses and qualifications covering a wide range of subjects from 14.
- Encourage them to develop their own mix of subjects, combining a broad core of learning with more specialist choices which meet their interests and aspirations.
- Give young people access to different types of provision, for example centres of excellence and specific expertise, regardless of where they learn.
- Encourage all young people to develop essential practical skills for life and work, including competence in analysis, problem solving and thinking.'

Each Learning Alliance is made up of a partnership of between four and seven schools, including a special school and a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU), and representatives of local colleges, work providers, the voluntary/community sector, and Connexions. In each Alliance there is a minimum of approximately 4000 students aged 11 to 19. Within an Alliance the range of specialisms is such that it adds to the borough-wide provision and does not duplicate what is available elsewhere. Two of the Learning Alliances have aligned their timetables. By this means learners can be provided for in a variety of ways, drawing as necessary upon the schools, on the college, and on work-based learning providers. In some instances, tutors from the college, or from the work-based environments, come into the school to deliver courses on site. Yet another initiative has been the devising of information packs for learners, and access to web-based teaching materials. An Alliance co-ordinator ensures that there is close liaison between the various partners, all of whom have agreed the protocols.

Another example is that of a smaller authority which formed a partnership of four community secondary schools, each with specialist status, and two special schools. All the schools have played a part in developing a virtual learning environment, which has involved teachers in a number of subject areas working across the partnership to devise on-line learning activities, all of them available to the students through the internet, at school, at home or elsewhere. Curriculum initiatives have included shared GCSE twilight provision, an AS level critical thinking course for Year 10 and 11 students, and wider access to the mainstream curriculum for special school students. In Spring 2005, 140 students taking GCSE ICT courses took part in 'ICT in the Workplace' in the Pathology Department of the local hospital. In the same term, students attended professional presentations by a radiologist, theatre sister, physiotherapist, and speech and language therapist, and healthcare professionals take part in 'breakfast means business' sessions aimed at

raising students' aspirations. Students in all the schools have the benefit of mentoring by hospital professionals. Yet another series of joint activities is with the federation's 'partner universities'. In January and February of 2005, for instance, students from the federation's schools attended master classes run by three universities, in English, science, and mathematics respectively.

An important element in the work of the federation is the Student Parliament, of which more below. This is no token body, but a key participant which is taken seriously and which has a capacity for action in its own right. The Parliament has its own budget and spending capacity, which it uses for such purposes as leadership training, hospitality, and travel. In July 2005 a Student Parliament Leadership Training Day was held at an outdoor pursuits centre, with a programme that encouraged teamwork in some challenging activities. The Parliament regularly carries out surveys of student opinion. For example, it recently commissioned an Enrichment Programme survey which listed all the activities available, sounded out their popularity, and invited suggestions for additions to them. This has led to a revised and heavily subscribed programme. The Parliament also commissioned a survey of the attitudes to school meals throughout the six schools, and is currently looking into the impact of ITT provision on learning and teaching. In each case the students are in the driving seat, and an adult researcher organises the enquiry for them.

It can be seen at once how great a contribution such well-planned collaboration between 11-19 schools can make to provision for gifted and talented students.

To complete the picture, the accounts below are examples of what can be achieved when the collaboration is between secondary schools and their partner primary schools. They are drawn from the Launchpad 'Transition', which contains useful information on achieving educational continuity.

- The first is that of partnership project on English, where the primary schools began the agreed work on text level features and writing styles. The pupils took their books and other materials with them when they went on to secondary school and continued the work with their new teachers, whom, of course, they already knew.
- In another, the secondary school welcomed its new Year 7 with an Inductive Skills programme which occupied the whole of their first month in school, with their Year 6 teachers fully involved. There were activities focused upon a variety of subjects, with the use of Successmaker Software, and such experiences as 'peer mediation' workshops. The pupils, 300 in all, also enjoyed workshops by visiting writers and dance companies, and a number of out-of-school activities.
- A third example is where a secondary school and its partner primary schools devised an ICT extension programme across Years 6 and 7. Pupils in Year 6, using the secondary school's facilities and working with its teachers and with their own teachers, developed their skills in

multimedia, PowerPoint presentations, spreadsheets, and control in design technology.

- Yet another example was that of a partnership which consisted of a large secondary school, five primary schools, and a nursery school. The partnership's Literacy Continuity Group worked out a programme of common action on standards, expectations, marking, moderation, and teaching approaches, and a corresponding mathematics group did the same. Other partnerships in the authority devised projects for other subjects, such as 'Key Stage 2/3 Continuity in music', and one set up a 'Cross-phase poetry project.' The teachers engaged in these activities analysed the outcomes, including the value for gifted and talented pupils, and used the findings to develop the activities further.

## WHAT MIGHT WE DO IN SCHOOL?

Even if your school is not in a formally constituted partnership you will already have many contacts with other schools. Naturally, there will be close links with those primary schools from which you receive pupils, but no doubt also with other secondary schools in the area. This Launchpad has been examining what can be achieved when these links are strengthened in the shape of a partnership, collegiate, or federation. The decision to form such a grouping is obviously a collective one. As we have seen, the initiative is often taken by the local authority, but there are many examples of schools which have formed collegiates themselves. These have sometimes evolved from a fairly loose relationship, and sometimes they have been planned from the outset as a result of a strong lead from one of the constituent schools. Without doubt, the best starting point is a spirit of common resolve and sensitivity to the needs of others. No one school should be dominant at the expense of the rest, and there is certainly no place for a concept of one or more 'subordinate' schools steered by a 'superior' institution, nor for a culture of dependency.

Your school may be one of those which is already part of an evolutionary development in the strength of relations between a number of schools. It may, on the other hand, be well placed to take a strong lead in the formation of a collegiate or federation where no such partnership already exists. Despite the inevitable variety in the kinds of partnership which might be developed, it is nevertheless possible to identify some universals. The first and most obvious of these is the need for all to be involved in the design and then to be fully committed to the decisions that have been agreed between the schools. As we have suggested above, a lot of people have to be taken along when a partnership assumes a more formally defined shape, not least governing bodies, the staffs of the schools, and parents.

A study carried out in Kent by the authority's Secondary Transformation Team (Glanville, 2005) posed a number of questions to schools within the authority's five federations. For example, they were asked: What are the key challenges that federation brings? Has the federating led to raising standards, and are there any data to support this? What lessons have you learned about what

has or has not worked well? How are you addressing sustainability? If you were asked to give advice to anyone who was considering a federation, what would be your key points? Some of the answers to this last question are worth reproducing here, as they would be useful discussion points for working parties which the schools might set up:

- Look at what has happened elsewhere but do not relentlessly copy.
- Get governors on board quickly and build their trust.
- Avoid a 'take over'.
- Get the views of all stakeholders, and work towards agreement.
- Allow autonomy. Where there is a natural inclination to collaborate, foster it keenly.
- Be aware that not everyone will agree, and take them with you over time.
- Do things to show parents that federation will be an improvement for their children.
- Delegate responsibility to the 'doers' in your school; let them out of school. All staff benefit from the 'Learning Walk'.
- Make sure of adequate funding and administrative support.

Management structures will be an important element in the design of the partnership, and the detailed planning of them will chiefly involve senior management and governing bodies, along with the local authority in most cases. It is among the staffs themselves, however, where innovation, the enrichment of practice, and an enthusiasm for sharing can provide the most valuable spur to teaching and learning. In a paper which drew on a number of NFER evaluations, Rudd (2003) reported: 'Several respondents said that partnership working should be 'bottom up' and not top down. Since it is school staff that have to make the day-to-day sharing exchanges, they have to have the key role.'

One of those interviewed remarked 'Partnerships are based on relationships; they're not based on mechanisms and structures. Successful partnership is based on personal relationships – they will only work as well as the people involved.'

It hardly needs adding that initiatives at this level have to operate as an organic part of the whole, working to the overall rationale agreed among the schools. In another context, Hargreaves (2003) made a case for teachers adopting an approach of 'disciplining innovation'. By this means, development occurs at an even pace, without the danger of 'innovation overload'. With this caveat in place, there is no doubt that teachers get the best out of partnership by working together, through shared teaching, observing lessons, generating ideas in small groups, and enthusing others.

Ideally, the schools will set up working parties or discussion groups to help shape the partnership, and these groups will remain as standing units to take on specific responsibilities for growth and development when it is in operation. The co-ordinators for gifted and talented students will be among those who can make a significant contribution here. For example, grouping together pupils of high ability can give scope for such approaches as a faster pace,

more innovative or open-ended methods, or a range of challenges which this form of grouping can best serve. With shared teaching and resources, and some common timetabling, this can be a successful initiative. Co-operation in bringing together pupils of high ability, and the resources available to them, was most recently endorsed by the government in its Education Improvement Partnerships (2006). It argues the case for schools 'to improve through collaboration the support for gifted and talented pupils. As well as working together to meet the new quality standards now under development, they could ...pool the expertise of their teaching staff or create more sustainable teaching groups by drawing together pupils from several schools.'

## REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READING

Ainscow, M., West, M and Nicolaidou, M. (2005) 'Putting our Heads Together: A Study of Headteacher Collaboration as a Strategy for School Improvement.' In: CLARKE, P (Ed) *Improving Schools in Difficulty*, 117-136. London: Continuum.

Ainscow, M., West, M., Howes, A. and Stanford, J. (2005) *Why Should Secondary Schools Collaborate?* (An advice paper for the DfES). Manchester: University of Manchester, Leadership Development Unit.

Arnold, R. (2004) *Transforming Secondary Education*. Slough: NFER, EMIE

Arnold, R. (2006) *Schools in collaboration: federations, collegiates and partnerships*. Slough: NFER, EMIE

Department for Education and Skills (2003) *Models for Working Together: Guidance*. London: DfES.

Department for Education and Skills (2003) *School-to-School Collaboration: Event Report*. London: DfES.

Department for Education and Skills (2003) *A New Specialist System: Transforming Secondary Education* [online]. Available at: <http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/makingadiff/docs/TransSecEduc.pdf>

Department for Education and Skills (2005) *Schools Causing Concern*. London: DfES.

Department for Education and Skills (2005) *Education Improvement Partnerships: Prospectus* [online]. Available: <http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/sie/si/eips/> [2 February, 2006].

England. Statutory Instruments (2004) *Guidance on the School Governance (Federations) (England) Regulations* (SI 2004/2042). London: The Stationery Office.

Glanville, S.J., *Federations in Kent* (Research Paper) (2005) Maidstone: Kent County Council.

Great Britain. Parliament, House of Commons (2006) Education and Inspections Bill 2006 (online). Available: <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/publications/educationandinspectionsbill/>.

Hargreaves, D. (2003) *Education Epidemic: Transforming Secondary Schools through Innovation Networks*. London: DEMOS

Rudd, P. (2003) *Partnership approaches to sharing best practice*. Slough: NFER/CONFED.

University of Warwick (2005) *Evaluation of the Federations Programme: 1<sup>st</sup> Interim Report*. Warwick: University of Warwick, Centre for Educational Development, Appraisal and Research.