

Open Report on behalf of Debbie Barnes, Executive Director of Children's Services

Report to:	Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee
Date:	13 February 2014
Subject:	Small Schools Collaborative Partnerships

Summary:

In 2011 Lincolnshire launched the Small Schools Collaborative Partnership Project which was aimed at encouraging primary schools with less than 200 pupils to work together. This was to support small schools in light of the many changes in the educational landscape. Although the project has changed since its inception it is still going strong in many areas of the county and there is an increased awareness nationally of the innovative and high quality work taking place with schools working together.

Actions Required:

The Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee is invited to discuss and accept the report, and continue to support the collaborative partnerships project.

1. Background

The National Context

The government is committed to raising standards in primary schools. They have introduced a variety of measures which include:

- Setting higher floor standards;
- Ensuring OfSTED inspections are rigorous, leading to the expectation that schools do not 'require improvement' for more than two consecutive inspections;
- Publishing more data on school and pupil performance;
- Introducing new tests (spelling, punctuation and grammar, and phonics);
- Introducing a new curriculum and assessment framework;
- Requiring schools to operate performance related pay.

The Lincolnshire Context

Small schools are a significant part of the Lincolnshire educational landscape and help to keep many rural communities alive. The county has a high proportion of smaller, rural schools spread over a wide geographic area; this brings both benefits and challenges.

Small schools' benefits include:

- Leaders are more able to set and carry through a vision to move a school forward;
- It is easier to establish committed and cohesive teams and to plan the curriculum jointly;
- Leaders and staff know each other and can relate more personally to pupils and parents;
- Leaders really know what is happening and can identify and resolve problems more easily and quickly.

Small schools' particular challenges include:

- Headteachers often have to spend more time teaching than headteachers in larger schools; this leaves less time for strategic leadership and leading learning through lesson observation, providing feedback and coaching;
- It can be harder to recruit headteachers; recruiting and supporting a team of committed and effective governors is also a challenge;
- The scale of small schools' budgets limits the employment of support staff (including SENCOs), leading to heads and other school leaders taking on some administrative duties;
- Weak teachers have a disproportionate effect in a smaller school.

The History of Collaborative Partnerships in Lincolnshire

Research has shown that school partnerships help to drive up educational standards and encourage best use of resources through sharing best practice and improving efficiency through economies of scale.

There had been a variety of different partnerships within Lincolnshire often established within geographical areas or friendship groups of headteachers.

In 2011 elected members committed to establishing a more formal network of partnerships of small schools. In January 2012 Lincolnshire proposed a collaborative partnership scheme:

- There would be a maximum size of around 200 pupils for any single school entering the collaboration, though the limit might reflect individual context;
- There could be shared School Business Management and Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCo)/Vulnerable Children's Officer provision across the collaboration;
- The strategic leadership of the collaboration would be provided through a Lead Strategic Group comprising the headteachers and chairs of governors and be chaired by an education adviser;

- There could be the option to appoint joint staff, either to provide specialist teaching or as supply cover, etc., across the collaboration;
- A Partnership Premium would provide additional funding at the level of £100,000 per partnership per annum, with start up funding of £20,000 per school to employ a single Partnership Business Manager and a single SENCo/Vulnerable Children's Officer across the partnership while restructuring takes place.

Schools were receptive to the aims of the proposal but argued that the scheme was too rigid. Some wanted to focus the funding on improving teaching and learning rather than on joint appointments whilst others already had shared arrangements for special needs or business management and did not want to change them. Perhaps even more significantly the Department for Education (DfE) were changing the rules on Local Authority funding formulae making it impossible to target funding for partnerships. This meant that the proposed scheme was not workable and significant changes had to be made. In response to the concerns the scheme was revised:

- Schools were placed in (or negotiated) a partnership group;
- Each group was required to submit a business plan for their costs of setting up their collaborative partnership;
- Once a business plan had been approved then up to £20,000 per school was released – but as a one-off payment rather than on a per annum basis;
- The partnership was to be underpinned by schools agreeing a 'heads of agreement' on how they would work together. Once this was in place, partnership funding for the remainder of the financial year was released;
- Funding earmarked for partnership working was later put into formula allocations as part of the block allocation, which has since risen from c£90k to £115k.

By January 2013 there were 40 active partnerships across Lincolnshire that were generally considered to be successful.

What has been the impact?

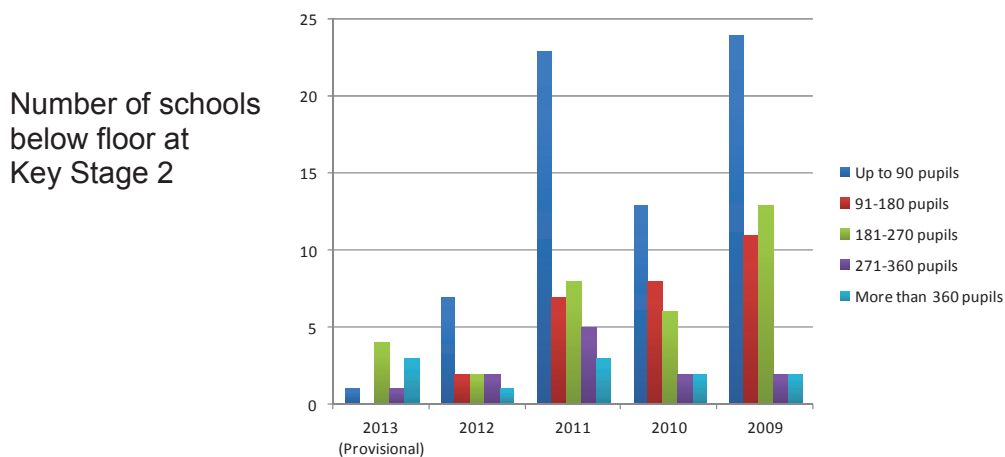
Schools involved in the Collaborative Partnership Project have made good progress. It is however difficult to say whether this is entirely due to being part of the partnerships as schools have made so many other changes. However the results of a survey sent to all partnerships was overwhelmingly positive. 62% of local partnerships responded with 96% reporting improvement as a result of partnership working, and with 90% seeing financial benefits, particularly via joint Continuing Professional Development (CPD).

Through the survey and from reports via the advisers, we have determined that the following have been the key activities that partnerships have found most beneficial:

- Leaders sharing their school's data with other schools, eg RAISEonline, Self Evaluation Frameworks (SEFs), school development plans and OfSTED reports and integrating these into a partnership development plan;
- Joint learning walks, 'drop-ins' and lesson observations in each others' schools;

- Joint professional development;
- Monitoring and moderation across schools;
- Schools within a partnership scheduling and running shared INSETs and common training days;
- SENCOs undertaking joint training and coordinating their work;
- Special events;
- School business management – procurement etc.

Although it is early in the journey of most partnerships to have hard data showing the impact of partnership working, the number of small schools below floor targets reduced considerably in 2012 and 2013, however other factors may also have contributed to this.



The number of schools with less than 180 pupils (blue and red bar on left of each graph) below floor has reduced dramatically since 2011.

Perhaps most importantly headteachers are reporting that they feel less isolated and are able to share their concerns and problems with other headteachers more easily which means they feel supported. Comments from headteachers include:

“Staff value the opportunities to get together in each other’s classrooms.”

“Working in a small group is far more productive... better than working in just one school because you’re sharing ideas.”

“We couldn’t do the things we do if we didn’t do it as a partnership.”

“I probably wouldn’t have had that (support) as a new head if the school had been on its own. It was knowing that I could just phone somebody and that they knew my school well which made a big difference.”

“In a small school, there are few opportunities for a promotion. Having a federation is enabling teachers to move up the ladder which is key to their professional development. It does open up a lot more opportunities.”

“It’s opened up the vision for our children of working with other children. It’s not ‘us and them’, they are making new friends.”

“It helps develop pupils’ confidence and self-esteem [and this] helps with the transition to secondary school.”

CfBT are funding a National Small Rural Schools Research Project led by Robert Hill who was an adviser to Government. This is a study of the current challenges facing small rural primary schools and the scope for different forms of partnership as a response to these challenges. This project will provide a commentary on the national context supported by a major case study based on experience of the schools that we support in Lincolnshire. Current evidence from our schools suggests that while there are clearly gains to be made, there are still barriers to overcome and the proposed study is designed to identify the most effective practice which overcomes barriers and leads to improved outcomes for pupils. It is anticipated that the findings will be shared on a national stage including with the DfE.

Continuing the Success

Although the project has been successful overall there are still a number of challenges to be overcome. Perhaps the main challenges centre around the capacity of the headteacher to provide sufficient time to meet with other headteachers in the partnership and then organise activities and drive them forward. The same adviser has been assigned to the group of schools in a partnership so that they are able to facilitate and help to coordinate and drive changes forward. All parts of the Local Authority will now provide, where possible, a service to partnerships rather than individual schools.

Other challenges are being overcome by using action research to find ways forward. At the moment there are several projects being undertaken:

Delivering Effective Feedback through Digital Technology

This project aims to:

- Improve outcomes for pupils, particularly those eligible for the Pupil Premium, by providing effective feedback;
- Enhance skills of teachers to use digital technology to support giving of feedback and providing opportunities for peer review.

As part of this project, there will be liaison with Professor Steve Higgins from Durham University who has a particular interest in this type of work. He will be visiting some Lincolnshire schools at the beginning of March and will attend the Collaborative Partnership Implementation Group meeting to help evaluate the project.

Developing Leadership through Performance Management

Two groups of schools are working with the Kyra Teaching School Alliance to develop opportunities for CPD which will build leadership capacity within the partnership. Aspiring leaders can be identified and supported to develop skills and expertise both within their own school and through projects working with other schools. This will be written up as a case study, which can then inform further development of leadership development and succession planning.

Developing Peer Review within Partnerships of Schools

Two education advisers have worked with 9 schools and 2 headteachers (who are associate education advisers) to develop peer review.

The 9 schools have worked in groups of 3 to carry out reviews in each others' schools, facilitated by an education adviser. Initial reviews, carried out over a period of 6 weeks, have had a general focus, but the next round will allow the schools to develop the focus which is most appropriate for their needs. The next step is to identify strengths which can be shared within the group and match strengths to the needs of partner schools. They will then carry out a further review which has a specific school improvement focus matched to the priorities of the individual school.

The aim of the project is to build capacity for peer and self review within a group of schools, by using the leadership skills of the headteachers (as well as specific skills of other leaders and teachers) in a wider context.

To ensure that good practice is shared there will be a second conference for schools working together in June 2014. Delegates found the conference in July 2013 *"provided support, energy and lots of practical ideas"*.

The conference in June 2014 will be planned along similar lines. It will include a keynote speaker, Robert Hill, who will provide a national perspective. There will be workshops focused on practical aspects of partnership working. Most of these will be run by teachers and headteachers – practitioners who can speak from current experience of what is working well for them. There will be a market place where schools and other providers can share successes and offer resources and other solutions. It is also hoped that there will be pupils from schools working in partnership on exciting projects, who can bring their views and thoughts for consideration.

Specific focuses for the coming year include:

- larger schools, including secondary and special, getting involved with partnership working;
- building capacity through leadership development within groups of schools;
- improving communication and ways of sharing practice;
- using technology to support training and development;
- using peer review to support school improvement;
- developing the work of governors within partnerships;

- developing ways of working for all Local Authority officers that support schools in collaboration.

A steering group, which includes headteachers, governors and Local Authority officers, meets regularly to discuss the way forward.

2. Conclusion

Education within England is going through a fundamental period of change on a scale never seen before. In order to ensure Lincolnshire's many small schools do not suffer as a result of these changes, and are proactively developing their own solutions to ensure sustainability, working together through the Collaborative Partnership Project needs to continue and to be developed further. Small schools have already identified improvements and these are beginning to appear in the schools' data.

3. Consultation

a) Policy Proofing Actions Required

N/A

4. Background Papers

The following background papers as defined in the Local Government Act 1972 were relied upon in the writing of this report.

Document title	Where the document can be viewed
'Strategy for sustaining small and medium sized primary schools in Lincolnshire. Creating Collaborative Partnerships'. Report to Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee, 3 rd February 2012.	http://lincolnshire.moderngov.co.uk/CeListDocuments.aspx?Committeeld=124&MeetingId=3144&DF=03%2f02%2f2012&Ver=2

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