

School Federation; the solution to the closure of rural schools?

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On 15 November 2016, [the Cabinet Secretary for Education, Kirsty Williams, announced her intention](#) to make changes to the [School Organisation Code](#). The primary objective of the changes will be to introduce ‘a presumption against the closure of rural schools’, something which is already in place in Scotland and England.

This presumption can be traced back to **one of the [education priorities Kirsty Williams, set out](#)** to First Minister, Carwyn Jones before joining the Welsh Government. One of the reasons why such a presumption has not been in place in Wales is that there is no official definition of a ‘rural school’ in Wales, which is another thing the Cabinet Secretary wishes to change in the School Organisation Code.

This proposed presumption would mean that

- Cases to close rural schools must be strong; and that
- Local authorities [will have] to carry out more rigorous consultation and conscientiously consider all viable alternatives to closure including **linking up with other schools, known as federation.**



As well as **changes to the School Organisation Code**, the Cabinet Secretary also committed to making an **extra £2.5 million available** to the, soon to be defined, rural and small schools **from April 2017**. This extra funding will be ‘to support schools working together’ and for the

development of federations across all maintained schools and better information and guidance for those considering collaboration and federation.



This might signal a **change in direction** for Welsh Government policy, which in the past has focused on reducing the number of surplus spaces in schools in Wales. This often meant closing schools which were deemed to have insufficient pupils. As a result of [a Written Assembly Question \(WAQ\) from Conservative Assembly Member, Darren Millar](#) in July 2016, it emerged that **the majority of these closures** were in [‘rural Wales’](#).

What is school federation?

Schools in Wales have been able to federate since 2010 and the introduction of the [Federation of Maintained Schools and Miscellaneous Amendments \(Wales\) Regulations 2010](#). The rules regarding federation were updated through the passing of [The Federation of Maintained Schools \(Wales\) Regulations 2014](#). [The first schools to federate](#) were Michaelston Community College and Glyn Derw High School in Cardiff in 2011.

The [Welsh Government’s guidance on federation](#) provides an overview of the term:

The term federation describes a formal and legal agreement by which a number of schools (between two and six) share governance arrangements and have a single governing body. Federations can involve a mix of maintained community and community special schools which are either nursery, primary or secondary schools.

However, under the new 2014 Federation Regulations schools with a faith and/or a trust such as voluntary aided, and voluntary controlled can only federate with schools of the same category or with schools that have a similar charitable trust status and/or religious ethos. Foundation schools will only be able to federate with other foundation schools.

The guidance also notes that there is

no blueprint for federation and the design or operational workings of a federation will depend entirely on the circumstances of the individual schools and the focus or purpose of their wanting to work together.



However, the most important reason for considering federation must be **the benefits such an arrangement would bring for children and young people through enhanced educational provision.**

Why federation?

A report published by the National College for Teaching and Leadership, entitled '[A study of the impact of school federation on student outcomes](#)', indicated that school federation:

- has a **positive impact on student outcomes**, although the effect can take two to four years to become apparent;
- offers **greater resources** and consequently opportunities for change and the provision of additional services; and
- provides **more opportunities for professional development** for staff, often at reduced cost, across the federation, and at times beyond the federation. A federal structure also promotes opportunities for collaboration between schools, which is seen as **important in raising standards** in Wales.

While all of the above are relevant and desirable outcomes in Wales, there is a further driver for federation, namely **the number of surplus places** in Welsh schools.

Surplus school places in Wales

The push to reduce surplus places in schools was supported by **the previous Welsh Government, which recommended** that local authorities have **no more than 10% surplus places** across all primary and secondary schools in its area. At an individual school level, a significant level of **surplus provision is defined as 25% and at least 30 unfilled places.**

It supported this push with its [21st Century Schools Programme](#) and its School Organisation Code. **The Code noted** that it was 'important that **funding for education is cost effective**'. The Code also stated that any reorganisation or closure would have to be 'in the **best interests of educational provision** in the area.'

In 2012, Estyn published a report entitled [How do surplus places affect the resources available for expenditure on improving outcomes for pupils?](#)

That report found that



closing a primary school will yield potential savings of £63,500 plus £260 for each surplus place removed. Closing a secondary school will yield potential savings of £113,000 plus £510 for each surplus place removed. [my emphasis]

This combination of factors have been perceived to have contributed to the [closure of 157 schools between 2006/7 and 2015/16](#), primarily, it seems in rural Wales. Despite the closures, the Welsh Local Government Association, in a [briefing to its Coordinating Committee](#), notes that by 2015

There were 19.6% surplus places in the secondary sector and 14.4% in the primary sector, a reduction of 3.2% in the primary sector since 2013. Over 40% of the surplus places in schools were in small schools, which are largely located in rural areas. [my emphasis]

It now seems that the new Welsh Government is going to adapt its approach to surplus places, although we are still **waiting for the detail** that will underpin this change. Perhaps this detail will emerge with the publication of the, yet to be published, [strategy and implementation plan for federation and collaboration in Wales](#).

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