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Executive headteachers: Your complete guide

Executive leadership can bring many benefits for the schools involved and can be a great next step for experienced headteachers. In this Best Practice Focus, **Paul K Ainsworth** considers what an effective executive headteacher looks like, some common structures of executive leadership, and the nine areas where executive heads can have real impact



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The role of executive leaders in the primary school

If you attend a meeting of primary headteachers, one noticeable trend is the increasing number of executive headteachers. This remains true if you are talking to colleagues in the world of academies or in local authority schools.

Statistics on the number of executive headteachers are hard to come by. In fact, any online search will likely bring you back to figures from 2010, which counted 450.

In my local authority, the need to support aspiring, new, or experienced headteachers led to the establishment of an Executive Headteacher Network by the Teaching School Hub. This is intended for colleagues who have completed their National Professional Qualification for Executive Leadership (NPQEL) and are looking for some practical support.

Why executive heads?

The primary driver is often financial. In many rural counties, there are a significant number of small schools, those with less than

100 pupils and less than four classes. Such schools find it difficult to balance the books with a non-teaching headteacher; even a teaching head can be a significant demand on the budget.

Additionally, there is a shortage of applicants for these roles. While there is a romanticism to being headteacher of a small school, the reality is one of huge pressure. From designing curriculum, to leading subjects to managing the governing body, to all the non-educational elements of headship, the list goes on. That is before the demands to have class responsibility for a couple of days a week or to take on PPA cover for your class teachers.

One solution to these challenges is appointing an executive headteacher to lead two or more small rural schools.

There is also a shortage of headteachers for larger schools in urban areas. A governing body that has been unable to appoint may instead look to a local established headteacher who can add the school to their portfolio, perhaps while growing a leader from within

who can be supported to become the headteacher in time.

Finally, there is a need for leaders willing to take on more challenging schools, often referred to as “stuck schools”. These are the headships which need experienced professionals, but such headteachers may not wish to give up their current headship and may want the capacity and support of their own leaders. As such, they may offer to lead the school in an executive arrangement. In the past this may have been seen as a National Support School or National Leader of Education deployment.

Why become one?

If we are clear on some of the factors which make executive headship an important part of the leadership landscape, why would you choose to become one – what are the motivations in assuming this role?

First, it offers opportunities for professional development. We all reach a stage when we wish to progress our careers, develop new skills, and take on a new challenge.

Becoming an executive head can allow us to do this while maintaining the relationship with our current school.

Second, there is the moral purpose. We may have become leaders and headteachers as it allowed us to have an impact on pupil outcomes beyond the children in our classroom. As an executive headteacher, we can share our expertise with other schools and hopefully improve the outcomes of a larger number of pupils.

Finally, we may become an executive headteacher to meet a particular need when asked by governors, trustees, or the local authority. They will have identified a particular skill-set we possess to address a specific issue in another school.

Executive models

Unlike headship, there is no legal definition of executive headship, and thus no formal definition of executive leadership in an educational setting. There are a number of suggested definitions and models out there.



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In the School Workforce Census of 2015, the post of executive headship was used to denote a headteacher who “directly leads two or more schools in a federation or other partnership arrangement”.

In a number of research papers in this area, an executive headteacher is described as one with “oversight” of more than one school. There is probably a semantic discussion as to what the difference is between “directly leading” and “having oversight”.

A third definition from the National Foundation for Educational Research (Lord et al, 2016) is that an executive headteacher is considered as “a lead professional of more than one school; or a lead professional who manages a school with multiple phases; or who has management responsibility significantly beyond that of a single school site”.

If we consider this third definition as the catch-all executive headship, it is interesting to see the different school models this could present. The following models should be seen as fluid. At different times in the improvement journey or the history of a federation, various models might be adopted.

1. You could lead two or more schools as the substantive headteacher of both or all schools. The substantive roles could be temporary, permanent or a mixture of the two. This is more likely in the case of small schools.
2. You could lead two or more schools by being substantive headteacher of one of them, executive headteacher of the other/s with a substantive headteacher in the remaining school/s. This could be a mixture of temporary or permanent roles. This model tends to be more likely in larger schools.
3. You could be headteacher of a school and have responsibility for another major project such as leading a Teaching School Hub, a Reading Hub, or a SCITT.
4. You could be a headteacher of a school and have another role in a multi-academy trust such as education director or regional director with responsibility for other schools.
5. You could be appointed to be executive headteacher of a school on a temporary basis which has such challenge that an executive headteacher is required to support a second headteacher. This could also be related to succession-planning to develop a new or acting headteacher.

Executive leadership

While this is not the focus of this *Best Practice Focus*, it is worth considering that there are a range of executive leadership opportunities. In a federation of small schools, you may have an executive deputy head who works across both schools with you. You could also have an executive SENCO. In the world of MATs or Teaching School Hubs there is a range of executive leaders, from CEO to subject leads. All these colleagues work across multiple schools. Some will have substantive posts in a single school and some will always work across multiple schools.

Skills and attributes

Many believe that a good headteacher will naturally become a good executive headteacher. This is not necessarily the case. If you have worked with a number of executive heads, you will be able to think of some who seemed to transition to the role very naturally, yet there will be others who were

Table 1.	
Area of leadership	Leadership skill or attribute
School-to-school consistency and collaboration	Treats school fairly and equitably
	Acts as a school improvement partner and a critical friend
	Balances individual school identity and consistency
Strategic thinking	Assimilates information easily to identify key trends
	Holds others to account and quality assures
	Works with governors to map a route to achieve the vision
Coaching and staff development	Recognises people's strengths and weaknesses
	Coaches and develops leaders
	Delegates clear responsibilities
Outward facing	Sustains networks with a wide range of stakeholders
	Business and financial acumen, influencing and negotiating
	Lead spokesperson for the organisation

good headteachers but never seemed to bring those strengths to the executive role.

There are some executive headteachers who never feel comfortable not being present in both schools all the time – which is of course impossible. They never manage to delegate key roles and responsibilities to their leaders, instead staff in the school/s are constantly waiting for the executive head to return before they can get going.

This can also affect the parent body so that even parents wait until the executive headteacher is back before raising their concerns. The executive head can then become overrun on days when they are in the building and can never move on with the strategic side of the role.

There are also those executive headteachers who take the opposite route and seem to get lost in the cracks between schools. Colleagues continually believe they are being highly effective in the other school, but this may not be the case. This may be less of an issue if there are highly competent leaders in both schools, although either way it is a waste of money that leaves both schools continuing to run as separate entities – the true strengths of a federation never being realised.

These are just a couple of situations where executive headteachers have not developed the skills and attributes necessary to become highly effective in their new role. You will no doubt be able to think of other scenarios.

There are, however, a set of skills and attributes that researchers (see for example, Lord et al, 2016)

Executive skills: Use this table – adapted from Lord et al, 2016 – to evaluate your strengths and areas for development

have uncovered which effective executive headteachers do possess. These fit around four different areas of leadership.

Table 1 above breaks these areas down into smaller elements to offer you a self-evaluation list. If you are feeling particularly brave you might use this with colleagues for some 360-degree evaluation.

School-to-school consistency and collaboration: This is an area which can be completely new to leaders. Colleagues will criticise the executive headteacher if they are perceived to treat their schools differently.

Strategic thinking: There will be some headteachers who will be very strategic in nature and will be used to working through their colleagues. There will be others who fall into the trap of focusing on the day-to-day doing.

Coaching and staff development: If you are not at a site every day, you need to develop those colleagues who are leading in your absence.

Outward-facing: As an executive head, you deal with a larger group of stakeholders who need to be well managed to enable your schools to perform.

Driving improvement

So, how can and do executive headteachers drive school improvement? As discussed, ➤

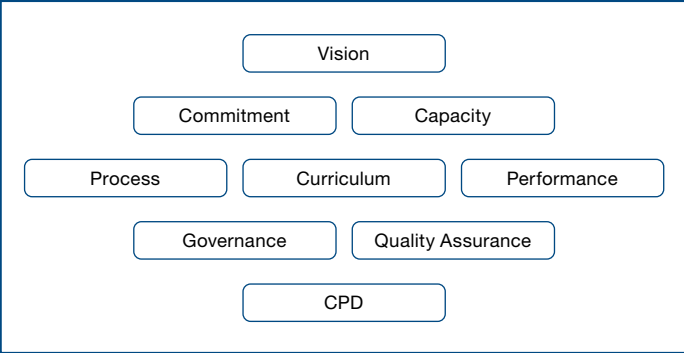


Figure 1: Nine focus points where executive headteachers and leaders can prioritise in order to get the most out of their group of schools

executive headteachers may be appointed due to a shortage of headteachers or financial constraints.

This is a short-term factor which can often lead to situations where leaders in the school have not spent the time to really consider how the executive leadership can drive positive change. Instead, the focus ends up being on stasis – on keeping practices the same.

In education we are all aware that without the constant requirement to move forwards, we can very quickly fall behind. In the current education climate this is often seen in standalone academies not part of networks where practice can quickly become outdated. This is an even bigger risk in a federation of two schools as it can be perceived from the outside that they have the people required to keep improving.

Nine areas of focus

I would now like to consider nine areas which executive headteachers and other executive leaders need to work within to get the most out of their group of schools, with the aim of ensuring that executive leadership adds value to a group of schools rather than simply drains resources.

I group these nine elements into three sets of three, as depicted in figure 1 above.

**Tip of the iceberg
1, One vision?**

The question is often where we begin, and for many leaders there is always one phrase they will reach for: “Start with the why.” What is the vision and values upon which the executive model is

based. While money may have been a catalyst to begin the conversation around executive headship, finance is rarely a long-term idea which we can fall behind.

The “why” or vision is likely to be in two parts. First is the why of the executive head. Why have you decided to take on the additional stresses and strains of being responsible for more than one school?

By its nature this carries more risk to you as a leader. So you have to be clear on what it is that gets you up on those cold November and January mornings when the summer or the Christmas holidays seem a distant memory and it is dark when you leave for work and dark when you return home. It could be worth returning to the three thoughts described earlier – your professional development, your moral purpose, or the local need which you are addressing.

The second consideration is what the vision of the schools is.

**EXECUTIVE SCHOOL
LEADERSHIP**



In this recent episode of the Headteacher Update Podcast, our experts, including the author of this *Best Practice Focus*, take a deep dive into the different roles and models of executive leadership, including how executive leaders can support their schools. Listen back via <https://buff.ly/RYumPso>

The most effective primary schools have very clear visions from which everything flows. This could range from the style of leadership to the manner in which children are rewarded.

If I think of two of the schools I work with, one uses the phrase “Let your light shine” and a second “Overflowing with hope”. The leaders consistently use these phrases in their interactions with colleagues, parents, and pupils.

One of the interesting challenges for an executive headteacher is whether they use the same simple vision across both their schools, or do they work with different visions, constantly changing their language according to the school they are working in.

One executive headteacher talked about “Personal Best” as their vision. When they moved to a second school, they moved this vision with them.

If the two schools have long-established visions and changing them could be viewed unfavourably, an executive head could instead look at the values that underpin the visions. Those words, between three and five, encapsulate the model of working. An executive headteacher could find harmony across the schools by moving towards one set of values.

2, Collective commitment

The executive headteacher may be completely committed to the arrangement across the schools, but for it to be truly effective all the leaders must want to succeed, and teachers must see its value.

The teachers in the original school of the headteacher will have to accept that they no longer have access to their headteacher every day. Teachers in the second school, meanwhile, may be wary of “a takeover”. Parents of children at either site may have similar misgivings.

There can be colleagues working under an executive head who will feel that one school has been treated unfairly compared to the other. This belief is deeply damaging to the long-term effectiveness of the executive head. Leading two schools is always challenging and even more so if you do not have the support of all colleagues.

It is important that the executive headteacher is very clear on their messaging that this arrangement is

vital and that we are all working to the common good. Teachers and leaders are most often prepared to support something when they see the value to the pupils, whether that is those in their class but also the moral imperative of supporting other children to have an equality of opportunity.

In the previous section we discussed vision and values, and one way of building collective commitment can be in working with colleagues across both schools to develop a shared identity, rather than imposing one on the other.

It is important to build relationships between groups of staff. So, an important starting point can be one senior leadership team where leaders get to know each other and see for themselves the challenges they all face. Similarly finding opportunities for teachers is vital too. I will return to both these themes later on.

As an executive headteacher, the nirvana that you are searching for is the feeling of having “one school” that is simply on two or more sites – that is truly how you can develop that collective commitment so that the work of every colleague in the institutions is always focused on the children in the schools having the best opportunities possible and more opportunities than they would have had if the schools had remained as separate entities.

3, Unleashing capacity

One of the temptations for those new to executive headship is to add extra posts at the beginning. There are many colleagues in their first executive headteacher role who immediately appoint heads of schools in both locations. This costs extra money which puts the whole model under immediate strain.

One executive head explained that they felt their budget was balanced because they had a school business manager on both sites, rather than considering whether they had the potential for more teaching time if the schools had a single school business manager supported by an administrator.

Executive models should provide the opportunity for more capacity and expertise than a single school might have access too. This is especially the case in



the smallest schools. The first element should be in the capacity of the executive headteacher.

In a small school, a headteacher may be teaching half a timetable, whereas by being a half-time headteacher in both schools, teachers can be employed to deliver their teaching. This is cheaper and means the executive headteacher can focus on their leadership tasks.

An executive arrangement may mean that two schools can share a SENCO or a pastoral lead who may even be full-time across the two schools. This offers a better chance of finding the right expertise than if a teacher or teaching assistant is trying to complete these duties alongside their teaching commitments.

Middle or subject leadership is one area where executive models can be very beneficial. Colleagues in small schools will look enviously at schools which have two forms of entry or bigger and hence have teachers who are only responsible for a single subject. This is very different from very small schools where each teacher is responsible for as many as three or four subjects.

If you can share the subject leadership, so that one teacher leads a subject across both schools, it can be truly liberating for the teaching, while ensuring that the subject leader has much more time to fulfil their role – time to develop their subject expertise, write the curriculum, and quality-assure what is happening in the schools.

**Engine at the centre
4, Make processes habits**

There are headteachers who after a busy week will not have had a chance to do any school improvement. Quality assurance has fallen by the wayside. They have not had those line management coaching conversations they promised would happen. Instead, it has been behaviour management all week, or they will tell you about the parent complaint that has dominated their time.

“If you can share the subject leadership, so that one teacher leads a subject across both schools, it can be truly liberating for the teaching, while ensuring that the subject leader has much more time to fulfil their role”

If this is already the situation for headteachers leading one school, then it is not the ideal starting point for executive headship. Nonetheless, executive heads can find themselves slipping into this way of working.

Equally you will see executive headteachers who will sweep into a school, deal with the queue of pupils waiting for them before moving onto the telephone calls from parents before moving onto the school assembly and then seemingly disappearing in a puff of smoke.

To all intents and purposes, colleagues can feel that these

executive headteachers are doing a great job. But what happens to the routines of school leadership?

If you want to be truly strategic and ensure that school improvement stays top of the agenda, then you need to work on your processes of executive leadership and turn those into habits.

One solution is to break your year into a repeating cycle, rather than one annual cycle. You could stick with the traditional terms or have your own way of dividing the

fortnightly planning. It feels more sustainable but the big problem with doing something every fortnight in one of your school is that if you miss a week then it turns into a whole month before you look at it again and in a short term you may end up not looking at it again until the next term.

So try to work on weekly tasks whether it is line management conversations, meeting with pupils or quality assurance. Keep tasks short and purposeful. Line management conversations might be 15 minutes a week. Those short periods of time will add up over the year and produce real value.

5, Developing curriculum

Since the Education Inspection Framework was introduced by Ofsted in September 2019, all leaders have spent a long time on developing their curriculum. Leaders are now well-used to having lesson-by-lesson medium-term planning which highlights substantive and disciplinary knowledge that will be taught, the vocabulary which will be covered, and the models of assessment that will show which pupils have learnt and remembered more.

This is a huge task for primary schools and one that requires constant working to ensure it is fit-for-purpose. If you lead very small schools, the fluctuations of pupil numbers with the changes of year groups in different classes can make this even more complex.

Even in a one-form entry school with a few early career teachers, teachers can find they are

leading three subjects. It is here that executive models can give greater quality with less time commitment. The trick is to try and move towards common curriculums across your schools with subject leads working across the schools.

In two one-form entry schools, you can reach a situation where each teacher can focus on a single subject. After all, it would be strange to have two teachers trying to produce equivalent curriculum planning for one subject under one executive headteacher.

If you are the executive headteacher of larger schools, you could be in the luxurious position of having two teachers being responsible for planning one subject across two or more schools. This makes writing and developing a high-quality curriculum much more time-efficient and sustainable.

Equally if you have schemes as a basis for your curriculum, rather than developing it from first principles, if your teachers are leading fewer subjects, they can really adapt the curriculum to make it bespoke for your two schools while retaining the pedagogy and order of planning which can reassure some colleagues.

There may be a few adaptations for a local historical study or there may be two local rivers to look at but, overall, a common curriculum

across the schools can be an achievable aim which can also support a time-efficient quality assurance process.

6, Quality assurance

Quality assurance by leaders is the third section of your schools' engine of making processes habits and developing a common curriculum. We can easily believe that if we have good teachers and a well-planned curriculum, it does not really matter if quality assurance slips for a period as everything will be continuing in the expected manner.

One executive headteacher was working in schools of different sizes with very different challenges. It was felt that the small village school would continue to tick along as it had always done while the larger urban school received the bulk of the support.

The executive headteacher then completed their first short quality assurance for a month or so of the maths provision with a system leader and were surprised that the expected structures for the learning were not being followed, and while each classroom was acceptable in its own way, it did not feel like a school with a strong curriculum.

It is even more important for executive headteachers that they have carefully planned quality assurance processes which work

across their schools and involve a range of leaders – with leaders quality assuring across both schools.

The starting point is always the curriculum – reading in week one, maths in week two, writing in week three. A colleague needs to move around the classrooms in both schools and check that the curriculum is followed.

In two small schools this could be the task of the executive headteacher and if well planned may take a maximum of an hour in each school.

Further planning could ensure that each subject leader has a block of time once per half-term to quality assure and improve their curriculum. Over these six blocks, they may use one for visiting lessons, one for looking at books, one for talking to pupils – and the other three for looking at curriculum planning and improving it.

These types of activities need locking into the school calendar (with cover planned too). The routine then needs to become sacrosanct if we are to keep the quality assurance wheel across both schools turning.

Hidden from view
7, Data

At some point as executive head it will be necessary to compare the schools using metrics. Equally, you will wish to be able to self-serve

and find the information for yourself in your schools rather than relying on someone to find it for you. In which case one early action of an executive headteacher is to align the systems in your two or more schools.

One immediate starting point is a common management information system. It may have the facility to have both schools on show at the same time to easily compare demographic metrics, attendance, and other measures.

There may be home communication modules within the MIS which means communicating with parents and carers using the same newsletter or different ones becomes much smoother.

Safeguarding processes are critical and too many schools have been caught-out by not being able to quickly access the numbers of differing incidences or the chronology of certain issues. It is important to ensure that the same categorisation is used by the safeguarding software tool in both schools – even one extra space or a different capital letter will make comparison between schools challenging.

It is important to spend time on all of this at the outset and ensure that there is complete consistency.

In the world of local authority schools, it is likely that schools will use the same finance package which should make the life of the executive headteacher easier.

If there are two school business managers in the two schools at the beginning it is important that they report the finances in the same way, to make benchmarking straightforward.

For two academies, the executive head should bring the finances onto a common system. It becomes difficult for colleagues leading a local authority school and an academy as tools will be different, but it should be possible for the school business managers to report in similar styles.

Finally, when looking at in-year attainment data, the schools must use the same assessments, taken at the same time, and inputted into the same software. You can then create your own data dashboard which compares like with like across the schools. Without this it is very easy to make misleading comparisons which can make school improvement difficult.

“ The final element of the diamond is governance. This is often the first challenge that executive headteachers face but can take the longest time to move into the space which is most manageable ”

8, Continual improvement

To ensure continual improvement is at the heart of your executive headship, it is vital to harness the power of CPD across your school. Working together on elements such as common curriculum, shared subject leadership, and consistent quality assurance can hugely benefit the schools as compared to if they were trying to do everything on their own.

Senior leadership team meetings can be seen as a process of school leadership, but can also be vital CPD. It is often hugely beneficial to move to a joint senior leadership team across the federation as soon as possible.

This needs to be based on fairness without favouritism, so alternating senior leadership team meetings from one school to the next on a weekly basis is a visible way of showing the staff team that colleagues are working together.

The next stage is looking at how CPD can be delivered across the schools. Do you have professional development meetings attended by all staff alternating from one school to the next on a weekly basis? Do you deliver some via video conference so that you can alternate, delivering from one school in person while on Teams to the other?

You could bring colleagues together for tasks that require proper discussion or looking at materials – this would fit well with book-looks or curriculum planning.

You may also set some CPD tasks which teachers can complete in their fashion. For example, for

some online learning a slot on the meeting schedule is chosen but colleagues can decide where and when they do it. There are some great resources on the National College which could form part of a safeguarding CPD pathway in this style.

Finally, there is your own CPD. Is there a network of executive heads in your locality which you could join to share issues and solutions directly related to the role? In Lincolnshire, for example, LEAD TSH facilitates a termly executive headteacher network which I lead to enable that sharing of ideas. If there is nothing in your area, you could set it up. Finally, there is the NPQEL which many colleagues study for and which provides excellent theoretical models that you can build upon in your role.

9, Governance

The final element of the diamond is governance. This is often the first challenge that executive headteachers face but can take the longest time to move into the space which is most manageable.

It is very likely at the beginning of executive headship that the leader will have to serve two governing bodies with two sets of meetings and two sets of reports. Often these will be different.

Initially, executive headteachers need to harmonise the style of reports – from attainment to finance – so that the process while still doubled is more manageable.

Once this is done executive headteachers need to try and create a scenario where meetings

mimic each other across the schools.

The goal at the end of the first year must be to form one governing body across the schools so that there is a formal federation. Without this, executive headship can become very unwieldy and time-consuming.

It is worthwhile having this conversation at the very beginning when governing bodies are negotiating on the arrangement with a memorandum of understanding stating that by the end of the first academic year there will be a single governing body across the two schools.

There are many situations where such federations consist of a church school and a community school. This will need Diocesan approval at some point.

Where life can be more challenging is in the case of an academy and a local authority school. If the academy is part of a MAT, then it is likely the MAT will only enter this arrangement if the local authority school is committed to joining the MAT in the fullness of time. If this is decided against by the governing body of the local authority school, it is likely the executive arrangement would be ended.

For a standalone academy and a local authority school, life is more challenging as it is unlikely that regional directors would give permission for the formation of a MAT of two primary schools. These types of arrangements need conversations with the Department for Education at the outset to ensure a long-term sustainable solution.

Final thoughts

There is no doubt that the executive headship model can have huge benefits for primary schools and allow leaders to work together in a sustainable and time-efficient way. Equally when executive headship is not effective, there can be dangers to the schools' continued improvement – not to mention the careers of the leaders involved.

It is important that leaders work through the ideas in this *Best Practice Focus* to try and find their own solutions as to how executive headship can benefit their schools, ensuring that improvement does not stall. Some schools have begun to work on exciting further

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leaderships models with executive deputies across federations of two schools, and for three schools executive SENCOs have also been included. Single subject leads can also have great impact, especially in small schools.

If you think that executive headship is something that could be part of the future for you, studying the NPQEL can be a first step as can forming relationships with existing executive heads.

Talk to your chair of governors about the potential for your school in joining such a model to gauge their support. It may be worth communicating your interest to the local authority, too.

After May half-term there are always schools which have not been able to recruit headteachers and the local authority may be looking to match-make strong headteachers from nearby schools and form executive leadership models as a potential solution.

You could be more proactive and with the support of your chair of governors contact schools which have a headteacher vacancy to see if they would be interested in discussing such a model.

Executive headship can be an invigorating and exciting part of the journey. With the right structures, it can provide significant benefits to leaders, schools, and the pupils they serve.

