

SMALL SCHOOLS DOING THE DOUBLE.



“SMALL SCHOOLS ARE A VALUABLE PART OF OUR EDUCATION SYSTEM. PUPILS WHO ATTEND THEM HAVE UNIQUE EXPERIENCES. LEADERS WHO LEAD THEM HAVE LOTS OF OPPORTUNITIES BUT ALSO FACE MANY CHALLENGES.”

Richard Kueh HMI, Deputy Director, Schools and Early Education, shared this insight in April 2024. At that time, there were currently just under 4,000 schools in England with fewer than 150 pupils.

Sarah Bridgman is headteacher of two Hertfordshire schools, which are very small by this definition, with 111 pupils at Ponsbourne St Mary's Primary School near Hertford and 76 at Thundridge Primary School near Ware. Here Sarah shares her journey of how her dual headship came about and what she's learned along the way.

WHERE DID YOUR TEACHING CAREER START?

I grew up in Hertfordshire and have family close by. I love working in Hertfordshire. I've worked here now for 22 years, across six different primary schools of varying sizes and demographics, serving on the governing board of each one. I have taught across the full primary range as a class teacher, spent 16 years at senior leadership level and have experience working as a SENCO.



WHAT BROUGHT YOU TO A DUAL HEADSHIP?

I initially sought a part-time, small school headship because I thought it would be a great way of sustaining my career but also balancing a busy home life. I definitely underestimated the demands of part-time school leadership but enjoyed it.

My first headship, in 2016, was at Tonwell St Mary's School near Ware, with approximately 40 pupils. Changes to funding meant that balancing finance was challenging, and low pupil numbers meant teaching three year groups in a class.

My governors were proactive and knew that, for the financial and educational sustainability of the school, we needed to be part of a larger organisation. We made links with Thundridge, which is only two miles down the road from Tonwell and made a good partnership. We became a federation, and I was appointed as the headteacher across both schools in April 2022.

HOW HAS YOUR CAREER PROGRESSED? OR WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?

In January 2024 the headteacher at Ponsbourne St Mary's moved to a new school, and the governors considered options for future leadership. Also looking for a more sustainable solution, the board decided to work in collaboration with Tonwell and Thundridge, appointing me to work as their headteacher on secondment. Sadly, Tonwell St Mary's was not able to remain financially viable, and the local authority made the difficult decision to close the school in August 2024.

HOW ARE THINGS AT PONSBOURNE AND THUNDRIDGE WORKING?

I physically split my time half and half across the schools. The governors are very supportive and trust to me to be able to manage my workload and make my own decisions.

Our staff still work in their own schools, but if someone wants an opportunity to work across both settings and it makes sense, we'll make it happen.

There are things that need attention on a day-to-day basis, so both schools have a senior leader – either a deputy or an assistant head – but because of the size of our schools, they also have class responsibilities.

We link up and share resources, helping to make our schools more educationally and financially sustainable. For example, we share staff training, joint sports events and shared trips.

Currently, Thundridge and Ponsbourne are still working in collaboration, and there is a formal consultation about a possible future federation, which we're hoping will begin in the spring.

DO YOU KNOW OF OTHER HEADS THAT WORK IN THIS WAY ACROSS MULTIPLE SCHOOLS?

I completed the NPQEL, the national professional qualification for executive leadership, and was part of a coaching group where I linked up with people nationally, who were working in or towards this kind of role, so I made connections there.

I am aware of some established federations in Hertfordshire, and I have to say that the leaders of those federations have been so kind and generous to me with their time and advice.

SMALL SCHOOLS VS LARGER SCHOOLS

I think they both have their benefits and they both have their challenges. There are lots of things that small schools do really well due to their size, e.g. getting to know all pupils and families really well.

I think that a federation can offer "the best of both worlds". You can keep what's really special and unique about your own small school, whilst enjoying the benefit and stability that comes with being part of a larger organisation. It can be busy trying to attend two Christmas plays and double sports day or discos!

WHAT TIPS WOULD YOU GIVE TO OTHER SCHOOL LEADERS WORKING ACROSS MULTIPLE SETTINGS?

- Proactive governors and supportive parents make a big difference.
- Keeping finances separate works well for us and gives parents and governors a sense of security and reassurance.
- Sharing transport for trips such as for our residential school journey helps save money. We split the cost on the ratio of children of children from each school so that it's completely fair.
- Shared staff training, CPD and INSET improve interactions and ideas as we're in a room with more people who are coming from slightly different experiences but with the commonality of both being small schools.
- We mix staff training up, organising our meetings so that we do a couple at each school each term, some on teams, and some that are school-specific.

WHAT IS YOUR BIGGEST TAKEAWAY FROM THIS EXPERIENCE?

Whether your school is big or small, we can all learn from each other. Collaborating with neighbouring settings and sharing how you handle difficult situations, celebrating the good and working together so the whole community benefits whilst also getting results and helping educate young people, is one of the reasons we all work in education.

HOW DO HFL EDUCATION SUPPORT SMALL SCHOOLS?

The SEAs and teams across HFL are on hand to support schools, whatever their size or location.

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WE'RE FINALISTS IN THE BETT AWARDS 2025!

Our Small Schools' Programme has been shortlisted in the 2025 Leadership and Management Solutions category of the BETT Awards 2025.

This news is exceptionally timely, as we are excited to announce that our Small Schools' Programme will be returning on Wednesday 22nd January 2025. Scan the QR code to find out more about this year's programme and book your place.



We have been overwhelmed by the positive response to the first series and felt it was important to continue this work. We have taken on board suggestions for further sessions.

Scan the QR code to watch a wonderful testimonial from Dr James Inglis, headteacher at Northaw CE Primary School, about how the school has benefited from the programme.



If you have any questions, email training@hfleducation.org or call 01438 544477.

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