

Exploring Job Sharing in Educational Leadership

Job sharing in district leadership positions offers a wide range of benefits.

By Karen Starr, Ph.D.



Across Australia, tests are under way to assess the feasibility of job sharing among education leaders (principals, assistant principals, and education business leaders). The tests arise from the need to encourage more people into leadership positions and to retain experienced education leaders.

Scarce research exists in this area, but many people are interested in the notion of job sharing, and since workers are encouraged to delay retirement, this option could grow in popularity.

Job sharing is attractive for many reasons. It can:

- **Create a work-life balance.** When faced with long working hours, sharing the leadership load

is attractive. Those currently testing a shared arrangement cite their desire for more personal time; “age and stage” issues, such as the need to care for aging parents; and the hope of a transition period to retirement.

- **Attract education leaders.** Education departments see the part-time shared option as being attractive to leadership aspirants at a time when there’s a shortage of education leaders, including education business leaders, and an increasing baby boomer retirement problem to address.
- **Redesign leadership.** There is an emerging interest in redesigning formal leadership roles with various new configurations and constructions.

Types of Job Sharing

Although other models exist, here are some of the most common:

Fractional time, rotating authority model. An incumbent shares the role for some of the time with an assistant leader (for example, an 80%–20% time allocation, with the incumbent working four days a week and the assistant stepping into the role for one day a week). In this model, there is a hierarchy of a substantive incumbent for most of the time with an associate leader for the rest.

Internship model. An aspiring leader pairs with an experienced leader to “learn the ropes.” This model involves a full-time partnership or a part-time shared arrangement.

Part-time, partial overlap model. Leaders work part-time with some common time when both are present to ensure thorough communications, planning, and joint presence at assemblies, important meetings, or official functions.

Equal partners, job-integration model. Two people bear equal responsibility and equal authority, working for equal amounts of time (usually 50% each), but not concurrently.

Syndicate or concurrent model. Two people share the role and status simultaneously all the time, with

each undertaking specific tasks or both sharing all tasks simultaneously.

Cyclical or turn-taking model. One person undertakes a formal leadership position for part of the year with the other taking over for the remainder; for example, a six-month cycle arrangement with two people each working six months in the job. Alternatively, this model could be configured with coleaders concurrently present but taking a cyclical swap of responsibility for different aspects of the role.

Temporary sharing arrangement. This model would enable an incumbent to be away for a set amount of time—such as one school term—for personal or professional development reasons, for example.

Multicampus or multisection of school model. Different people lead different sections or campuses of the same school.

Super principal model. One principal bears responsibility for a multicampus school of more than one sovereign school, perhaps with a site principal or manager in each school. In this model (referred to as an executive headship in England), the principal (or head teacher) takes prime leadership responsibility and is assisted by site managers.

Cross-cultural model. Partners from different cultural backgrounds work together to meet the cross-cultural needs of a school or school district.

The possibilities of job sharing appear endless, but each model is derived from different imperatives. Some configurations have no divisions of authority, whereas others follow a main/delegated model of authority. The types of arrangements depicted above typically involve two people, but they could potentially involve more people. The models could be amalgamated to produce more complex exemplars.

From the models currently being tested in Australia, the type of sharing arrangement appears to be decided by incumbents. At present, sharing arrangements are voluntary and designed to meet individual and educational needs. Approvals for such arrangements are at the discretion of governing boards and employing bodies.

Benefits of Shared Leadership

Job sharing provides opportunities for aspirants to gain experience in the role while being supported and mentored by a substantive, experienced incumbent. This option may be attractive for younger education leaders who would like to have a supported “test run” before plunging into a full-time, sole position. Coleadership also offers enormous advantages in induction.

Job sharing provides a valid and reasonable means of acquiring more personal time—work–life balance. Most

large organizations have work–life balance policies (even though in education they appear to be more aspirational than mandated or achievable). Sharing arrangements also offer individuals greater scope for professional learning, research, reflection, planning, and observations in other schools. Incumbents wanting to pursue further academic study may find job sharing attractive.

Joint responsibility may be less stressful, and common feelings of isolation and being “lonely at the top” could disappear. The “burden” of running a school or school district could be reduced, especially in the face of difficult challenges. Leaders sharing a role would have an automatic internal support base.

A joint, democratic approach to leadership could appeal to those who prefer to work in teams, with reduced hierarchies and formality. Job sharing supports preferences for shared or distributed leadership models, as opposed to sole, heroic leadership notions. If the top job can be shared, it can model more collegial, team-based leadership approaches.

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Evidence suggests that in its current configuration, educational leadership is perceived by many as being too complex, time-consuming, and demanding. Hence, the possibility of sharing may appeal to groups who are currently deterred or underrepresented, which would have systemic advantages.

Disadvantages of Shared Leadership

Shared leadership models have some obvious downsides. First is the issue of what to do when the job sharers don’t get along. Marriages and friendships can break down, so why couldn’t a job-sharing situation?

A divided leadership team would be disastrous for the institutions and individuals involved and could be difficult to resolve. Temperaments, job commitment, personalities, and dispositions all come into the equation. For job sharing to work, there can be no power plays, no exclusion, no sabotage, no marginalization. Trust within the relationship is imperative.

Few examples exist of employment contracts for joint appointments, yet an enormous number of considerations differ from a sole appointee’s contract. For example, how would a coleadership position be advertised? Or would it simply arise as individuals saw the need and potential benefits? Would partners be interviewed jointly? Would they receive the same pay (fractionally adjusted) and tenure?

What induction processes would be necessary, and how would induction be arranged? Would a

probationary employment period be required? How would performance appraisals be conducted—solely or as a team? How would conflicts within the partnership or complaints against a partner be resolved?

Almost universally, education leaders and business leaders work longer hours than reflected in remuneration, so who does the overtime? What hours are required of each partner? What would happen if one partner resigned? What notice period and succession plans would be required? Who takes over if someone is absent or on leave? What happens if one person wishes to change his or her work conditions?

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Resentment is a possibility if one person were to receive credit for work undertaken jointly or completed by the partner, or if one person's skills were recognized over another's. In the same vein, the joint signing of official documents and communications would need to be organized. Partners would need to have equal access to support staff, especially if those people were themselves part-timers. Appointments and briefings would need to be a joint responsibility.

It may be rare to find two people equally reliable and capable, yet if that were not the case, either the partners or the school community could become resentful and disenchanting with a sharing arrangement.

Role overlaps or task omissions are obvious pitfalls if communications between partners are not watertight. Furthermore, a shared arrangement could incur greater demands and work delegation to middle-level leaders and managers, making their working lives more demanding. Governing councils may be confused about unclear lines of responsibility or delegation. Stakeholders could try to play one partner off against the other.

There could be no guaranteed stability or sustainability beyond the life of an existing partnership. And at present, few central or regional support mechanisms are in place to support these new forms of educational leadership.

Making It Work

Obviously, people who share a job need to be compatible and have similar values, understandings, and philosophical beliefs, primarily about education but also about other important areas, such as the number of hours they will dedicate to education work.

It appears from the few reported cases in Australia, that coleadership is best implemented when partners choose each other. Throwing unknown partners together could be too risky.

Partners would need to have complete trust in each other, have complementary skills, and be collaborative team players; open and full communication is critical. An agreement would need to be reached about what should be done, how it should be done, when it should be done, and who should do it. Substantial time would need to be put aside for planning, handover, and review.

There are issues concerning office space (shared or separate?), as well as the split use of secretarial time and resources. Professional learning opportunities would have to be accessed equitably and tailored to individual and team needs.

The governing council and employing bodies would have to be supportive of a shared arrangement. Obviously, the institution would not want organizational disruptions or interruptions incurred through shared leadership configurations, or new models would not last. Clear documentation would be needed on how the job sharing would be executed. The school or district would also need to decide whether a sharing arrangement would be cost neutral or whether it would incur budgetary revisions. How much of the budget should leadership and administration consume?

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Quite clearly, if coleadership is to work, considerable planning and forethought are necessary.

Focus on Leadership, not Leaders

More research is needed in this field, so it is pleasing to hear that education systems testing shared leadership models are reviewing how such arrangements are working in practice. Numerous configurations could be adapted to suit the needs of each context and the individuals involved. However, the risks and opportunities that can be foreseen would have to be decided and well documented before shared positions were established.

Shared leadership roles provide an opportunity to focus on leadership rather than on leaders and enable more people to experience what school leadership actually entails. Shared roles also emphasize continual professional learning on the job. Given the enormous benefits that could be possible, job sharing is an option worth considering. After all, increasing numbers of people from all manner of employment fields are interested in job sharing, so why should education leaders be barred from such exciting possibilities?

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