

Convince your stakeholders

Jack Myers explains the importance of being open about what is being planned when schools merge

It hardly needs stating that the independent schools sector is grappling with one of the most challenging financial environments in recent memory.

In response to mounting economic pressures, many schools have been forced to make difficult decisions, which in some instances have sadly meant closures. However, many schools have been exploring other strategic alternatives in order to secure long-term sustainability, including restructures and mergers.

While consolidation may be the only realistic option for a school to remain viable, for parents, staff and pupils, the idea that their school community will be changing in a dramatic way can provoke genuine anxiety.

Effective communication is therefore critical to a successful merger. Too often overshadowed by operational concerns, communications should not be an afterthought – indeed, families and staff are unlikely to see the detailed due diligence or the various contracts that underpin a merger. Their primary source of information will be what their schools tell them, and if those communications are unclear, clinical or underweight, a merger can be seriously undermined before it's even begun.

The following article looks at what schools must keep in mind around a merger to ensure a smooth transition:

1. Plan ahead

One of the most common communication mistakes during a school merger is failing to prepare. Often this

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is because senior leadership focuses too much on the external announcement and too little on what their stakeholders need. While it's unlikely your press release will include details on changes to school uniform or whether there will still be a sibling discount, your parent FAQ definitely should.

So, there are questions the senior leadership team needs to establish very early on. Which stakeholders are the most important and how are we going to show we have prioritised them? How are we going to manage expectations given there will likely be a number of questions that will take time to answer? How do we reassure stakeholders of the opportunities a merger presents with clarity and confidence?

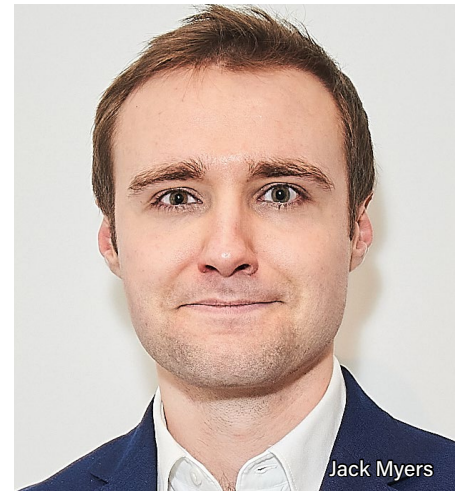
2. Align with legal and HR early

Merging large organisations is complex, from TUPE to staff consultations, to changes with suppliers. It can be a logistical minefield, so it's far better to have professional advisors engaged early to identify areas of vulnerability or sensitivity. Indeed, a positive merger announcement can easily snag on an HR or legal oversight, and missteps here can lead to morale issues that ripple across the broader school community.

3. Build a shared narrative

One of the most effective ways to create a unified announcement is to bring the respective leadership teams together early on – not just to align strategy, but to align story. Different communities will be coming from different places and will usually have different questions regarding a merger. It's very important, therefore, that all communications, no matter which school they are coming from, are consistent – stakeholders will likely compare and contrast messages they receive, and any contradictions will undermine confidence in the project as a whole.

Bringing leadership teams together also offers an opportunity to discuss differences between school communities



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candidly. For example, one community may be unaware of the unwavering grudge the other holds against it; or one may think of themselves as a more traditional school, while the other prides itself on its progressive ethos. Addressing differences in culture and perception early will lead to stronger, more authentic communications down the line.

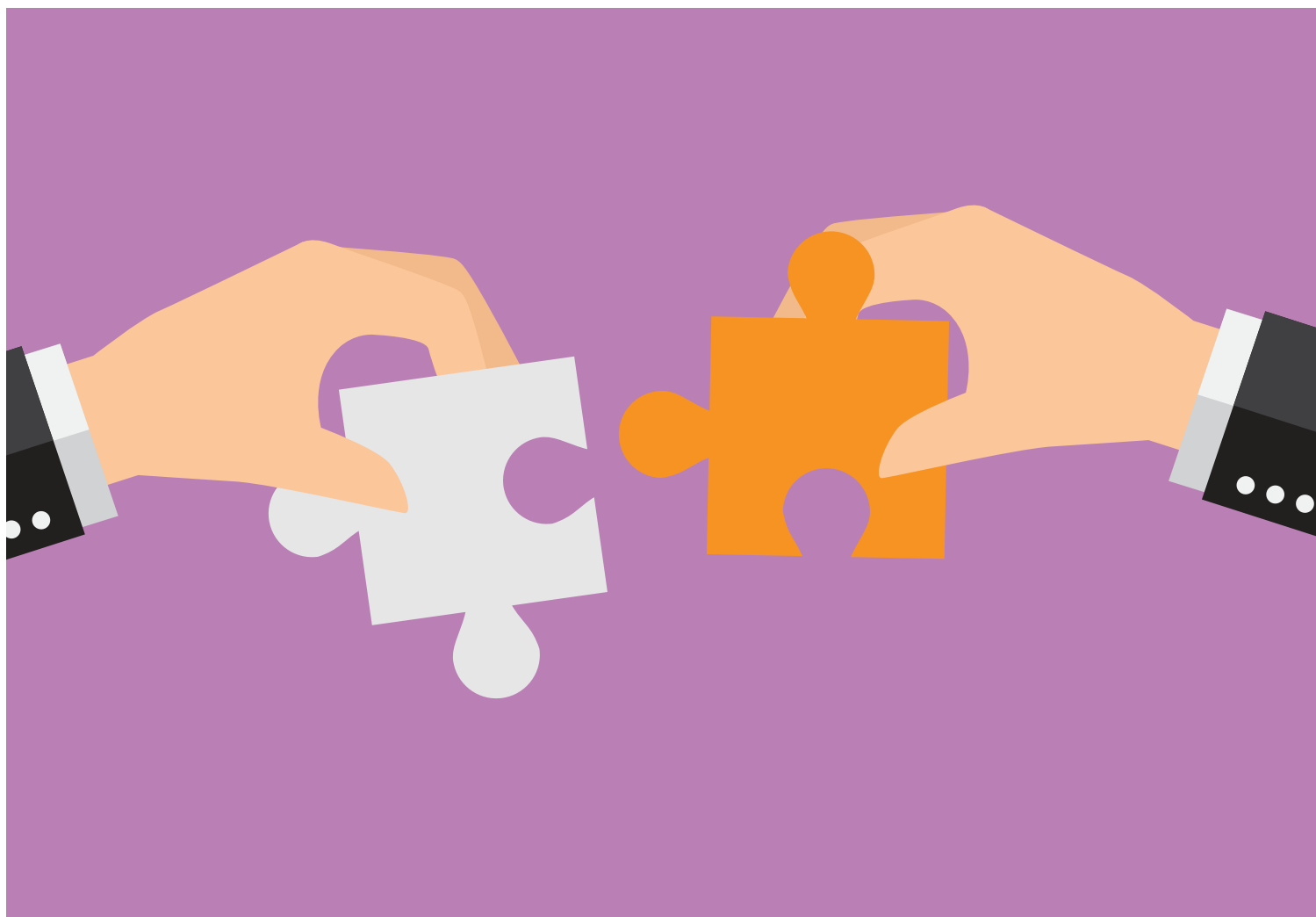
4. Avoid generic messaging

As mergers become more common, many announcements risk sounding boilerplate. “Shared values” and “aligned ethos” are topics schools may want to touch on, but they shouldn't be invoked glibly. Stakeholders will want to know what values are shared, what makes the two schools a genuinely good fit, and why now is a good time to bring two communities together.

The more specific you can be, the more authentic you will sound. Focus on points of connection between the schools: collaboration to date, shared academic philosophies, complementary facilities, aligned extracurricular programmes, or a joint commitment to a particular educational vision.

5. Marketing – don't rush the shine

This is a particular risk for the smaller school, which may fear it is going to be gobbled up by a larger operation. While glossy brochures and slick videos can



certainly impress prospective families, they can feel out of step with the emotions many stakeholders may be feeling about the merger, especially if promoted too early in the process.

Take the time to consider the sequencing when it comes to promotional materials rather than develop them as a matter of course. There is a time and a place for brand-building, but if it comes before trust is established and questions are answered, it can do more harm than good.

Likewise, the media can play an important role in shaping public

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perception. A media strategy should be developed early, spokespeople identified and briefed, and external messaging hammered out long before you announce.

6. Keep the conversation going

The initial merger announcement is never the last word; indeed, parents and staff will be keen to interrogate the detail of proposals.

Framing the merger as a collaborative transition, one in which the community has a voice, will go a long way toward easing concerns and fostering buy-in. Providing opportunities for stakeholders to ask questions and offer feedback is good practice following an announcement. Building dedicated Q&A pages that are regularly updated, setting up email accounts for merger queries, and offering one-to-one access or even small group forums can be effective.

In conclusion

Mergers can bring financial sustainability and strategic clarity to schools, but it's

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important to acknowledge that they also represent a deeply personal shift for pupils, parents and staff.

Most stakeholders are willing to be convinced of the benefits of a merger and are primarily looking for reassurance that the project is in safe hands; hence the more you can do to communicate the opportunities of your merger with care, empathy, and authenticity, the better. ■

Jack Myers is senior account director at PR management firm Alder