

'Academies: Let's find out for ourselves'

By Marc Rowland (Deputy Director, National Education Trust)

Whilst the source of the announcements about moves to full academisation (George Osborne!) was somewhat unusual, the announcement itself was not a surprise. Back in August 2015 the Prime Minister talked of all schools becoming Academies.

The biggest risk we face is risk aversion. For many schools, remaining as LA maintained might well have been preferable. However, it is increasingly no longer an option – even if it were a good working relationship in the past. That past is no longer on offer, not least due to diminishing budgets and capacity. This is no time for an ostrich approach to change management.*

Chris Husbands on the future role of the Local Authority: *By 2022 all schools will be national schools, directly funded by the secretary of state for education, but franchised to school operating charities. Local councils will have a prescribed but contained role: a responsibility, which it is difficult to see how they can discharge, to ensure a school place for every child, to co-ordinate the admissions behaviour of school groups, and to secure the provision of services for children with special needs.*

My personal view is that forcing the Academies agenda is a mistake and risks toxifying an issue when Heads and Governing bodies were increasingly taking a pragmatic approach to Academy reform. Nevertheless, the media furore, politicisation of issues and entrenched positions arising from the White paper should not act as a distraction. School leaders can't afford to wait for the policy to be perfect before finding out more. Read a forthright critique of the White paper from Chris Husbands [here](#).

The idea that becoming an Academy is some kind of golden ticket is of course ludicrous. But they are here to stay. And we will only know whether the policy has actually worked in the longer term when high performing schools are formally partnered within MATs with those that have struggled. Current comparison of the overall effectiveness of LA maintained schools and Academies is a particularly unhelpful basis for debate.

So whilst politicians and unions spin statistics and dig trenches, and government policy changes more often than a cuttlefish I believe our schools need to lead and manage this process of reform from the front. This, whilst managing the very complex challenge of ensuring that the infinite variety of young people that attend Sheffield schools get a great education every day.

So let's deal with some of the recent controversies around Academies and the White paper.

Parent governors no longer required... Again, I'd argue this is hardly a surprise. Governance has been moving away from a stakeholder model to a skills based one for some time. MATs can structure their local governing bodies as they see fit – including parental representation. I think this a positive thing to do (though I'd like to see parents of disadvantaged families better represented). But it doesn't need to be mandated to happen. Further, it is important that parent governors were never meant to represent the views of parents. No one will stop a school having a parent on the governing body, but they should be there because they have the right expertise. Getting it right with local governance can reduce workload too. For example, Burnt Mill Academy Trust in Essex only discuss curriculum and standards at local governing body level. Other issues are dealt with by the board.

NB noises coming from sanctuary buildings suggest there may be a u-turn on this one in the offing...

Inter-MAT payments and eye watering salaries... CEO salaries such as that paid to Dan Moynihan of the Harris Federation have been extremely damaging for Academy reform. But they are not representative and even if they were desirable, very few MATs would be able to sustain such high salaries. Boards will be able to put in place sensible pay structures to avoid such problems. Similarly, the recent story of inter-MAT payments unearthed at Perry Beeches Academy, whilst unpleasant, are easily avoided with a strong board. These things are avoided if the culture and values are right.

Admissions... Questionable practice around admissions and exclusions is not something that is exclusive to Academies. Read the Children's Commissioner Report from 2014:

<http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/publications/it-might-be-best-if-you-looked-elsewhere-investigation-school-admission-process>

Academies don't make this happen – it's a complex issue but if culture and values are right, we are far less likely to see these types of behaviours reoccurring. Excluding children with significant barriers to learning (or not admitting them in the first place) does not improve a school. It exacerbates problems and shifts them on to colleagues and puts the blame on the child. Learn Sheffield's priorities planning should help negate some of these challenges.

What is possible...?

When we start to think about the positives, that's when it gets exciting... At a system level, working together with Learn Sheffield means that no school should be isolated or alone in this process. This is particularly true for smaller schools and specialist provision. Big decisions can be taken within a context of high support and enable leaders to focus on what really matters – what happens in the classroom.

I recall a conversation with Nicola Shipman of the Steel City Partnership about the transformative power of that MAT for some schools facing challenging circumstances – not least in the way that leaders in each school felt responsible for outcomes of pupils right across the MAT and not just in their own school. Cross phase MATs offer the chance to iron out challenges of transition – where our most vulnerable children struggle most, whether changing from KS2-3 or KS4-5, we lose too many.

MATs offer opportunities for creativity around staffing – something that is essential during a context of diminishing budgets and challenging recruitment. I understand the anxieties people may have about changes of employers, but any school would be bonkers to make staff T&Cs worse in the current context.

Working with Learn Sheffield, TSAs and MATs there are opportunities to plan for the future: Planning for teacher and leadership supply. To do some exciting and radical things such as new leadership positions, responsibilities for research and development, coaching and recreating better versions of the Advance Skills Teacher, for our most effective practitioners to develop their careers in the classroom.

There are also opportunities for curricular freedoms. These are probably overstated by politicians, and a primary school leader would be crackers not to follow the National Curriculum in core subjects, but in the foundation subjects there are great opportunities for a community relevant curriculum that can prepare our pupils for learning and life. Rather than teaching them about the Stone Age, we can help to prepare them for Asia's century.

So what do we need to do...?

I think we need to think differently. I think MATs can be what they want to be. We should start from the perspective that everything is up for grabs at the moment, but the longer we leave it to consider what we want, the less choice we are likely to have. We need to proceed in a spirit of openness and collaboration.

It is still possible to convert as a single school, provided results are excellent and Ofsted report is strong. The DfE have been explicit in stating that no high performing school will be forced to join a MAT. But this model does leave the school isolated. My understanding is that the MAT is the favoured model – but there is the opportunity to convert as an excellent school and to form a MAT structure, with a view to others joining it as part of a MAT at a later date. The other option is to set up as an Academy Sponsor, often working with schools causing concern. But it is important to invite the RSC to Sheffield to talk to school leaders and answer questions you may have. Expressing an interest in becoming an Academy via the DfE website does not commit you to anything, but it will get you a point of contact there who will be able to discuss options with you.

MATs offer the opportunity to retain excellence within Sheffield – in a way that meets the needs of the unique contexts of our schools, but to not become inward facing. There is no reason why schools from beyond the city should not be part of our journey towards excellence, where as part of a MAT or less formal structures: Tinsley Meadows Primary is a model of the benefits of being an outward facing school.

In my experience, strong MATs:

- Get it right with their boards – both in terms of culture, values and expertise. How do you ensure you have the right people with the right ethos and skills? That will offer what Mary Myatt calls ‘High Challenge, Low Threat’. Having school representation on the board means that school leaders can play that highly strategic role in a way that might not have been able to do as a maintained school. But it is important that the board is skills based: HR, Finance, Research, Standards and more.
- They have robust internal quality assurance systems.
- They remain outward facing, they create partnerships and collaboration.
- They focus relentlessly on teaching and learning.
- They measure their success by outcomes for disadvantaged and vulnerable learners.
- They are open and transparent – particularly around data.
- They plan for growth and financial viability.
- They grow carefully and steadily, when they have the capacity to do so (sometimes appoint staff to enable this growth!) Pupil numbers are arguably more important than the number of schools.
- Have an ethos that everyone employed within the MAT believes in.

Multi Academy Trusts do offer considerable opportunity for school led change, provided there are clear lines of accountability, robust plans for financial stability and the required skills and expertise to deliver those plans.

What I do not think Sheffield schools should do is rush into creating MATs across localities throughout the city. That might be right in the long term, but it shouldn't be a quick decision based on the most convenient option now. Becoming a member of Multi Academy Trust should not just be made on geographical boundaries but on what works for pupils and the school community. If you decide on a locality model, it is important to have looked at alternatives first. And of course, localities can still work together whatever happens! Just be sure to enter into a partnership that meets your needs.

*There is no known recorded sighting of an ostrich burying its head in the sand – it's a myth – but useful all the same!

Further reading

‘What is an Academy?’ by the excellent Laura McInerney

<http://schoolsweek.co.uk/what-is-an-Academy-and-other-questions-about-converting-schools/>

10 Facts from the DfE

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/10-facts-you-need-to-know-about-academies>

And the rather drier... ‘Converting to an Academy’ from the DfE

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/convert-to-an-Academy-information-for-schools>

Schools can and should choose their family

www.tes.com/news/school-news/breaking-views/schools-can-and-should-choose-their-family-join-academy-trust

Sir David Carter Presentation:

<http://www.tauntonteachingalliance.com/sir-david-carter-presentation/>

Regional Schools Commissioners

<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/schools-commissioners-group/about/our-governance>

Chris Husbands on the White Paper

<https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/the-2016-education-white-paper-a-response>