



Department
for Education

Dominic Herrington
National Schools Commissioner
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
London
SW1P 3BT

7th July 2021

Dear Emma,

Following my session on 9th June, I promised to write to the NGA setting out in more detail why the Department believes more schools should benefit from being part of a multi academy trust.

The Department promotes the multi-academy trust model because it is hard wired to create the conditions for deep collaboration and a shared strategic vision across multiple schools, enabling clear accountability for pupil outcomes. By working in partnership, schools within a trust can share curriculum expertise and effective teaching practices to deliver the best outcomes based on the needs of each individual school.

Strategic governance is one of the key characteristics of academy trusts. By operating under a single governance structure, a strong board of academy trustees can effectively oversee the strategic direction of the academy trust and hold executive leaders to account for the outcomes of [all pupils within the academy trust](#). This means that there is clear accountability for standards across the trust; all schools within the trust can support each other and the trust is accountable for them all. This structure goes much further in promoting shared practice than other collaborative structures, such as federations or alliances.

Of course, it is not the trust structure itself, but what it *enables* that makes the most difference, not only for pupils but teachers and leaders too. Teachers and leaders are provided with the opportunities to gain experience across different school settings, share subject expertise and pilot innovative approaches. Trusts at a sufficient stage of development also offer structured and diverse career pathways supported by high-quality CPD opportunities, and a greater array of middle leader positions. Evidence indicates that 'teachers and middle leaders tend to achieve promotions younger in large academy trusts than elsewhere.' ([Ambition Institute, 2019](#)).

Academy trusts can also play a key role within the communities they are based. School leaders are empowered to use their local knowledge and relationships to make decisions based on the needs of their pupils and the interests of the communities they serve, working to create a shared vision to deliver the best outcomes for all. In the [Academy Trust Survey 2017](#) conducted by the department, virtually all trusts (96%) with two or more academies believed their structure had facilitated collaboration, and most also had formal relationships with schools outside their trust.

Whilst the performance of academies varies, like that of all schools, our strongest trusts consistently improve the schools they take on, both in terms of Ofsted and educational attainment. The department's [multi academy trust performance measures](#) show that the very best trusts consistently perform well above the national average in Progress 8 and other accountability measures.

The department also sees strong multi-academy trusts as a powerful vehicle for securing sustained school improvement by allowing high performing schools to consolidate success and spread that excellence across their local area. Evidence suggests that, on average, sponsored schools improve more quickly than equivalent LA maintained schools - [The DfE's 2019 analysis of sponsored academies](#) shows that before conversion, sponsored academies (both primary and secondary) typically performed significantly less well than otherwise similar schools. After academisation, most groups of sponsored academies caught up or surpassed matched schools that did not become academies. As of August 2020, 75% of sponsored primary and secondary academies that have been inspected are 'Good' or 'Outstanding' compared to only around 1 in 10 of their predecessor schools.

The internal school improvement structures of a trust can also effectively facilitate school improvement by offering meaningful advice and support that is tailored towards the specific needs of each individual school. Ofsted's recent report, ['Flight or flight? How 'stuck' schools are overcoming isolation'](#), found that the majority of 'unstuck' schools that were part of a trust considered the influence of the trust as intrinsic to their recent success. They cited the trust's role in raising expectations and providing challenge where needed, developing curriculum subject expertise and the scale and management of the trust as crucial to this success.

The single governance structure of academy trusts is also specifically designed to drive school improvement by allowing our best schools leaders to focus on improving pupil outcomes. By operating under a single governance structure, the trust is held accountable for the outcomes of all pupils and schools within the trust. The trust structure also means that administrative functions can be supported by a central team. The clear level of accountability for outcomes and the centralised support for finance, administration and HR allows schools to focus on great teaching, curriculum and support for pupils.

The trust model also allows trusts to achieve economies of scale. [The 2020 Kreston Academies Benchmark Report](#) found that MATs had the most improved financial performance before the COVID-19 pandemic, that MATs had an average surplus nearly 3 times more per school than a SAT and that centralisation of functions in MATs "suggests economies of scale are increasingly being realised". Recent data published by DfE ([Academy trust revenue reserves 2019 to 2020 - GOV.UK](#)) also shows that MATs have built reserves to the levels recommended for schools.

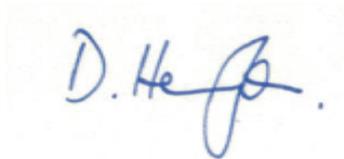
The strength of the academy trust model is in its flexibility to respond swiftly in times of need, to direct resources and ensure effective collaboration, and these benefits have become even more apparent through the pandemic. Following their autumn visits, Ofsted reported ([The trust in testing time: the role of multi-academy trusts](#)

[during the pandemic](#)) that many schools in trusts had found the support they received to be invaluable and this further cements our belief in the unique strength of the multi-academy trust model. School leaders found that the support provided by their trust in relation to safeguarding, interpreting Covid-19 guidelines, developing remote learning and integrating this into the curriculum had been crucial.

The Confederation of School Trusts are also working with the University of Nottingham on research that looks more closely at the resilience of the academy trust model during the pandemic, and we look forward to the publication of their findings. The past year has been extremely challenging for the school system but it has also highlighted that schools are 'stronger together' in formal partnerships and that having scale and greater capacity offer important advantages.

As a Department, we will continue to assess the emerging evidence on the multi-academy trust model to ensure that we are making informed choices and planning for a future system that provides the best quality of education to all pupils.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "D. Herrington", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Dominic Herrington
National Schools Commissioner