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Rt Hon Nicky Morgan MP
Secretary of State

Sanctuary Buildings Great Smith Street Westminster London SW1P 3BT
tel: 0370 000 2288 www.education.gov.uk/help/contactus

Emma Knights
By email: emma.knights@nga.org.uk

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Dear Emma

Thank you for your letter of 22 April 2016 about our recent White Paper *Educational Excellence Everywhere*.

It has always been my belief that the most sustainable way for schools to improve is for the Government to trust this country's most effective education leaders, held to account through skilled and effective governing boards, to transform education for the benefit of pupils. *Educational Excellence Everywhere* outlines our plans to build the conditions for the success of every school, and we remain committed to the vision of a dynamic high performing school system where every school is an academy by 2022.

I was sorry to hear that some of your members are concerned that the process of becoming an academy will distract schools from their fundamental purpose. Since launching our proposals, the Government has listened to feedback from MPs, teachers, school leaders and parents and we recognise that there are concerns around a blanket provision to convert all schools by a fixed date. As a result of these conversations the Government has decided that, while we remain determined to see all schools become academies in the next six years, it is not now necessary to legislate to ensure we achieve this goal. Existing powers and the evidence that more and more good schools are embracing the benefits of academy status gives us confidence that an increasing number of schools share our vision. Our ambition that all schools will become academies gives schools and local authorities a clear sense of direction to help them plan more effectively for a sustainable future.

No governing board should feel pressured to rush into an arrangement that is not right for them, and we will allow good or outstanding schools in strong local authorities to convert as and when they see fit. Boards and school leaders should think very carefully about what arrangements will be in the best interests of their current and future pupils. The Government will support schools, particularly small schools, through this process. In the last month alone, 227 schools put in applications to convert, the highest monthly figure since the programme began and we expect this rate to increase.

There will still be specific circumstances where more directive measures to intervene will be necessary. 104 directive academy orders have been issued to underperforming schools in the last month alone. We will continue to convert failing or coasting schools to academies so that they can benefit from the support of a strong sponsor, and we will bring forward legislation to give us new powers to convert all schools in a local area where local authorities are demonstrating chronic underperformance or a lack of financial viability, putting the success of their remaining schools at risk. We believe that with all schools as academies it will be easier for us to respond swiftly and effectively to underperformance across the whole system.

Let me be clear that we do not believe that becoming an academy is the sole factor in improving results. Becoming an academy simply makes it easier for schools to do the things that do increase standards. An academy-based system will allow for local solutions, delivering power to the strongest trusts to choose what will work best for their school. Where trusts are performing well they will be left to run their schools as they see fit with the opportunity to extend their reach. Where trusts are not delivering for our children we will act promptly to reduce their influence. It will also do more to set up leaders for success, ensuring that they have the necessary tools to grasp the opportunities provided by greater autonomy.

As I am sure you are aware, we have already invested in successful programmes that have helped build the capacity and capability of the system. These include the Academy Ambassadors programme and the Executive Educators course for MAT CEOs, both of which I know NGA has supported. We will continue to support the development of capability in the system through a new excellence in leadership fund, for the best MATs and other providers to develop innovative ways of tackling leadership challenges. We will develop and provide further capacity building support including guidance and 'how-to' tools based on evidence and case studies from the experiences of existing academy trusts.

We will also publish 'design principles' which will detail what we know about successful MATs and explain the basis on which RSCs will expect to approve new single and multi-academy trusts. We will work with the full range of national and local organisations to encourage development of the best possible academy and MAT arrangements.

As NGA has so helpfully already been promoting, we believe that most schools are better off in a group that provides a strong, long-term, accountable structure. Working together to be more effective and efficient, MATs can recruit specialists in areas like HR, finance or estates or chose where to source this expertise from. In sharing the cost of such services, MATs can spend less on administration and so invest more in teachers. It is easier for groups of schools to develop and offer high-quality training and continuous professional development for their teachers. They can offer better career opportunities, leading to higher staff retention rates. They can also share the task of training new teachers and developing new pedagogy and curricula, as opposed to relying on government-prescribed approaches. MATs also provide the best long-term structure within which stronger schools can support weaker schools to improve. This can include spreading their influence and expertise into new parts of the country, unconstrained by LA boundaries.

As I mentioned, I am aware and appreciative of NGA's work to promote groups of schools, including through your publication with ASCL and the work you do to support MATs through your consultancy team and advice lines. The model schemes of delegation you refer to in your letter are a fantastic example of the sector-led innovation that we want to see. I am absolutely confident that NGA will continue to provide invaluable support for its members.

I know that NGA is as convinced as I am of the importance of high-quality governance to the success of an autonomous school-led system. High-quality governance and leadership is especially important as we devolve more power from local and national government to schools. Our entire approach - from governance to curriculum to budgets - is about giving schools the freedom to adopt the models that work best for them.

I appreciate the value NGA members place on reserved places for elected parents. I too highly value the role that parents play on boards, and expect many parents to continue to play this valuable role. That is why all academies will always be free to appoint parents to the board and may continue to reserve places for elected parents if that is what they want.

I want to enable boards to be able to focus on appointing parents because they have valuable skills that make them effective trustees or local governors. I see no necessity to require academies to reserve two places on the board for parents simply because they are parents. Involving parents in governance, and listening to their views and feedback, are separate undertakings. As you say, the parents that are on the board are not playing a representative role. They must govern in the interest of all pupils and so they should be chosen for their skills do so.

You also suggest that elections are important to avoid 'governance by clique'. I am absolutely committed to the principle of independent challenge on the board, but schools should be free to determine how to achieve this. Some may decide to keep places for elected parents but some may achieve this in other ways. For example, Academy Ambassadors is successfully introducing business-minded people onto MAT boards to provide fresh and independent outlooks. Appropriate oversight and intervention arrangements are in place through the Regional Schools Commissioners to deal with any significant governance failures should they arise.

Listening to parents is, of course, as vital as good governance. Far from removing parents from their current involvement in the education system, we want to empower them to hold their child's school to account. This type of engagement is crucial to ensuring that all schools support children to reach their full potential. For the first time, the White Paper set out how in future we will expect all academies to engage meaningfully with all parents to listen to their views and feedback, particularly in relation to key decisions about their school. The White Paper also outlined a range of measures to help parents become more engaged with their children's education, including the launch of a Parent Portal to provide information on school performance and guidance on how the school system works. This new website will act as a one-stop shop for parents, letting them know exactly how they can get involved in their child's education.

Thank you for writing on this important issue.

Yours sincerely
Nicky

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