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National College
for School Leadership

Schools and academies

The growth of academy chains: implications for leaders and leadership

Robert Hill, John Dunford, Natalie Parish, Simon Rea and Leigh Sandals

Resource

Acknowledgements

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The research team takes full responsibility for the findings and views expressed in this report.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The purpose, scope and structure of this report

This report on the growth of school and academy chains is one of a number of projects commissioned by the National College for School Leadership (National College) that is examining the impact on school leaders and school leadership of the education policy changes being introduced by the coalition government. In particular the National College wishes to identify and understand the implications and challenges for school leaders posed by the rapid development of both sponsored and converter academy chains. It plans to use the findings from this report to help inform the development of the College's work on succession planning and leadership development within academies.

The National College set the research team the following questions:

- How many chains are emerging and how many schools/academies are involved?
- How are chains planning to expand over time and how do they see this happening?
- What are the different models for governance, leadership and management across chains? How do different chains deal with back-office functions and shared services such as ICT, and which arrangements offer the best value? Are there innovative approaches to delivering services and the curriculum? What are the pros and cons of each model and are there key lessons, for example in relation to overall size, geographical proximity, spans of control for leaders etc?
- What skills and qualities are required by chief executive officers (CEOs) of chains to be effective?
- How do chains that take on underperforming schools support improvement? What is the evidence of impact and how can this be sustained over time?
- What are the most effective processes for securing continuous school improvement across the chain?
- How do chains work most effectively with local authorities and other schools that are not part of the chain?
- How do the most effective chains support the transfer of knowledge and effective practice between schools within the chain? How do they learn from wider best practice and from other chains?
- How do the most effective chains support professional and leadership development including talent identification and development?
- What are the challenges and risks that chains should consider as they expand?
- Is there an optimum size for a chain? Can a chain be too big?
- Are the issues different for primary, secondary and cross-phase chains?
- What are the implications of the above for leadership and leadership development in chains and for schools more widely?

Methodology

The methodology adopted by the research team is summarised in Figure 1.1

Figure 1.1: Methodology for study of school and academy chains



The literature review focused on:

- lessons from the growth of charter management organisations (CMOs) responsible for running some 1,000 charter schools in the US
- the school improvement strategies used by federations and academy chains and their impact on attainment
- the leadership, management and governance of federations and chains
- risks and mitigation strategies associated with the expansion of school and commercial chains

The key findings from the review have been incorporated into this report.

The data analysis for the study examined:

- the number and classification of academy chains and their projected rates of growth. The findings from this work inform chapters 2, 3 and 5.
- an examination of Ofsted inspection data for sponsored academies, comparing those that are in academy chains with those that operate on a standalone basis. The findings are included as part of Chapter 4.
- GCSE attainment statistics for academies for the years 2006/07 to 2010/11. The findings are reported in Chapter 4 and a technical note on the methodology used is included as Annex B.

In September 2011 a survey was emailed to 37 CEOs and executive principals (ie those with overall responsibility for leading sponsored academy chains). The chains included were those that had three or more academies in their chain¹. Responses were received from 28 CEOs/executive principals², a response rate of just over 75 per cent. The size of the survey sample should be borne in mind as the results of the survey are used throughout this report. The questions for the survey can be found at Annex A.

The research team undertook nine case study visits: six to sponsored academy chains and three to converter academy chains. The full write-up of these case studies can be found at (www.nationalcollege.org.uk/academychains). Summaries and extracts from the case study visits inform the report at many points.

Telephone interviews were conducted with senior leaders and, in some cases, chairs of governors of 12 converter academy chains.

Interviews were carried out with a range of key stakeholders including officials and advisers from the Department for Education (DfE), directors of children's services and organisations representing headteachers.

The research team jointly with the National College either organised or attended five reference group seminars with the following groups:

¹ Since September 2011 the number of chains consisting of 3 or more academies has increased to 48, though many of these additional chains will not be fully operational until April or September 2012.

² For the sake of brevity the survey is referred throughout the report as the CEO survey even though some responses come from executive principals.

-
- a policy discussion for CEOs of sponsored academy chains
 - leaders of converter primary academies either sponsoring or considering sponsoring another school as an academy
 - leaders of chains of converting academies
 - CEOs and executive principals of smaller sponsored academy chains
 - CEOs of larger sponsored academy chains

Finally the research team and National College officials met with a programme board of experienced and senior school leaders to test and review their findings. The membership of the board is listed at Annex C.

What is a chain?

One of the first questions that the research team had to address was: what is a school or academy chain?

In *Chain reactions* (Hill, 2010) it was suggested that to be considered a chain, a group of schools had to meet seven criteria. We revisit those criteria and the fuller definition of what it means to be an academy chain in Chapter 13. However, it is clear that within the education community the term 'chain' is being used more generally and broadly.

For the purposes of this report, therefore, we have defined a chain in the following ways:

- A sponsored academy chain has been interpreted as one where a lead sponsor is sponsoring or responsible for three or more academies (though we have at various points also identified and commented on issues relating to sponsors who at this point are responsible for just two academies).
- For a converter academy chain we have followed the practice used by the DfE. The guidance on applying for academy status (DfE, 2011a) states that:

Groups of schools may decide, regardless of performance, that there are benefits to converting as part of a formal partnership or chain arrangement. Where schools are seeking to convert as part of a chain this should be stated on their application.

DfE, 2011a:10

The DfE uses a school's declaration on the application form to become an academy as the basis for identifying that an academy is converting as part of a chain. The governance models for these converter chains may vary:

There are a range of ways in which schools can work together as a formal partnership, from loose collaborations with no shared governance to being part of the same multi-academy trust.

DfE, 2011a:11

The governance models for converter chains are discussed further in Chapter 3.

Structure of this report

Chapters 2 and 3 of this report describe the landscape for, respectively, sponsored and converter academy chains. Chapter 4 assesses the impact of academy chains.

Chapters 5 to 12 review a series of issues relating to chains, drawing out areas that are common and distinctive to different types of chain. Each chapter follows the pattern of looking at the relevant issue from the perspective of sponsored academy chains, and the latter part of the chapter focuses on converter chains.

Chapter 13 takes a different form. The chapter reflects on the evidence presented in the earlier chapters and considers the implications for academy chains, the National College and the wider education system.

Chapter 2: The sponsored academy chain landscape

Introduction

The first sponsored academies opened in September 2002. The early academies were sponsored by separate sponsors on an individual basis. But in September 2004 the United Learning Trust (ULT) sponsored its second and third academies and so the first academy chain came into being.

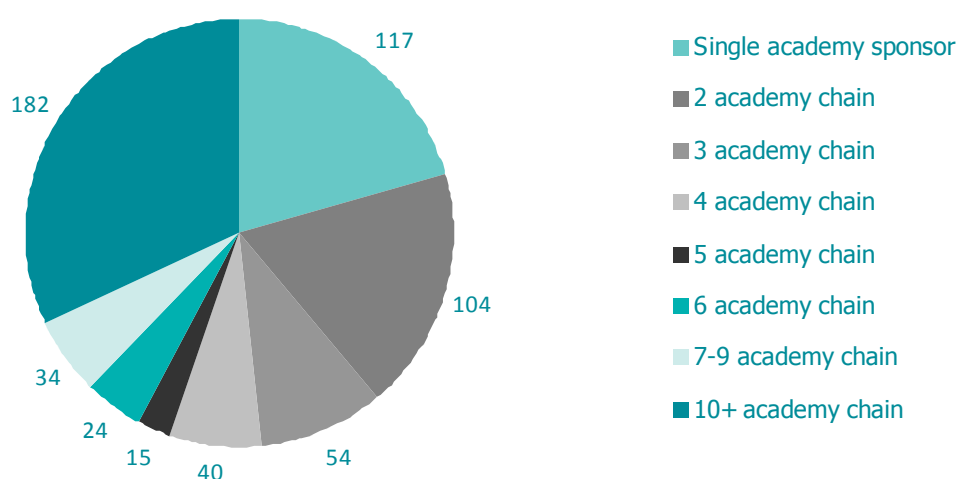
By February 2008 there were 40 academy sponsors sponsoring more than one academy (Adonis, 2008). However, at that point there was only one sponsor with a chain of 10 or more academies: ULT with 13 sponsored academies. Only one other sponsor (the Harris Federation) had as many as five academies that were open. The landscape today looks very different. This chapter charts:

- the number, growth and distribution of sponsored academy chains
- the drivers of this expansion
- the enablers of the expansion

The sponsored academy landscape

Sponsored academy chains have grown rapidly. Figure 2.1 shows the number and distribution of over 570 mainly sponsored academies (including those that are open, those that have been approved and those formally being planned with the DfE by size of sponsor). Nearly 350 of these academies are or will be in sponsored chains that have 3 or more academies in the chain.

Figure 2.1: Number of sponsored academies by size of chain



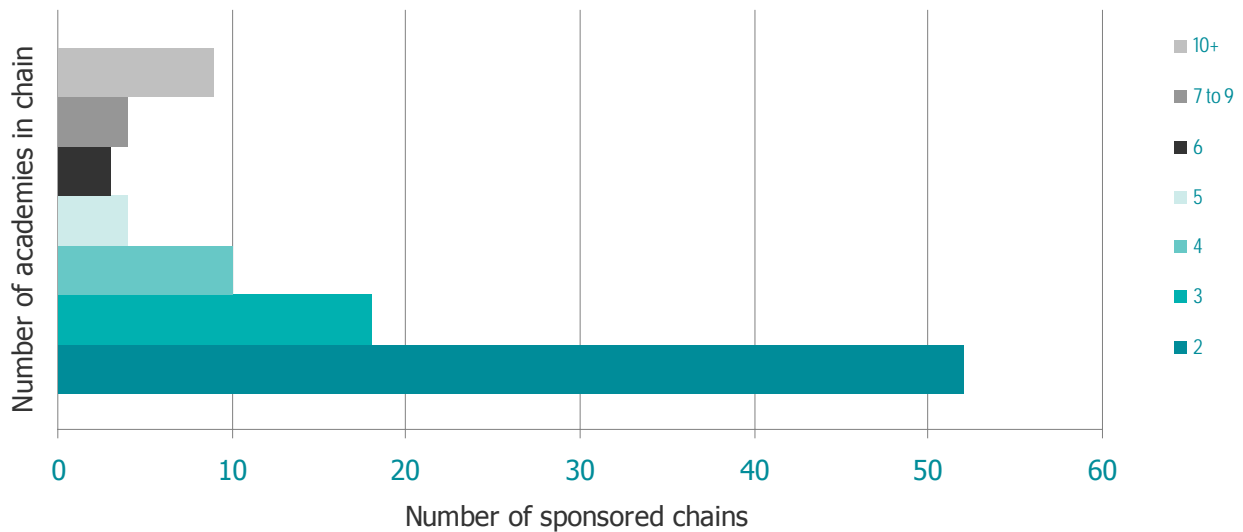
Source: DfE data on open academies and planned sponsored academies and free schools, as published at the beginning of January 2012

Note: Total number of academies included = 570, including 119 planned academies and 93 converter academies

Figure 2.2 shows the growth of chains by size of sponsor. A total of 52 sponsors have 2 schools in a chain. A growing number of these come from the converter academies that have responded to the government's challenge to take formal responsibility for a school by sponsoring another school as an academy. Over 30 converter academies are now sponsoring or in the process of sponsoring one or more schools as academies. When other high-performing schools and federations acting as sponsors are included, the number rises to nearly 40.

By September 2012, 48 chains are likely to have 3 or more academies in their chain.

Figure 2.2: Number of sponsored academy chains by size of chain

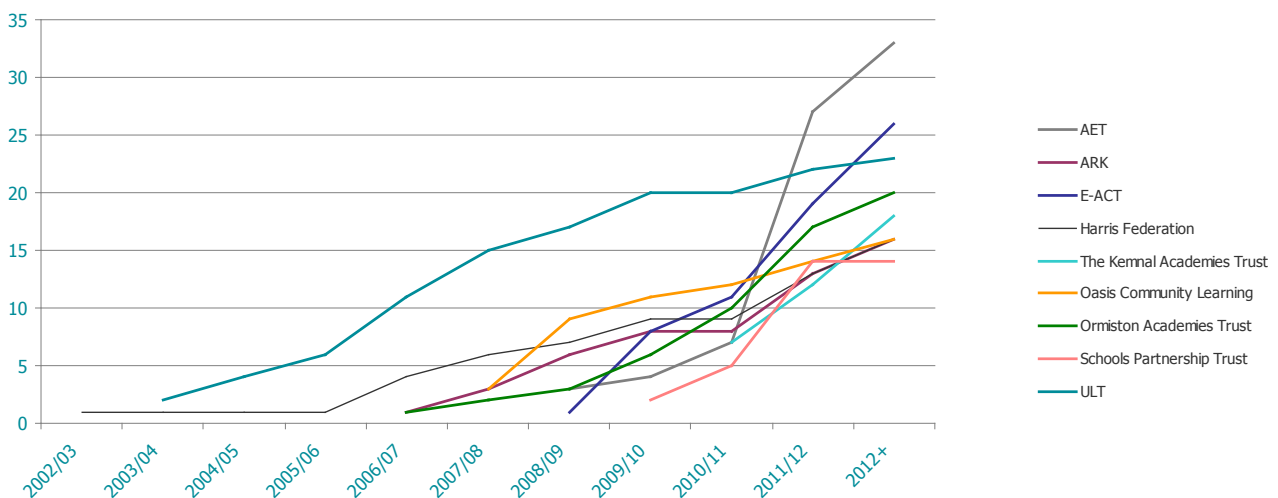


Source: DfE data on open academies and planned sponsored academies and free schools, as published at the beginning of January 2012

Note: Includes 119 planned academies and 93 converter academies

To date, 9 chains consist of 10 or more academies and they account for some 182 academies that are either open or are planned. Figure 2.3 shows the growth trajectory of these nine largest chains. In some cases the expansion has been very rapid. However, from 2010/11 onwards some of the growth is accounted for by good or outstanding academies joining sponsored chains. There are challenges in assimilating such academies into a chain but they are of a different nature and order from expansion that revolves around taking over underperforming schools. Indeed, the inclusion of outstanding schools into sponsored chains adds to their capacity to take on further school improvement projects. The number of new academies projected to join the chains in 2012 and beyond only reflects those formally being planned and reported as at January 2012, and as Chapter 5 explains, many of the chains have expansion plans that go considerably beyond the numbers shown.

Figure 2.3: Growth of the nine largest sponsored academy chains over time



Source: DfE data on open academies and planned sponsored academies and free schools, as published at the beginning of January 2012

Figure 2.4 describes the origins and growth of one academy chain over the past decade.

Figure 2.4: The growth of a chain: the Harris Federation

The Harris Federation takes its name from its sponsor, Lord Harris of Peckham. Lord Harris has strong roots in the south London area and is committed to improving the educational opportunities of young people. In 1990 he sponsored Crystal Palace City Technology College (CTC) on the site of a previously underperforming school and in the decade that followed the CTC steadily improved both its results and reputation.

As a result of its success, Crystal Palace CTC became oversubscribed. Lord Harris increasingly felt he wanted to do something for the parents who wanted to send their children to a Harris school but were not able to get them admitted because of a lack of places. When the academies programme commenced Lord Harris was one of the first in the queue to sponsor an academy in Peckham in September 2003.

Around the same time Dr Dan Moynihan became principal of Crystal Palace CTC and under his leadership the school moved from being assessed by Ofsted as 'good' to 'outstanding'. This provided the platform for Crystal Place CTC to support the start-up and development of two further academies: the first in Merton (in September 2006) and the second in South Norwood (in September 2007).

Two further Harris academies were opened in Southwark in September 2006. The original idea had been to have two Harris federations: one based on the Peckham Academy and one on Crystal Palace CTC, which by 2007 had also become an academy. However, that proved impractical and the academies came together in a single federation under the leadership of Dr Moynihan as chief executive officer.

The federation continued to grow steadily and by September 2011 encompassed 13 academies, including one primary academy and one 'outstanding' converting academy. The federation is providing education for over 13,000 pupils. The London geographical focus of the federation has been maintained, though the 'outstanding' converter academy is located in Thurrock (just across the Thames in Essex).

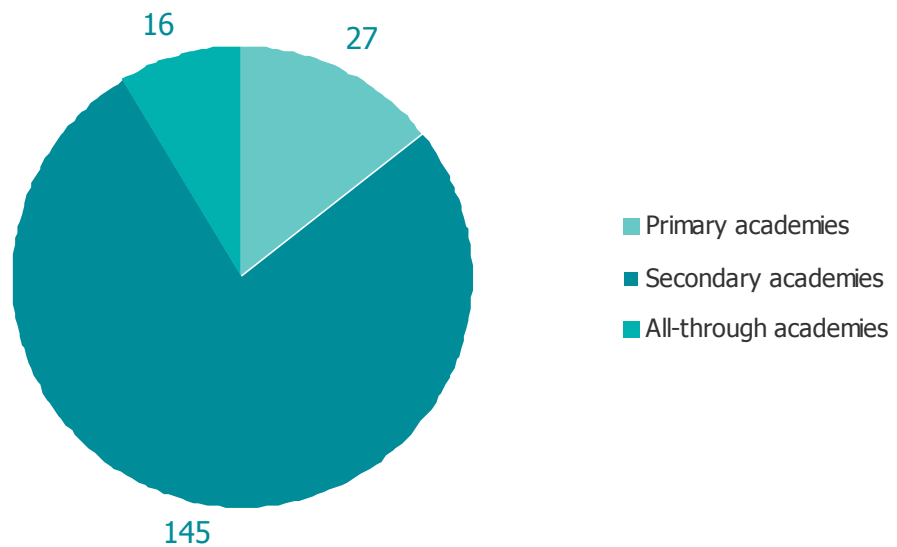
So far, 8 of the 10 Harris academies inspected have been judged to be 'outstanding' by Ofsted, with a ninth judged in a monitoring visit to be making good progress. In terms of the overall number of students gaining five grades A*-C at GCSE including English and mathematics, the average across the group has risen from 30 per cent in 2006 to 55 per cent in 2011¹.

¹ These results relate to eight Harris academies. In seven of the eight the results have been achieved entirely with students from predecessor schools. One Harris academy has been open for eight years, five have been open for four years, one for three years and one for two years.

Source: Interviews with the Harris Federation CEO and principals

The development of academies was until 2010 mainly a policy focused on the secondary sector, though a number of all-through academies were approved by the previous government. It is not surprising therefore to find that in those sponsored chains responding to the survey, three-quarters of the academies within their chain are secondary schools (see Figure 2.5).

Figure 2.5: Number of academies within sponsored academy chains by phase of education



Source: CEO survey (28 responses)

Drivers of the growth in sponsored academy chains

The growth in the number of sponsored chains and in the size of chains has been driven by a number of factors:

- the desire and ethos of the sponsors and academies to extend their school improvement model and expertise to more schools
- the need for some chains to expand in order to create a cost-effective operating model with enough academies contributing to the funding of the central support functions of the chain (see also Chapter 5)
- the government's view that structural solutions make a significant contribution to raising attainment particularly in underperforming schools. This policy commenced under the previous Labour government with increased opportunities for academy sponsors and the creation of National Challenge trust schools, and has been continued at an even faster rate under the current administration
- the adoption by a small minority of local authorities of a strategy to introduce and increase the number of academies as part of a cross-authority school improvement agenda
- the incorporation of some academy converters into sponsored chains. This has generally happened for one of four reasons. First, an academy might seek to join a sponsored academy chain because it wants the support (educational, support services or both) that being part of a chain brings. In some cases schools are jumping before being pushed into the arms of a sponsor, having seen the direction of government policy, understanding the implications of their current performance and wanting to have some control over their future. Second, a converting academy might already be an outstanding school and by mutual agreement with a sponsored academy chain it decides to join the chain in order to contribute to the chain's school improvement agenda. Third, a school could be classified by the DfE or a local authority as requiring school improvement support. However, rather than go through the usual and somewhat drawn-out process of closing one school and opening under the under the auspices of a sponsor, the governors of a school agree to join and be supported by a sponsored chain via the converter academy route. Fourth, an 'outstanding' converting academy or federation might decide, following conversion to academy status, to itself become a sponsor of another school in need of support.

The relative priority that CEOs give to the reasons behind wanting to expand academy chains is discussed further in Chapter 5.

Enablers of the growth of sponsored academy chains

Most chains are being enabled to expand through the role played by DfE brokers whose job is to match a school that is in an Ofsted category or below the floor targets with a sponsor that has the capacity to take on the school and turn it around. As Figure 2.6 shows, 22 of the 28 CEOs surveyed rated the role of the DfE in this area as 'significant' or 'very significant'.

In visits and conversations several CEOs and executive principals reported having to resist offers and requests from the DfE to take on further academies. The CEOs recognised the desire and urgency of the DfE to use chains as agents of school improvement but several felt they were at the limit of their capacity in terms of what the academy chain could manage at that time.

One CEO described his reasons for declining a request from the Office of the Schools Commissioner to take on additional schools. He considered it necessary to balance making an increased contribution to overall system improvement with:

our capacity to support another school whilst taking care of what we have now. This has at times meant saying 'no' to particular propositions to take on a certain school.

CEO, medium-sized sponsored academy chain

However, in weighing up such approaches from the DfE, CEOs were also concerned that if they said 'no' to too many offers the DfE might fail to consider them when the chain was ready to expand.

Coming a close second to the DfE's role were invitations and competitions run by local authorities. In practice the DfE and local authority roles overlap as local authorities are often the means of convening the sessions that decide which sponsored chain (from a shortlist drawn up by the DfE) is the preferred provider for a school that has been identified by the DfE as needing to become an academy.

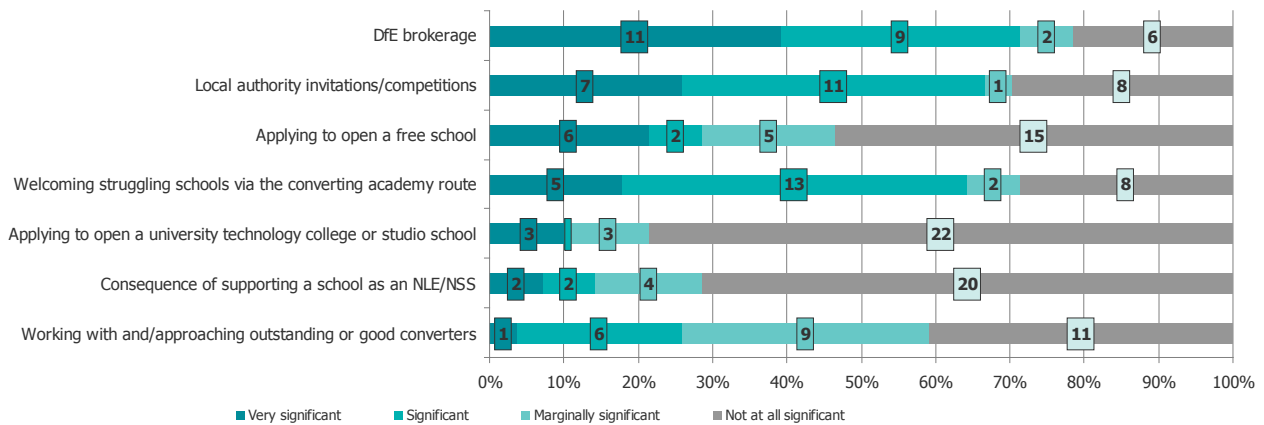
The process whereby the DfE, schools and local authorities shortlist and select sponsors for academy projects has the merit of enabling swift action to be taken to find a partner to take on an underperforming school. However, some sponsors and CEOs say they are not always clear as to how or why they are considered for some projects and not others. In addition, discussions with CEOs during case study visits indicate that they sometimes feel constrained about how open they can be in the selection process when it comes to discussing their assessment of the challenges a school faces. As one CEO said:

If you tell authorities the full truth about what is needed to turn a school around you risk upsetting them and not being awarded the academy. You cannot help feeling that sometimes academy projects go to sponsors who are less threatening in challenging the status quo.

CEO, sponsored academy chain

Figure 2.6 shows that sponsoring a free school is seen as a 'very significant' means of growth for a fifth of chains. Current figures show that 14 of the 95 free schools that either opened in September 2011 or are in development are promoted by academy sponsors. In addition further education (FE) college and school-based academy sponsors are increasingly involved in sponsoring studio schools.

Figure 2.6: How are you acquiring new schools to add to your chain?



Source: CEO survey (28 responses)

Figure 2.6 also confirms that converter academies are starting to make their presence felt as a driver of sponsored chain expansion, with over 6 out of 10 respondents seeing this a ‘very significant’ or ‘significant’ means of expansion. As explained above, converters may join a chain either because they are in need of support or improvement or because they have excellence and expertise to offer. One chain put the advantages of the latter scenario very clearly:

At any size, a chain of schools has to have sufficient leadership capacity in outstanding schools to be able to give adequate support to schools that need it. For this reason, chains like ours will seek outstanding converter academies to join the chain in order to be able to take on more weak schools.

Report from case study visit to sponsored academy chain

Although the inclusion of converter academies is significant, it is only part of a much bigger picture of what is happening to converter academies after they have achieved academy status. Chapter 3 charts this landscape in more detail.

Chapter 3: The converter academy landscape

Introduction

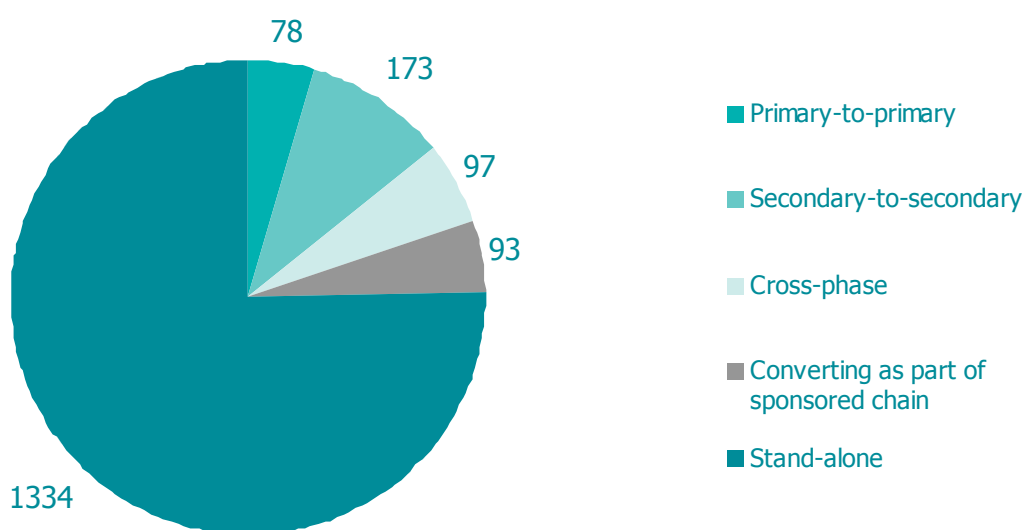
The growth in school autonomy has been a distinctive feature of the English education system over the past 25 years. Academies – and converter academies in particular – are the most recent and, arguably, the fullest manifestation of this policy. By January 2012, 1,775 schools had applied for academy status and 1,194 had completed the conversion process. Around a quarter of these schools are converting as part of an academy chain as defined by the DfE. This chapter:

- analyses the extent and distribution of converter academies within chains
- describes the different types of converter academy chains and provides examples of how they have been formed and are beginning to develop
- comments on the extent to which all the activity being brigaded under the heading of ‘converter’ chains merits that description

The converter chain landscape

At the beginning of 2012 around a quarter of the 1,775 schools that had either converted to or applied for academy status had done so as part of a chain, as defined by the DfE. The DfE had been notified of 122 converter chains¹, 68 secondary-to-secondary chains, 27 primary-to-primary chains and 27 cross-phase chains. In addition, 93 converting academies had become (or were planning to become) part of a sponsored chain by themselves becoming sponsors of academies, by joining an existing chain or by converting as part of a school improvement initiative. Figure 3.1 shows the number of converter academies in these different types of chain.

Figure 3.1: Number of academies converting by phase/type of chain as a proportion of all converting academies



Source: DfE data on converter academy applications, open academies and planned sponsored academies, as published at the beginning of January 2012. Note: Those schools classified as ‘standalone’ academies may be participating in a range of collaborative activity not reported to the DfE.

¹ Where a converter academy was part of a chain that involved sponsoring another school it has been considered as part of a sponsored academy chain rather than a converter academy chain.

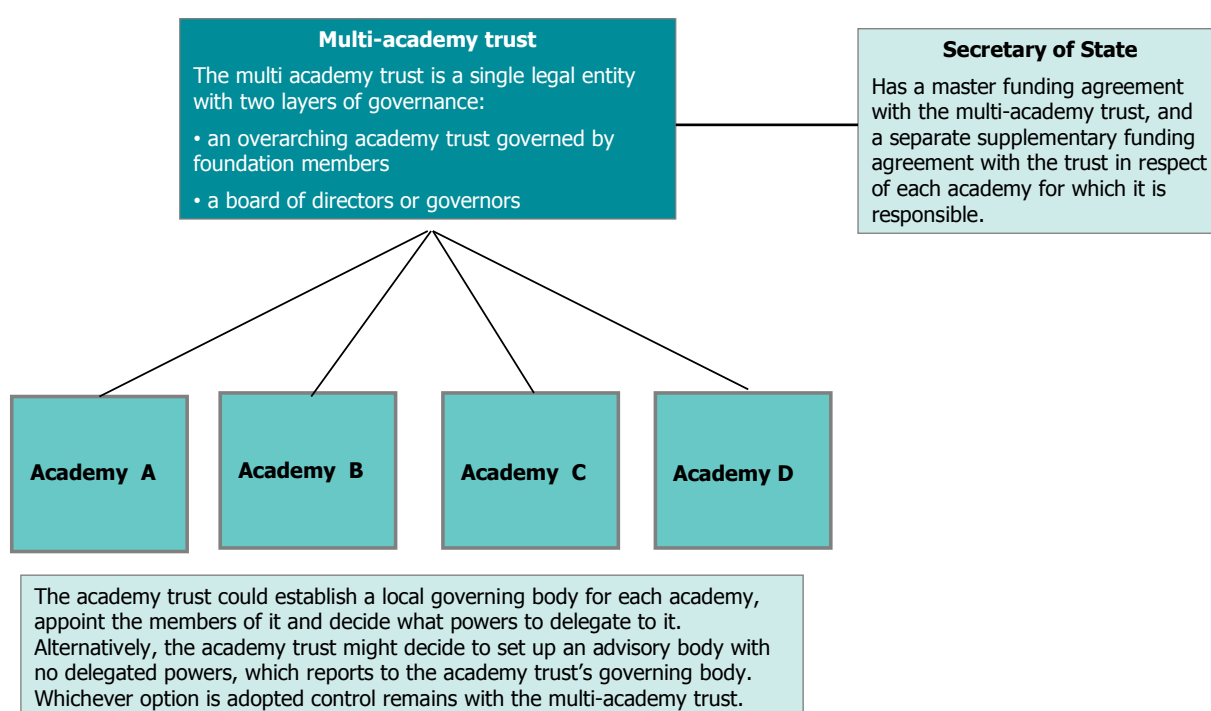
Different types of converter chain

There are three main types of converter academy chain.

Multi-academy trusts

These chains are in governance terms structured in the same way as many of the sponsored chains. The multi-academy trust has a master funding agreement with the secretary of state for education and a supplementary funding agreement for each academy within it. The trust has responsibility for the performance of all the academies within it. As Figure 3.2 shows, the governance of the trust operates at two levels: foundation members who constitute the charitable trust and a board of directors (sometimes referred as governors) responsible for the operation and performance of the trust's academies. If it wishes, a multi-academy trust can set up a local governing body for each academy, to which it can delegate a range of matters. Alternatively, the trust can set up an advisory body for each academy with no delegated powers.

Figure 3.2: Structure of a multi-academy trust



Source: DfE

Multi-academy trusts have some similarities with the constitution and operation of school federations. The 122 converter chains include 29 hard federations (that in turn incorporate 87 schools) and most of these are converting to academy status as multi-academy trusts. Figure 3.3 describes one example of a multi-academy trust formed by schools converting together to academy status.

Figure 3.3: An example of a multi-academy trust

Sharnbrook Upper School is a school in North Bedfordshire for pupils aged 13-19. In 2011 it became part of a multi-academy trust along with 3 schools for pupils aged 9-13: Lincroft School, Margaret Beaufort School and Harrold School. The schools had previously worked together as a trust school and the three middle schools had been part of a single federation. But the four academies now have a single governing body.

The individual schools, while they no longer have their own governing body, do each have their own school council. This is led by two parent governors who also sit on the main governing body of the multi-academy trust. The school councils, which work on the basis of written terms of reference and responsibilities, also include the head of the respective school, other elected parents, and staff and student representatives.

The head of Sharnbrook Upper School is the lead head for the four academies: his recent appointment was advertised as being for the dual role of upper school head and lead head. The head of Lincroft School is a national leader of education (NLE) and is now executive head of the three middle schools, having previously exercised this role for two of them.

Source: Telephone interviews with leaders of the Academy Federation of North Bedfordshire Schools

Umbrella trusts

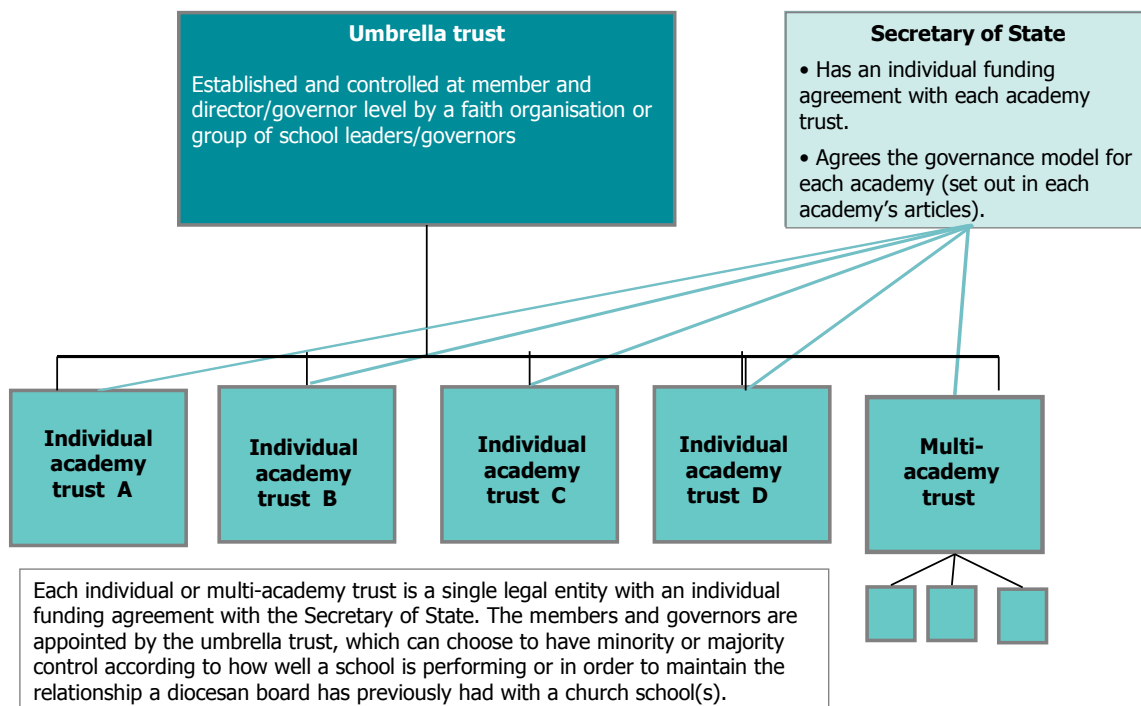
Under this model, a faith body or a group of schools sets up an overarching charitable trust. This trust in turn establishes individual or multi-academy trusts to run the schools coming under the umbrella of the overarching trust. Each of the individual academy trusts within the umbrella has a separate funding agreement with, and articles of association approved by, the secretary of state. As Figure 3.4 describes, the umbrella trust can choose how much control it exercises over the trusts within the umbrella, according to either:

- how well a school is performing; or
- how far it wants to determine the relationship it has with an academy

For example, a diocese may wish to replicate the governance relationship it previously had with a voluntary-aided school. Thus a diocesan education board might establish an umbrella trust that then nominates a majority of the members to the individual or multi-academy trust set up by a voluntary-aided church school(s) on conversion to academy status. Figure 3.5 provides an example of this arrangement in practice.

This means that although an individual academy or group of academies operates to and is governed by its own academy trust, the foundation membership and governance of that trust is to a greater or lesser extent influenced and controlled by the overarching umbrella trust.

Figure 3.4: Structure of an umbrella trust



Source: DfE

Figure 3.5: Example of a faith-based academy trust working within an umbrella trust

The Becket School in Nottingham along with its partner primary schools (Blessed Robert Widmerpool, Our Lady and St Edward's and St Edmund Campion) converted to academy status together to form a multi-academy trust. This move reflected the schools' previous joint partnership working and also the local bishop's view that families of Catholic schools should convert together if they were minded to apply for academy status.

The multi-academy trust has an executive committee that has responsibility for the joint work of the schools, with each school having its own local governing body with delegated responsibilities. However, the multi-academy trust for the four schools sits within the Catholic diocese of Nottingham's umbrella trust. The majority of the members, or foundation governors as they are sometimes called, of the multi-academy trust are appointed by the bishop through this umbrella trust.

The diocesan umbrella trust will have a similar relationship with other Catholic voluntary-aided schools in the diocese that convert to academy status.

Source: Report of meeting with leaders of the South Nottingham Catholic Academy Trust

The introduction of umbrella trusts is not limited to academies that are part of a faith community, as Figure 3.6 describes. Umbrella trusts have the potential to act as a sort of charitable holding company for growing a chain of converter academies.

Figure 3.6: Example of a non-faith-based umbrella trust

Huntingdon Primary School is an 'outstanding' school in Nottingham that had been supporting another local primary school, Edna G Olds, though both schools have gained from their collaboration. They decided that along with a third primary school, St Ann's Well, they would apply for academy status. However, each school wanted to keep its own governing body, and so they decided to form an umbrella trust, called the L.E.A.D. Academy Trust (the initials stand for lead, empower, achieve and drive).

The umbrella trust includes the heads and chairs of the three founding schools, though Huntingdon has the majority of places. The trust also includes representation from external education experts. Although the three schools have their own governing bodies they share an executive head, who was formerly head of Huntingdon and who is supported by a head of school in each of the three primaries.

The trust sees the umbrella model as providing member schools with the autonomy to lead and manage in a way that preserves their individual identities and responds to specific community needs. The unifying factors are seen as a shared vision and values; partnership working in key areas such as leadership, professional development and sharing best practice; improved succession and career planning; and a relentless focus on an exceptional quality of teaching and learning.

The umbrella trust has more schools wanting to come within its umbrella.

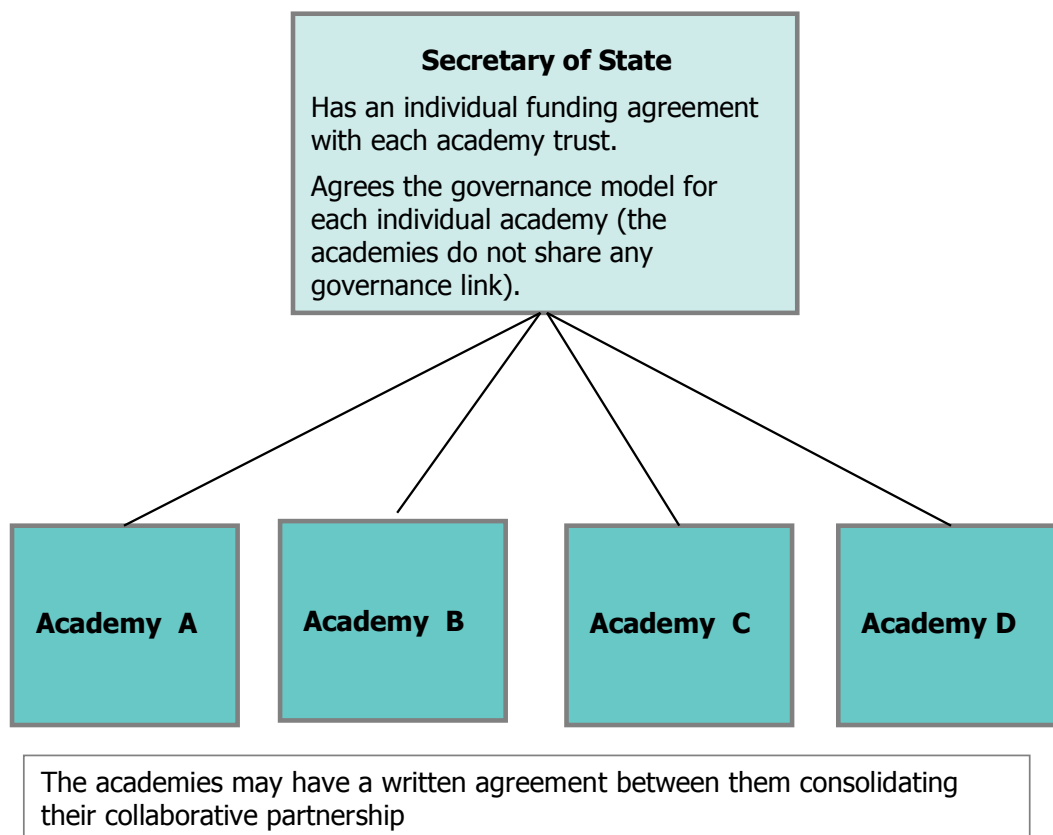
Source: Interviews with leaders and chair of governors of the L.E.A.D. Academy Trust

Collaborative partnerships

The majority of converter academy chains are, however, not so formal or structured: they take the form of looser collaborative partnerships. These arrangements fall within the DfE's third definition of a chain: the collaborative partnership (Figure 3.7). In this model the heads or principals of converting academies agree to work together in areas where they see some mutual benefit. With this model the secretary of state enters into a separate funding agreement with each academy. There is no need for shared governance arrangements between the academies involved and in these cases the partnership is looser rather than tighter, as Figure 3.8 illustrates.

However, some academies have taken their collaborative partnership a stage further. Although these academies have not moved into having shared or integrated governance they have adopted a formal partnership agreement, covering either their general relationship with each other or their joint activity on specific projects or procurement, as Figure 3.9 describes. Sometimes collaborative partnership is a way for a high-performing academy to discharge the expectation to support another school: indeed, sometimes a school that would not qualify for academy status in its own right has been accepted to become an academy because it has agreed to work with and be supported by another converting academy that is 'outstanding'.

Figure 3.7: Structure of a collaborative partnership



Source: DfE

Figure 3.8: Example of an informal collaborative converter chain

In the London borough of Bromley, 10 primary schools came together through the academy conversion process when they jointly procured the legal services necessary to facilitate academy conversion to form a collaborative 'chain'. The academies rely mostly on the strength of personal relationships and trust between leaders in order to make their joint work effective. The schools are working to a very pragmatic philosophy: where working together "has got strengths, we use it and where it hasn't we don't", was how one headteacher put it.

So, for example, the academies are working together to provide a training programme for newly-qualified teachers (NQTs). If a good outside speaker were available for a continuing professional development (CPD) event, the academies would share the costs. Peer-to-peer lesson observation is also part of the local culture. There have also been some moves towards sharing leadership development needs and resources.

A subset of six academies in the chain is looking at potentially procuring grounds maintenance, education welfare, insurance and behaviour services. They will report back to the whole 'chain'.

Source: Telephone interview with the primary head of an academy in a collaborative chain

Figure 3.9: Example of a more formal collaborative chain

All 14 secondary schools in the London borough of Sutton together with a special school for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties and the pupil referral unit have either converted to become academies or have indicated an interest in doing so (12 have become academies thus far). The schools are a mix of grammar, faith and comprehensive schools and all of them have been performing well: during the academy conversion process they were all judged 'good' or 'outstanding' by Ofsted.

Although there had not been much previous joint activity between the schools there were good relationships which had been fostered by the previous director of children's services. For example, protocols on exclusions and hard-to-place pupils were already in place. The schools did not want to "splinter off" and recognised that although none of them wanted to compromise on their autonomy it was in their long-term self-interest to collaborate rather than act as competing blocks when it came to discussions with the authority on issues such as central funding formulas.

There was also anxiety about being isolated from other schools and the community. By coming together as a partnership it helped to allay anxieties, particularly among staff. A formal partnership agreement has been agreed between the schools that commits them to:

- operating in a mutually supportive way
- acting as critical friends to each other
- sharing (performance) information openly using a standard spreadsheet template

Most activity is agreed through monthly meetings of the heads of the schools, with the meetings moving round different schools, thus providing an opportunity to understand more about each school. The school that provides the chair of the partnership takes on the role of organising the meetings and providing the basic servicing of the partnership. The chair of the group rotates every year. The deputy heads also meet regularly and have their own residential event.

Source: Telephone interviews with heads in a collaborative partnership

Another variant involves chains of two or more schools that have been in a hard federation converting to become a multi-academy trust, but also working with a wider group of local schools in a looser collaborative arrangement. The Huntingdonshire Secondary Education Partnership described in Figure 3.10 is one such example.

Figure 3.10: Example of schools in a multi-academy trust working with other schools in a collaborative chain

Longsands Academy and Ernulf Academy together form the St Neots Learning Partnership, a multi-academy trust. The federation came into being in 2010 when Longsands was asked to support Ernulf (a nearby local school) which was at that point in special measures.

Both schools are part of a wider grouping of 7 11-18 secondary schools in Huntingdonshire that have a history of working together for over 20 years. The partnership conducts a lot of its work through network groups that focus on areas such as work experience placements, provision for pupils who have been excluded or are not at school, and subject and curriculum support.

At the time the schools applied for academy status, only those assessed by Ofsted as 'good with outstanding features' or better were eligible to become academies. Only Longsands had this status at that point (three other schools within the partnership have since also been given the same assessment). The schools agreed therefore to apply as a group and agreed to deepen their joint work together.

Longsands and Ernulf, therefore, are working at a more integrated and deeper level on school improvement strategies, while still being strong active partners in the wider collaborative chain.

Source: Report of meeting with leaders of academies in a multi-academy trust and collaborative chain

The converter academies involved in these collaborative chains are quick to point out that they prize their autonomy. But many of the leaders of these academies also recognise the need for interdependence to go hand in hand with independence. As one head put it:

We don't want to go back to the grant-maintained era.

These leaders accept that efficiency and mutual self-interest dictate the need for schools to work together to provide support services, school improvement challenge and support and, in some cases, a more holistic offer for children and families in a particular community. Partnership activity centres on procurement functions, shared CPD, training (for example of NQTs), curriculum planning, work on transition between primary and secondary schools, some shared leadership development and general mutual support.

Understanding the spectrum of chain activity

The DfE's categorisation of different types of chain activity among converting academies is at one level very broad. Indeed many academies – sponsored, converting and those working in collaboration – consider that the definition of a chain being used by the DfE is too broad and makes the term devoid of meaning. Academies working together in loose collaborations do not see or describe themselves as chains, even though they fall within the DfE's definition. Others that are working in a more structured fashion consider it wrong to equate a multi-academy trust that has an integrated budget and governance framework with a loose collaboration of schools. This is not to make a value judgement about the different types of partnership working: it's about being clear that different forms of activity each need their own label. It is repeating the mistake made in the early days of federations when that term was used to embrace everything from informal joint working to shared governance.

However, at another level the DfE's description of chain-like activity is too narrow. It does not capture the full extent of the way that converting academies are working together. For example, the 73 schools involved in Challenge Partners (see Figure 3.11) are undertaking shared work that has the potential to be every bit as effective (and in some respects possibly more so) as many chains.

Figure 3.11: The Challenge Partners model

Challenge Partners describe themselves as working to a John Lewis style mutual collaboration. The schools contribute £7 per pupil to a common pool. The funding is used to provide a peer-led inspection, access for all schools to high-quality teaching and learning programmes and the establishment of subject networks.

Senior leaders in each school are trained to inspect other schools in a consistent fashion. Every Challenge Partner school receives an annual inspection or review that is focused on developing and improving the capacity of the school. Schools are evaluated one-third on the basis of their behaviours and two-thirds on the basis of outcomes.

The schools are clustered in regional hubs. Each hub has been trained to deliver the improving and outstanding teacher programmes. Access to these programmes is co-ordinated by the hub schools, which also provide a basis for mutual support with middle leaders going in and out of each other's schools.

Challenge Partners are also drawing up a network of excellent practice so that every school knows where to go to obtain specialist advice and support. Challenge Partners see themselves as potential academy sponsors, offering associate membership to an academy while a school is supported and improved, with the prospect of progressing to full membership when its improvement profile is on a sustained upward trajectory.

Source: Interviews with Challenge Partners

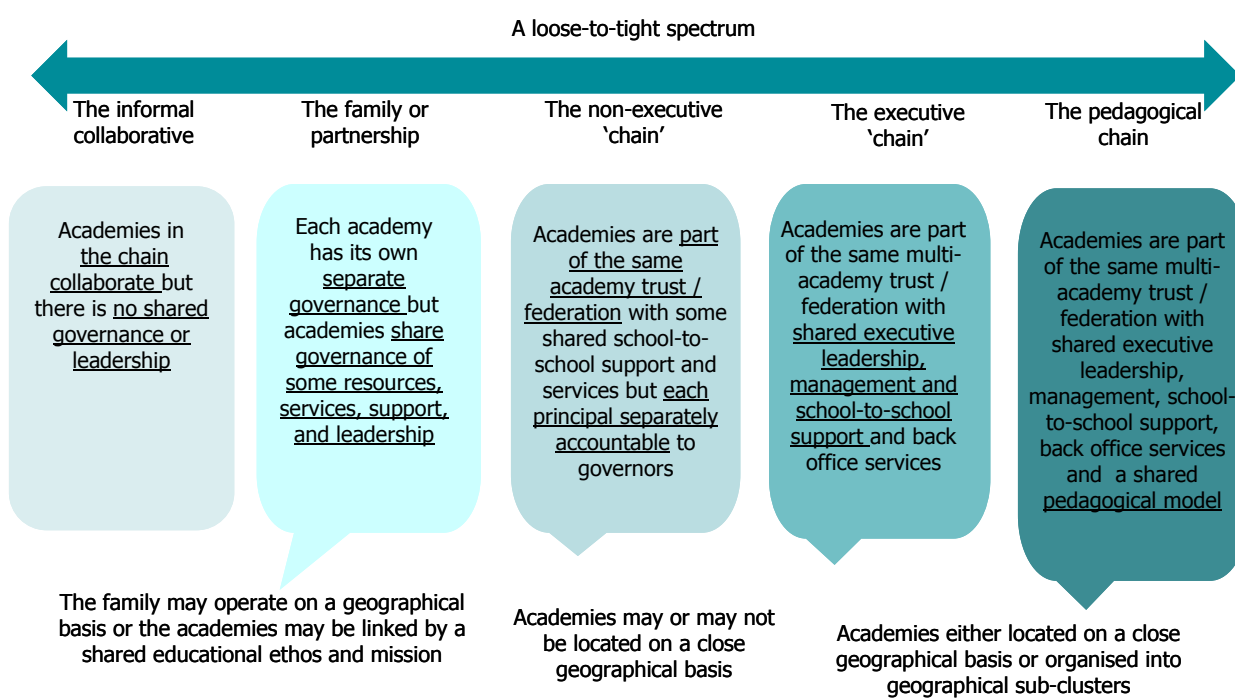
A more helpful way of describing what is happening is to look at the scope of collaborative activity between academies as being on a loose-to-tight spectrum, as Figure 3.12 does. The left-hand side of Figure 3.12 describes those academies working together to provide mutual support but in an informal manner, while the right-hand side describes what might be said to be a full-on academy chain with integrated governance, leadership and resourcing and based on the development of a shared pedagogical approach. Not only does this spectrum help to capture the breadth of activity among converter academies but it also starts to tease out the different ways that sponsored academy chains are working together, as later chapters will describe.

This spectrum also has some relevance to sponsored academy chains. Even when academies share the same lead sponsor they do not always consider themselves a chain. One diocesan sponsor told the research team:

We do not regard the schools as part of a chain; we would regard them as a family.

The principal of another academy described three academies sharing the same sponsor as “first cousins” rather than a chain. In Chapter 13 we return to the issue of what makes a chain, a chain.

Figure 3.12: Viewing chains on a loose-to-tight spectrum



This concept of the spectrum is also helpful from another dimension. Where academies are positioned on the spectrum is not static: their relations and chain activity are evolving fast. It is like looking at a film that has been speeded up. Going back to check facts and descriptions with academies as part of drafting this report resulted in corrections being made not because the original description was wrong but because the numbers of academies, the size of chains and the nature of collaborative activity are changing every month if not every week.

In Chapter 5 we explore further the ways in which chains are growing and could evolve. The next chapter, however, looks at the impact of academy chains on school improvement.

Chapter 4: The impact of academy chains

Introduction

Any assessment of the impact of academy chains is at this stage inevitably provisional. The advent of chains is a recent phenomenon and the position is, as we have seen, fluid. Chapter 9 looks at the contribution academy chains make to leadership development and Chapter 11 examines both the value and potential value of the ways in which chains are organising support functions. This chapter focuses on the value that academy chains are bringing to school improvement. The evidence should be treated with some caution because the numbers for some of the comparisons are small and it is only just starting to become possible to identify and interpret trends over time. Evidence relating to three particular areas has been examined:

- attainment at GCSE, as measured by the proportion of pupils gaining five grades A*-C, including English and mathematics, where the performance of sponsored academies in a chain of three or more is compared with that of academies that stand alone or are only in a two-strong chain
- assessments of overall effectiveness, as judged by Ofsted where the performance of sponsored academies in a chain of three or more academies is compared with other academies
- the performance of federations, which could provide some pointers to what the system might expect from the expansion of converter academy chains

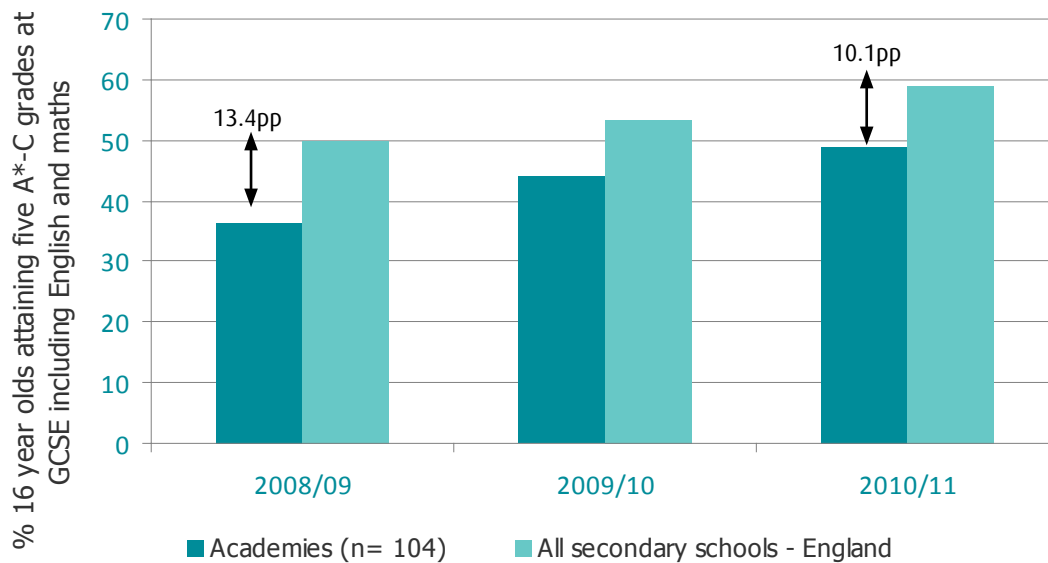
Attainment at GCSE

The performance of academy chains needs to be seen and assessed within the context of academies as a whole.

In 2010 the National Audit Office (NAO) analysed the GCSE results for academies from 2003/04 to 2007/08. It found that while academies had some way to go to match the national average for the percentage of pupils achieving five or more A*-C grades at GCSE, including English and mathematics, academies were 'nonetheless making good progress against comparable maintained schools both in absolute attainment and relative to prior attainment' (NAO, 2010:18). The NAO was able to identify 'a clear lift in performance' (ibid:17) after schools became academies, with academies overall increasing the rate of improvement in GCSE results compared with trends in their predecessor schools. A similar trend has been identified by London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) researchers, though they noted that it took time before the benefit of academy status was reflected in improved performance (Machin & Veroit, 2011).

Our analysis confirms this trend. Figure 4.1 shows that between 2008/09 and 2010/11 secondary academies on average improved at a faster rate than that for all secondary schools in England. In the 104 academies included in the analysis the average percentage of pupils gaining 5 grades A*-C at GCSE including English and mathematics increased from 36.4 to 48.8 per cent, an increase, when rounded, of 12.5 percentage points. This compares with an average increase for all secondary schools over the same period of 9.1 percentage points. The gap between the average performance of academies and all secondary schools has narrowed from 13.4 to 10.1 percentage points.

Figure 4.1: Average percentage of 16-year olds in academies achieving five grades A*-C at GCSE, including English and mathematics, compared with all secondary schools in England 2008/09-2010/11

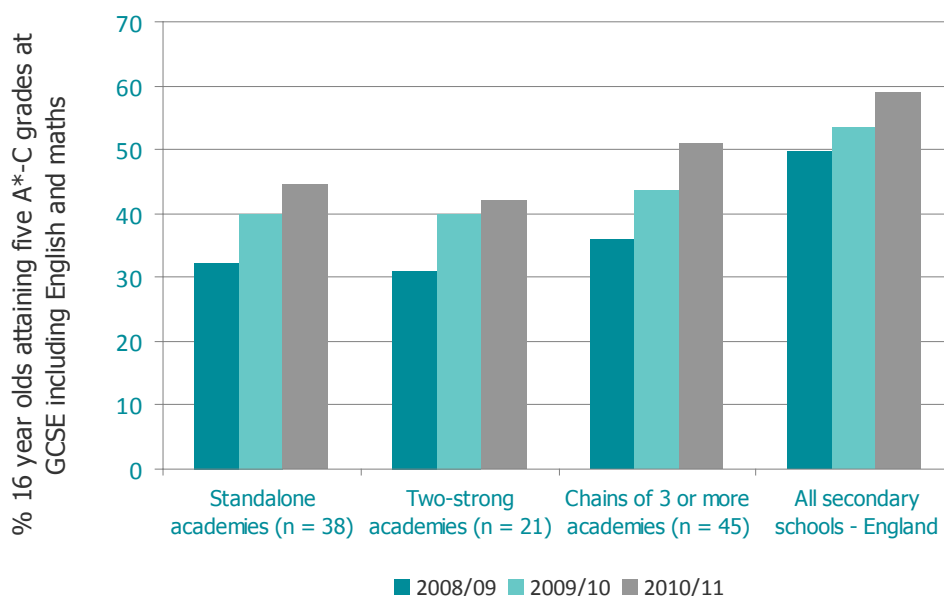


Source: Analysis of final DfE data for GCSE results and equivalents for 2008/09 and 2009/10 and revised data for 2010/11 as published in statistical first release 02/2012

Note: The analysis includes the results for academies that were open and had pupils taking GCSEs for all three years of the period 2008/09 to 2010/11. However, it excludes results from 11 academies that were formerly city technology colleges (CTCs), 1 current CTC and 4 academies that were formerly independent schools. These academies were mainly the school improvement base of a chain and/or were already high achieving prior to becoming an academy.

The NAO was unable to identify whether any specific features of academies were associated with particular rates of improvement. However, our analysis suggests that there could be a link with whether an academy was part of a chain. Figure 4.2 shows that on average, chains of three or more academies made greater progress between 2008/09 and 2010/11 than standalone and two-strong academies. The average rate of improvement between 2008/09 and 2010/11 for chains of 3 or more academies was 15 percentage points, compared with 12.2 and 11 percentage points for standalone and 2-strong academy chains, respectively.

Figure 4.2: Numbers of pupils achieving five A*-C grades at GCSE, including English and mathematics, in different types of academy chain, 2008/09-2010/11



Source: Analysis of final DfE data for GCSE results and equivalents for 2008/09 and 2009/10 and revised data for 2010/11 as published in statistical first release 02/2012

Note: The analysis includes the results for academies that were open and had pupils taking GCSEs for all three years of the period 2008/09 to 2010/11. However, as noted above it excludes results from 11 academies that were formerly CTCs, 1 current CTC and 4 academies that were formerly independent schools. Academies have been classified as standalone, part of a two-strong-chain or part of a chain of three or more academies according to their status during 2010-11.

The figures should be interpreted with some caution, not least because there is variation of performance within each category. For example, some chains of three or more academies perform more strongly than others, and within chains there are variations of performance. In addition it is only possible to analyse relatively small numbers at this point in time and we cannot be certain that the differences in performance are explained by being part of a chain. However, we consider it reasonable to rule out four possible variables (prior attainment, relative deprivation, length of time operating as an academy and cherry-picking which academies to support) that could potentially explain the difference.

Annex B explains how the different types of chain are broadly comparable, as measured by the 2010/11 exam cohort, in terms of the pupils' prior attainment and the proportion of pupils entitled to free school meals (FSM). Annex B also sets out how average rates of improvement for academies between 2008/09 and 2010/11 were similar, regardless of when they opened. We also considered whether there was any cherry-picking (by chains) in terms of the scale of the challenge they were prepared to accept when taking on academies or deciding whether to sponsor a new academy. We could find no evidence from policy or practice that this occurred during the phase of the academy programme when these academies were created. Chains, along with sponsors of standalone academies and two-strong academy chains, were prepared to take on a range of underperforming schools in challenging circumstances. Indeed if anything the chains of three or more academies were in some cases overambitious in taking on so many demanding projects at the same time, as Chapter 5 explains.

Moreover, the figures confirm a similar trend that we identified for the period between 2007/08 and 2009/10. The findings also complement the results found from analysing Ofsted inspection data and reflect findings from a previous analysis of performance and academy federations described below.

Assessments of school effectiveness

Ofsted's practice in inspecting sponsored academies has been to conduct a monitoring visit during the first and second years of an academy's operation and then have a full section 5 inspection in its third year¹. This enables an academy to establish itself and be assessed in steady-state circumstances. Ofsted conducted 161 section 5 inspections and reinspections of sponsored academies between September 2005 and July 2011.

The research for this report has focused on analysing the judgements of overall effectiveness reached by Ofsted in those inspections made between September 2009 and July 2011. This period has been selected for two reasons. First, a revised risk-based approach towards inspection of maintained schools came into force in September 2009². Second, by September 2009 sufficient numbers of sponsored academy chains were in operation to enable preliminary comparisons to be made between academies that were:

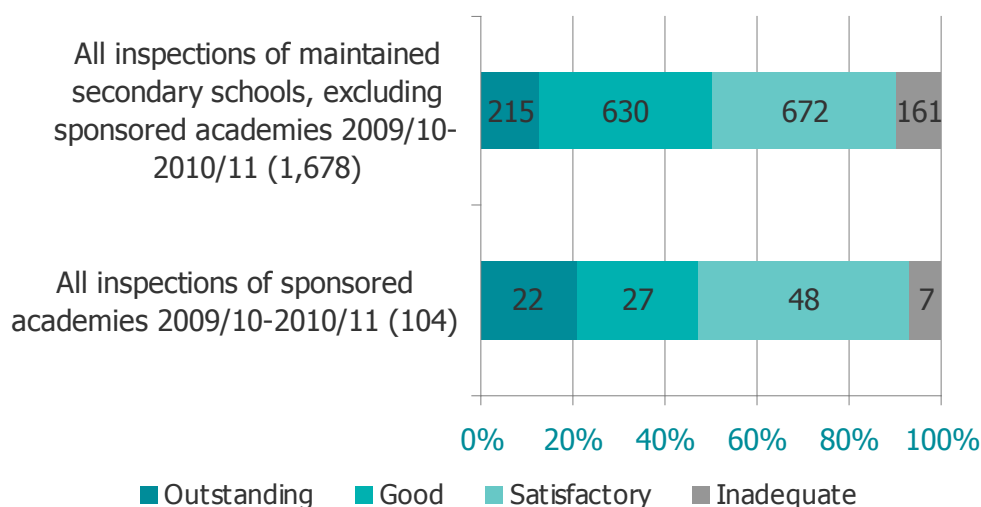
- run as standalone sponsored academies
- part of a two-strong chain during this period
- part of a chain of three or more academies

Figure 4.3 provides the context for these comparisons: it shows the results of inspections of all academies and all maintained secondary schools undertaken between September 2009 and July 2011. At a national level, a greater proportion of sponsored academies were judged outstanding and a smaller proportion judged inadequate than other maintained schools inspected between 2009 and 2011. However, because of the difference in the way that academies and maintained schools were selected for inspection some caution should be attached to attempting to draw firm conclusions from this data. In addition when the categories of 'outstanding' and 'good' are combined, the proportions are broadly similar.

¹ Ofsted and the DfE have agreed a revised policy that new sponsored academy schools opening from September 2011 onward will be inspected under section 5 of the Education Act 2005 in their second year of operation in order to ensure a consistent approach to inspection of all academy family schools. There will no longer be an initial monitoring visit prior to this inspection.

² Inspection became more risk based with good and outstanding schools inspected less frequently.

Figure 4.3: Overall effectiveness for all maintained schools and all sponsored academies, inspected between September 2009 and July 2011

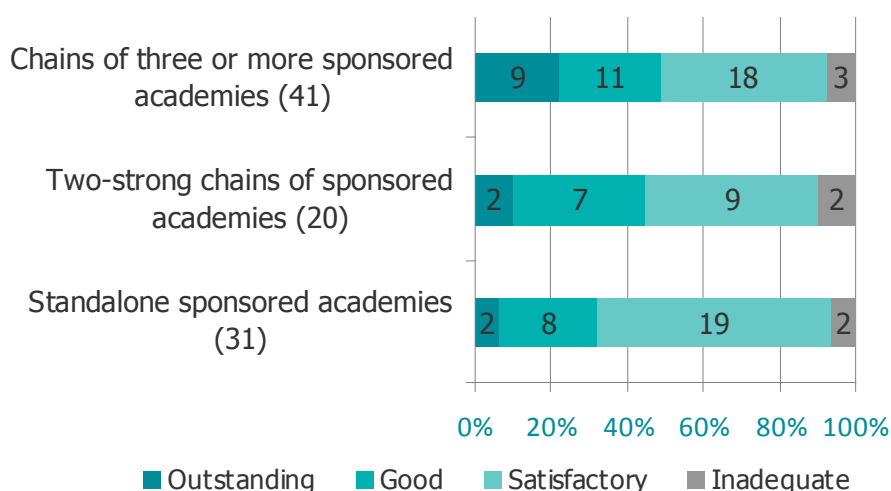


Source: Analysis of Ofsted data

Note: Secondary schools include middle deemed secondary schools and all-through mainstream schools. Ofsted also conducted three pilot inspections that are not included in this analysis.

Figure 4.4 compares the inspection results for 92 sponsored academies inspected between September 2009 and July 2011, according to whether they are standalone, part of a two-strong chain or part of one that has three or more academies. The numbers involved (particularly for two-strong chains) are relatively small and should not be overinterpreted. However, they show that chains of three or more academies do have a higher proportion of schools classified as outstanding. The gap is still evident in terms of comparing three-strong chains and standalone academies when the categories of 'outstanding' and 'good' are combined. When this is put alongside the analysis of the GCSE exam data described above it may be that we are beginning to see the indications of what might be described as a positive chain effect, though further analysis over a longer period will be necessary to confirm this.

Figure 4.4: Overall effectiveness of sponsored academies by type of chain, inspected between September 2009 and July 2011



Source: Analysis of Ofsted data linked to research team's classification of academies

Note 1: Secondary schools include middle deemed secondary schools and all-through mainstream schools. Ofsted also conducted 3 pilot inspections that are not included in this analysis.

Note 2: The inspection results for 12 academies (8 former CTCs and 4 former independent schools) have not been included in this analysis. These academies were mainly the school improvement base of a chain and/or were already outstanding prior to becoming an academy. Of these 12 academies, 9 were assessed as outstanding, 1 as good and 2 as satisfactory during the comparison period.

The Ofsted inspection reports mainly focus on the operation of individual academies rather than on links with and relationship to an academy chain. However, there are a few clues as to how being part of a chain can contribute to an academy's development. For example, the report for the Harris Academy Falconwood states:

The academy benefits from being part of the Harris Federation, receiving support in English, mathematics and science. Intra-academy competitions, numeracy and enterprise days, local sports and post-16 partnerships all very effectively enrich the academy's curriculum provision. The federation's 'student commission' is successful in bringing teachers and students together in collaborative partnerships to review the design and delivery of the curriculum.

Ofsted inspection report for Harris Academy Falconwood (carried out 30 Mar 2011, published 5 May 2011)

It is also significant that in a number of the academies found to be outstanding, inspectors commented positively on the calibre of governors and the quality of governance, as the two examples below illustrate:

The chair of the governing body has an extremely high level of understanding about the academy's priorities and ensures that these are focused on. The governing body effectively uses the information from external monitoring and is becoming increasingly systematic about checking the impact of policies and practice.

Ofsted inspection report for Ark Academy Brent (carried out 24-25 Nov 2010, published 12 Feb 2011)

The academy benefits from an outstanding governing body and from the Harris Federation of South London Schools; both bodies offer challenge and support of great worth.

Ofsted inspection report for Harris Academy South Norwood (carried out 20 Jan 2010, published 3 Jun 2010)

However, there is an important cautionary footnote to what is otherwise a positive picture. Ofsted has warned that being part of an academy chain is 'no guarantee of success or insurance against areas of weakness' (Ofsted, 2010a:53). All three of the academies judged by Ofsted to be inadequate during 2009/10 were in federations or sponsored groups with much stronger schools, including one which shares an executive principal with an outstanding academy (Ofsted, 2010a).

This finding points to there being variations in performance between chains, but in general chains of three or more sponsored academies are performing more strongly than others in their class. This is being implicitly recognised with at least two sponsored academies that have been struggling recently moving under the umbrella of larger and higher performing chains.

The performance of federations

Some sponsored and converter academy chains are coming to academy status having previously been part of a performance federation³. These federations share fundamental similarities with academy chains and as they have been in operation over a longer period they provide a useful evidence-base for understanding the potential impact of academy chains.

A study commissioned by the National College (Chapman et al, 2011) found that the work of schools operating through performance federations does have a positive impact on student outcomes, with the bulk of the federation effect on student attainment at GCSE occurring in school federations where higher performing schools partner lower performing schools. Significantly, performance federations have a positive impact on both the higher and lower performing schools in the partnership. The researchers also found that in 2010, students in academy federations outperformed students in the non-federation schools with which they were matched, though the impact was not great as for performance federations.

However, the study also noted that there is a timelag of two to four years between the formation of federations and the point at which their performance overtakes their non-federated counterparts. This suggests that policymakers can be optimistic in expecting school improvement as multi-academy trusts

³ In a performance federation a high-performing school partners one or more lower performing schools and they adopt a single federated governing body.

develop and as high-performing converter academies start to take on the sponsorship of other schools, but that they also need to be patient in waiting for the improvement to come through.

The study contained five other significant findings that are relevant to the future of academy chains:

- The researchers found no discernible positive impact in respect of all-through federations or what are termed ‘size’ federations, ie federations consisting of two or more very small or small schools, or a small school and a medium-sized school.
- Secondary federations with executive leadership outperform federations with traditional leadership structures (one headteacher leading one school). This suggests that ‘those responsible for establishing secondary federations should consider developing executive leadership structures’ (Chapman et al, 2011). That is a key message for academy chains and converter chains in particular to consider.
- The impact of federation is greater than that for more informal collaborative partnerships where the governing bodies were not merged. Again this is a significant finding that is reflected in the discussion in Chapter 10 and needs to be considered as the policy on academy conversion is developed.
- Becoming a federation has an economic impact on schools. However, the costs of running a federation are offset by greater resources and capacity for change, a finding which is explored further in Chapter 11.
- Federating provides more opportunities for CPD, often at reduced cost, across the federation, and at times beyond the federation. Federal structures promote opportunities for collaboration. This finding chimes with the evidence discussed in Chapter 10.

A study of 29 federations by Ofsted (Ofsted, 2011) found that the benefits of federation were related to the purpose of the federation, as illustrated in the following examples:

- In all 10 federations where a high-performing school had federated with a school causing concern, teaching and learning, achievement and behaviour had all improved. Typically there was also stronger governance, and a single system of assessing and tracking pupil progress had been introduced based on the existing procedures of the stronger school.
- In 11 of the 13 federations where schools had federated to protect the quality of education, pupils were now enjoying an enriched curriculum and a greater range of opportunities and extra-curricular activities. In eight of them there was also greater capacity to meet pupils’ needs flexibly and swiftly. This particularly applied to vulnerable pupils and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities. In these cases the federation was able to pool resources and expertise and co-ordinate provision through a single special educational needs co-ordinator.
- In all six federations where the federated arrangements enabled pupils to transfer from one phase to another, academic transition was greatly enhanced by a common approach to teaching and learning and assessment between schools. As a consequence, when pupils started their new school, provision was better tailored to meet their needs.

This reinforces the need for converter academy chains to be clear about the purpose and direction of their work together.

Ofsted also identified leadership as being crucial to federations achieving improvement and sustained progress. Unlike the study conducted by Chapman et al (2011), Ofsted’s findings did not discover that one particular leadership structure was more effective than another. Rather it considered that the crucial test was how well the leadership arrangements were ‘tailored to meet the individual circumstances of the school in each federation’ (Ofsted, 2011:5). The common features of effective leadership of federations were judged to be a clear vision and good communication of the benefits that federation brought to pupils, driven by the headteacher, but shared by others; well-developed strategic plans with success criteria shared with all staff; rigorous procedures for monitoring and evaluating the federation and holding staff to account; well-established procedures for, and a belief in, the importance of developing and coaching leaders at all levels; and continuing professional development of staff.

This largely positive picture in terms of the impact of chains and federations – provided they meet key criteria in how they operate – provides the backdrop for considering the expansion of academy chains. Given the impact of chains and federations there is a strong case for expanding structural school-to-school support. The next chapter identifies both the advantages and risks associated with this trend. Later chapters delve into what might contribute towards the positive chain effect.

Chapter 5: The future growth and development of academy chains

Introduction

The pace of change among academy chains is rapid. The statistics presented in Chapter 2 include 119 new sponsored academies that are being planned to become part of sponsored chains. However, this is far from being the full picture in terms of the expansion that is expected either by the DfE or the chains themselves. This chapter describes and discusses the:

- level of growth being considered by sponsored academy chains
- key policy levers being used by the DfE to promote the development of academy chains
- factors that are influencing the growth of converter academy chains
- advantages and risks of expanding chains of academies

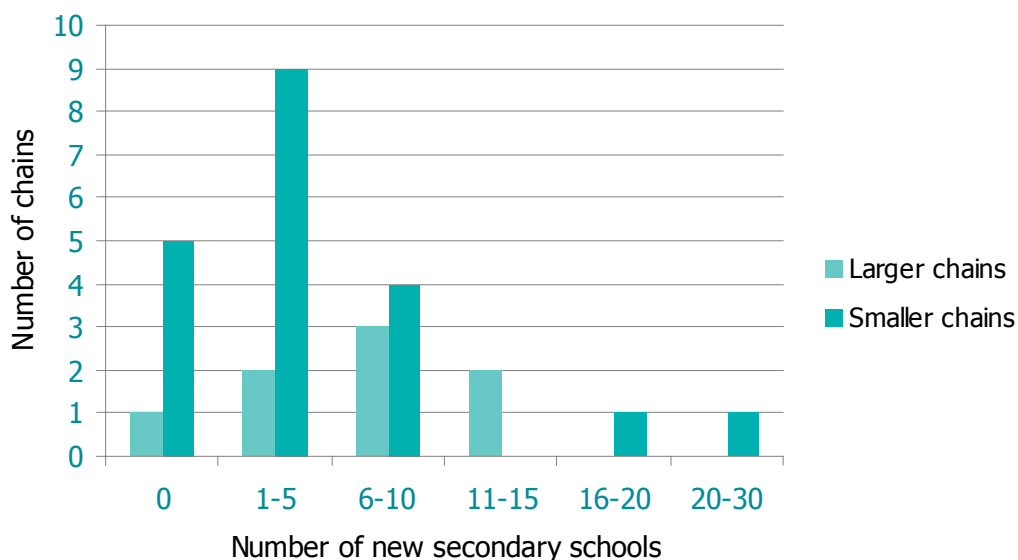
The growth of academy chains in the secondary sector

Chapter 2 showed that sponsored academy chains have largely been based in and grown through acquiring schools in the secondary sector. In terms of further expansion, however, Figure 5.1 shows that there are only two smaller¹ chains that have really ambitious plans to incorporate more secondary schools into their chain, with one chain aiming to add 16-20 secondary academies by 2014 and another 20-30. The rest are looking to add between three and five secondary schools a year.

However, one constraint on these plans may be the DfE's ability to provide a sufficient pipeline of secondary schools suitable for academy sponsorship. Some smaller sponsored chains told the research team of their frustration on this score and their inability to grow to what they saw as a critical mass of around five secondary academies. There was a sense that the DfE may be 'running out' of secondary schools to steer towards sponsored academy status. However, the government could decide to bring the remaining secondary schools that are in an Ofsted category and/or below the threshold for GCSE attainment into sponsored chains. As the floor standards continue to rise this could provide a further source of candidates for sponsored academy status, though this is unlikely to be on the scale seen in recent years. However, for those chains that are aiming to keep to tight geographical clusters, these schools might not always be in areas that fit with their expansion strategy unless, of course, they were willing to start up a new cluster.

¹ Larger chains have 10 or more academies; smaller chains have between 3 and 9.

Figure 5.1: Projected growth of secondary schools in sponsored academy chains by 2014



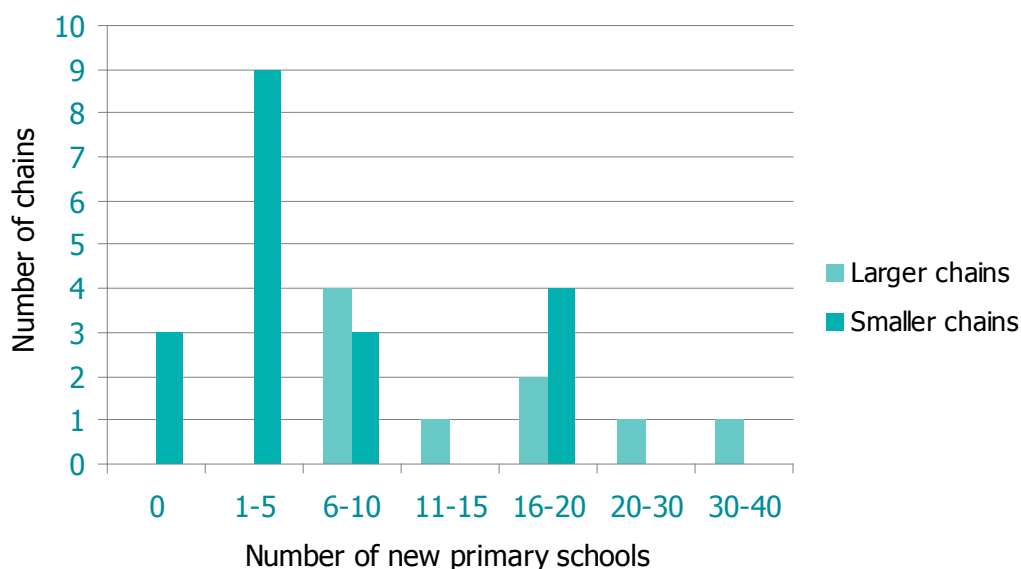
Source: CEO survey (28 responses)

Note: Larger chains have 10 or more academies; smaller chains have between 3 and 9.

The growth of academy chains in the primary sector

It is the primary sector where CEOs of larger sponsored chains, with 10 academies or more in the chain, see most of their growth over the next 3 years, as Figure 5.2 shows. There are 2 chains that have ambitious plans in this respect, with one wanting to add 20-30 primary schools and the other 30-40. Smaller sponsored chains are more modest in their forecast though 4 of them plan to take on 16-20 primary schools by September 2014.

Figure 5.2: Projected growth of primary schools in sponsored academy chains by 2014



Source: CEO survey (28 responses)

Note: Larger chains have 10 or more academies; smaller chains have between 3 and 9.

These plans in large part reflect the emphasis of government policy which is committed to turning the weakest 200 primary schools in the country into academies in 2012/13 (DfE, 2011b). Some have doubted the capacity and skill set of what have thus far been predominantly secondary academy chains to take on primary schools. For example, one local authority described to the research team how academy sponsors tended to have a “city-centric” view of school improvement that was not readily applicable to the challenges of running a small rural primary school in a rural county. There is also broader scepticism as the quotation from this secondary headteacher illustrates:

I’m bemused by the idea that ‘successful’ secondary schools will be asked to become ‘sponsors’ of these forced primary academies. I know about improving secondary schools but wouldn’t presume to tell a primary head what to do.

‘Middlemarch’, 2011

However, that view overlooks two factors. First, Figure 2.5 shows that although most sponsored academies are secondary schools just under a quarter of them are primary or all-through academies. Half of the 28 sponsored chains surveyed have primary and/or 3-18 academies within their chain. Moreover, some of those that do not include primary schools have strong engagement with the primary sector. For example, the Cabot Learning Federation has a partnership with six local primary schools that provides student-to-student support, opportunities for CPD, literacy and numeracy support, leadership development and access to the federation’s support services. The partnership activity is co-ordinated and led by a director of primary partnerships who is a member of the federation’s senior leadership team. Three of the primary schools are becoming academies and joining the federation in September 2012.

Second, several chains are developing particular pedagogical approaches led by leaders with primary expertise to underpin their engagement with primary-age pupils (see Figure 5.3).

Figure 5.3: Pedagogical programmes for primary-age pupils being developed and implemented by Absolute Return for Kids (ARK) Schools

ARK Schools currently runs 5 secondary academies, 3 primaries and 3 that have an all-through 3-19 age range. As ARK Schools has moved into expanding its engagement with the primary phase it has been able to draw on its work in all-through academies to develop a distinctive pedagogical primary curriculum. Following one of ARK’s underpinning principles (‘depth before breadth’) key features include:

- a mathematics mastery programme based on the highly successful Singapore maths curriculum which spends more time on fewer topics, always uses objects and pictures before numbers and letters and emphasises calculating with confidence
- literacy taught for 10-12 hours a week with a strong emphasis on phonics, spelling, writing, handwriting and a significant amount of guided reading
- a science curriculum that is loosely based on a model developed by Singapore and which focuses on scientific knowledge, vocabulary, rapid progress and lively variety of activities and observations
- an arts and humanities curriculum, which includes developing a particular focus on music

The roll-out of the ARK Schools approach includes standard lesson plans but with teachers across the schools involved getting together regularly to share ideas and resources on how best to apply the plans.

Source: ARK Schools

A particular feature of the planned primary expansion is that chains are contemplating taking on clusters of six or so primary schools at the same time. At the heart of this are the issues of scale and economy.

Primary schools are for the most part very much smaller than secondary schools. An average primary school has 250 pupils; 1,400 primary schools have fewer than 75 pupils; and over 4,000 have fewer than 150 pupils. Several chains consider that a critical mass of around 1,200 pupils (the equivalent of around 6 primaries) is necessary to procure and manage support services effectively, organise succession planning and have sufficient scale to benefit fully from school-to-school learning and cross-school deployments of staff and leaders.

I had a head of a one-form entry primary school approach me about joining our chain. I had to say 'no'. How can I offer a viable service and proper support to them on an individual level? It would not be economic.

CEO, sponsored academy chain

This view is not confined to sponsored academy chains. In Devon, 2 federations and 2 other schools are coming together to form an academy chain of 11 primary schools:

We always said that the federation would need to be about 1,200 pupils to maintain financial viability - this was the size of an average secondary school. At this size economies of scale are possible and you get increased purchasing power as a larger organisation.

With 11 schools and approximately 1,200 pupils, this will provide sufficient resources to make collaboration and federations sustainable in the longer term. The opportunities for staff to move between schools (for career enhancement and to support other schools) will be enhanced, as will the opportunities for joint planning and development with a staff of about 120 across all the schools. Other benefits include increased access to good practice to test and share ideas between schools and broader access to support for other schools.

CEO, First Federation, Devon

A number of chains are therefore in discussions with the DfE and local authorities about taking on clusters of primary schools. If primary schools are incorporated into chains in this way it could in certain areas raise the issue of choice for parents. For example, were all the primary schools in a particular locality part of the same chain, parents might feel that the government's policies were narrowing rather than broadening their choice of school. However, that view is based on the presumption that schools within chains are all clones of each other and as Chapter 10 describes this is far from being the case.

It is also important to take into account that while sponsored chains and larger groupings of converter academies believe there is the need for this economy of scale, smaller groupings of primary schools can be and are effective and viable, as Figure 5.4 illustrates.

It is as though the sponsored chains and larger groupings of primary converter academies are looking at developments through an entrepreneur's prism of what makes for a worthwhile investment in expansion, while the smaller groupings are viewing developments from the perspective of building their enterprise from the bottom upwards.

Figure 5.4: Example of a small primary multi-academy trust

The Village Federation, formed in March 2010, covers around 340 pupils in 3 small rural primary schools in Kent. It is now a multi-academy trust led by an executive headteacher who is supported by a head of school in each of the three schools.

Heads carry out classroom observations in each other's schools and provide mutual support including helping to prepare for Ofsted inspections. The executive head sees one of his key roles as being to coach and support the heads of schools. In addition, leading staff are used to provide lesson observations and coaching support across the three schools. Some CPD sessions are organised on a federation basis. The expertise of the highest quality staff is seen as the key driver of improvement across the federation.

The executive head and bursar post are funded on a federation basis with each school contributing a third of the costs. The federation has been able to use its increased clout to secure better deals for particular services in the individual schools without taking over procurement from them. This agenda is likely to develop further.

The federation may expand in due course but the executive head would like to be able to maintain a personal relationship with each of the schools in the federation and this is likely to limit the size of the federation to five schools.

Source: Telephone interview with executive principal, Village Federation

Expansion of converter academy chains

The growth of converter academy chains is more difficult to predict. Many of the chains – both formal multi-academy trusts and the more informal collaborative partnerships – are still finding their feet. Among the factors that are likely to have an impact on the development of these chains are the following:

- The role of church diocesan boards (both Church of England and Catholic) in creating umbrella trusts and the extent to which they will seek to shepherd church schools to convert to academy status within this framework will be influential. The chairman of the Church of England's board of education is reported as saying that up to 70 per cent of the church's 4,800 schools will convert to academy status within five years (*TES*, May 2011). In some dioceses there has been talk of churches bringing all the schools in a diocese within an umbrella trust. Some dioceses have begun to think about the school improvement implications of having a stake or being accountable for several dozen schools as Figure 5.5 below shows. Other dioceses seem less well prepared. If faith-based umbrella trusts are seen as ends in their own right and are not accompanied by other structures or systems for supporting schools it is hard to see how the cause of school improvement will be advanced.

Figure 5.5: Example of a diocese's school improvement support function

The diocese has established a diocesan educational company that exercises its accountability through holding an annual members' meeting at which all the chairs of the academy trusts are brought together; through section 48 inspections which cover religious education, collective worship and effectiveness as a church school; and through requesting reports from chairs on particular aspects of performance.

If a school is failing, the level of intervention by the diocese will depend on both the school and the local authority in question. In some cases the diocese will just work alongside the local authority. In other cases it will intervene directly. For example, in one school the CEO imposed a governing body and then worked with that governing body to reconfigure the school's leadership team. The diocese also sees other schools in the chain as having a responsibility to provide support if an academy is struggling or failing.

Source: Interview with CEO of diocesan education board

- The development of collaborative partnerships and whether they will deepen their joint work and move into more formal collaborative structures is a further influencing factor. Previous research (Higham et al, 2009; Hill, 2008) suggests that partnerships, if they are to flourish in the longer term, tend to get harder in their governance and more integrated in their operations.
- Whether academy conversion within the primary sector becomes more mainstream, particularly among small rural primaries where the ability to recruit new school leaders and financial viability continue to be major challenges, is a significant factor. The answer to this question will in turn depend on whether primary leaders and governors see groups of other schools rather than their local authority as the effective long-term home and support for their school. Of course the two options are not mutually exclusive. Some local authorities are working with their local schools and academies to construct new ways of operating that enable schools to be autonomous while still being part of a local family of schools that commissions or provides challenge, mutual support and services.
- Another factor that will affect the development of converter academy chains is the extent to which local authorities, drawing on previous good practice (National College, 2010), encourage primary schools to form federations or multi-academy trusts or to join chains, particularly in rural areas where financial viability and the ability to recruit headteachers are often significant problems for small schools.
- How hard will DfE ministers push chains as being the mainstream route when converting to academy status? Between 70 and 90 schools a month were applying for academy status during the autumn of 2011 but only a handful were doing so as part of a chain.
- We also need to consider the extent to which financial pressures force standalone academies to come together to share procurement functions and back-office services.
- A further consideration is whether it is possible to overcome the natural conservatism of some primary school governors, especially parent governors:

At present our primary schools are not showing a great appetite to convert either singly or as part of chains. There are a lot of small, very traditional rural schools whose governors don't immediately see the attractions of working in formal collaborations/federations.

Assistant director of children's services

- The perception of different academy chains and the brand and values that they are seen to represent are a critical factor in the growth of converter academies. Some are seen as acquisitive and many primary school headteachers are wary of academy groupings led by secondary schools. Significantly, secondary heads involved in leading cross-phase academy chains have been conscious of the need for their work with primary schools not to appear as a takeover by a big brother secondary school (see Figure 5.6).

Figure 5.6: Example of developing a cross-phase chain

The impetus for the chain originally came from the secondary head, but the three headteachers (including two primary heads) have taken it forward as a team. The secondary head feared that academy status would be like a return to the grant-maintained era which had worked well for her school but not for others. She was keen to maintain the benefits of partnership working and extend what they already had. Through the chain she saw an opportunity to make "a stronger group of schools, working as a team for the young people" in the area.

It was necessary to allow individual schools to maintain their identity: each of them is an academy in its own right as each school wanted to maintain its own governing body. A formal federation would not have gone down well.

The secondary head does not see herself as the dominant partner in the chain – "it is not a takeover bid". She recognises that some of the other primaries who have not signed up yet may be anxious about the secondary school's motives in forming a chain. They may decide to join the chain in due course, but they will need to make their own decisions and will want to see the advantages first.

Source: Telephone interview with head of secondary converter academy

- How many outstanding converter academies become sponsors and develop a chain in this way? Over 30 converter academies have so far have taken this path. The converter academies that are moving into a sponsorship role are mostly, though not exclusively, sponsoring primary rather than secondary academies and include the first primary schools to take on this role. The DfE has allocated dedicated funding to the National College so that it can extend its work in deploying NLEs to support underperforming schools. The DfE is keen to increase the supply of good academy sponsors and NLEs that choose to support a school by sponsoring it as an academy will be able to access the fund as they move into this role. This will provide an incentive for NLEs to channel their school improvement expertise into long-term structural partnerships. It could be particularly valuable in encouraging more primary NLEs to play a system leadership role.
- Finally, the evolution of teaching school alliances and how they develop their school-to-school improvement role and whether some of them choose to become academy sponsors will be influencing factors.

As this new landscape unfolds it may well be the case that some academies find themselves involved in more than one chain with each chain or partnership having its distinctive focus or function. For example, the principal of one converting Catholic academy described to the research team how she saw her academy developing at least three different sets of affiliations, some of which might over time become more formal chains. The first was the development of its current collaborative ‘chain’ with local Catholic primary converter academies, the second was the development of collaboration with all the Catholic secondary academies in the diocese, and the third was targeted collaboration on issues of mutual interest with other secondary academies within the local authority.

Challenges, advantages and risks of expansion

The expansion of chains has not been without its challenges. CEOs of sponsored chains were asked to assess a range of issues in terms of the scale of the challenge they presented. Generally the CEOs did not rank the challenges as being too onerous compared with responses to other questions. However, the top five issues where half or more of the CEOs identified the challenge as ‘very challenging’ or ‘challenging’ were (in rank order of challenge):

- raising attainment in all academies simultaneously

Although the growth of the federation has been relatively steady it has also been challenging to ensure that all academies continue to move forward and improve and that particular institutions don’t get left behind as new ones join.

Report from case study visit

- finding and recruiting sufficient high-quality senior leaders, which as Chapter 9 explains is why academy chains put a heavy emphasis on developing their own leaders
- dealing with inadequate staff inherited from a predecessor school

We had to address issues of competence with persistence and determination.

Executive principal, federation (now a multi-academy trust)

It has often been necessary (and sometimes expensive) to deal with inadequate leaders and staff inherited from a predecessor school.

Report from case study visit to sponsored chain

- finding and recruiting sufficient high-quality teaching staff

The constraint on growth is not insufficient leaders but insufficient high-quality teaching and learning expertise in English, maths and science. We have changed the timetable across the chain to address this so as to maximise existing expertise.

CEO, medium-sized sponsored chain

- negotiating with the DfE on start-up and other funding issues. Discussions with CEOs suggest that funding for the initial start-up phase of taking over an underperforming school, which is often the most costly in terms of addressing leadership, staff, building, curriculum and uniform issues, has become much tighter in line with the financing of schools more generally. There were also a few anecdotal examples of chains running into some bureaucratic obstacles and delays with securing funding consents from the Young People’s Learning Agency.

Despite these challenges, CEOs of sponsored academy chains are positive about the expansion of their chain. They identified a range of advantages linked to increasing the number of academies in their chain. These advantages were also tested in discussion with CEOs and executive principals through reference groups and a conference of middle and senior leaders in one academy chain. The same range of advantages (and risks – see below) was consistently identified. Later chapters of this report will describe and illustrate these advantages in greater detail.

Figure 5.7 shows a strong correlation between the experience of academy chains in the UK and that of chartered management organisations² (CMOs) in the US. The rationale for growing charter school chains reflects and resonates with the reasons provided by CEOs of academy chains in England.

Figure 5.7: Advantages of expanding academy chains

The advantages of expanding academy chains as identified by three-quarters of CEOs of sponsored academy chains as ‘very significant’ or ‘significant’	The advantages of expanding CMOs based on research of the Aspire school chain
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Extends the chain’s impact in terms of raising standards of education for more young people (all but one chain rates this as very significant, underlining the moral purpose that underpins chains’ vision of their role) 2. Creates a broader base for developing leaders 3. Increases the scope for sharing learning, subject specialisms, school improvement expertise and CPD 4. Provides more opportunities for staff deployment and promotion within the chain 5. Increases economies of scale in the running of central services and provides greater purchasing power 6. Opens up new opportunities to build new primary/secondary curriculum and transition models 7. Enables central costs to be shared across a larger number of schools 8. Provides a bigger platform for supporting innovation 9. Provides a stronger brand to attract parents and applications for admission 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The opportunity to further the moral purpose of a chain by giving more young people access to high-quality schooling 2. Increased economy of scale 3. A stronger voice and increased influence in the education reform debate: <i>Some absolute size, everyone at Aspire agreed, was needed to gain a seat at the table of reform... We might be able to change the way districts and schools teach and conceive of learning.</i> 4. The platform for schools and practitioners in different contexts to continue to develop and learn together 5. Increased leverage to attract high-quality new staff 6. New opportunities for existing staff, including: <i>opportunities to take on new roles in different schools, to ‘act up’ and backfill positions in their home school, be posted on temporary assignments to other schools in the chain and participate in collaborative teaching and learning initiatives</i>

Sources: CEO survey (25 responses); Analysis of Leschley, 2004

² Charter schools are publicly funded schools in the US operated by independent organisations but responsible to public authorities such as local school districts, universities or states. Charter management organisations (CMOs) are non-profit bodies that set up and operate charter schools and often follow a particular instructional approach. CMOs with responsibility for two or more charter schools run around 20 per cent of the 5,000 charter schools.

In addition to the points in Figure 5.7 over half of CEOs also saw the potential for an expanded chain to bring greater clout and influence within the world of education. If their chain were effective and successful and hence respected, they considered that this would help open the door to their becoming key stakeholders in shaping the content of education policy and managing the school system.

However, expansion also comes with a health warning: there are significant risks attached to growth in general and rapid growth in particular. CEOs were aware of these risks and in seven areas over half of the CEOs assessed the risk as 'very significant' or 'significant' (see Figure 5.8). Again the list overlaps with the challenges experienced by CMOs in the US.

Figure 5.8: Risks of expanding academy chains and the challenges of expanding chartered management organisations

The risks from expanding academy chains as identified by half or more of CEOs of sponsored academy chains as 'very significant' or 'significant'	The challenges of expanding CMOs
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Damage to the reputation of the chain as one of the (new) academies gets into difficulties or improvement proves very intractable 2. Too many new schools are taken on at one time and there is insufficient leadership capacity to manage the challenge 3. The chain reacts to having more academies by becoming more bureaucratic and a more rules-based organisation 4. Diseconomies of scale start to emerge – for example, communication becomes much harder and it is difficult to keep everyone informed and involved across all the academies in the chain 5. The core infrastructure (central services) becomes overstretched 6. Existing schools in the chain start to slip back as energies are focused on new joiners 7. The growth in the number of academies makes the chain impersonal, eg key senior and middle leaders and staff don't really know each other 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How to avoid 'undisciplined client acquisition' by being too opportunistic in looking for new schools and assessing sustainability of new projects 2. How to avoid excessive bureaucracy 3. How to balance scaling up central education improvement and back-office functions to support an expanded organisation, while still maximising investment and autonomy at school level 4. How best to create new schools through replicating DNA of successful schools or buying in new hires 5. How to manage uneven implementation of school improvement strategies

Sources: CEO survey (26 responses); CMO analysis based on Lake et al, 2010

The US comparison is particularly relevant because the rate of growth of CMOs is significantly more cautious than that being planned in England. CMOs do plan to expand: the majority of the larger CMOs with 4 or more schools in the chain want to add more than 10 schools to their chain with some planning in excess of 20 or 30. However, they plan to do this between now and 2025, a much longer timeframe than that being considered in England.

This variation between the US and England reflects an underlying difference about what constitutes sustainable growth. Opening three to five new schools a year is seen as aggressive growth in the US. On average, CMOs with four or more schools opened no more than one new school a year for the first six years. After seven years of operation, the average pace picks up to approximately two new schools a year. After 10 years they have on average 13 schools in their chain. The rate of growth is slower for smaller CMO chains (Furgeson et al, 2011).

This is not to say that CMOs have got it right and chains in England are proceeding too fast. But there can be real risks associated with an over-rapid expansion of a chain as Figure 5.9 illustrates. The advice given by a senior executive in the commercial sector as part of the research for *Chain reactions* (Hill, 2010) provides sound advice:

Increasing the scale of a chain needs to be handled very carefully. Many come unstuck by over-expanding. Increased size gives you flexibility and increases income but you must not compromise on quality and capacity to lead.

Hill, 2010:10

CEOs are generally aware of these risks. As Chapter 2 highlighted, a number of sponsored chains have said 'no' to specific requests from the DfE to take on particular schools that they did not feel were right for their chain at that point. However, the pressure on chains to grow is like a fast-flowing river current – it requires strong steering mechanisms to control the pace at which you travel.

Figure 5.9: Risks of expanding a chain too fast

The United Learning Trust (ULT) has been the largest single sponsor of academies during the first decade of academies. As at 1 January 2012 it was sponsoring 18 academies with a further academy due to join the group on 1 March 2012. The geographical spread of the ULT group comprises five academies in the Manchester area, three in Sheffield and Barnsley, two in Northamptonshire, one in each of Swindon and Banbury, three in Sussex and three in London.

ULT is part of the United Church Schools Trust (UCST) which has been running independent schools for 125 years and currently has 12 schools in its group. Recognising that the clientele for these schools was far from that envisaged by the original charitable foundation, the board of UCST was one of the sponsors to respond to the government's call to take on state schools in deprived areas. Thus ULT was born, with Lambeth, Manchester and Northampton academies in the first wave, then Salford, then a further five more almost simultaneously.

The original plan had been to create geographical clusters, but ULT responded to need and to government requests. The consequent geographical spread and rate of academy expansion proved more complex than expected. Problems with the two ULT academies in Sheffield in 2009 resulted in the government saying publicly that ULT should not expand further until these issues were resolved.

ULT was able to use its strengths as a chain to mobilise resources within the chain and turn the situation around, but the developments did cause ULT to think again. Although ULT was cleared to resume sponsoring more schools, in early 2011 it declined a request from the government to take on a group of schools in an area in which it was not at that time represented. Geographical coherence supported by a new regional management structure (described in Chapter 6) are now part of ULT's expansion plans, with additional secondary and primary schools (including some converter academies) being taken on in ULT's existing areas.

Source: Interview with leaders and chair of the board of ULT

The risks of over-rapid expansion are not confined to sponsored academy chains. Discussions as part of this project with two converter academy chains raised questions about the sustainability and robustness of their expansion plans. There was a degree of naivety about the implications of scaling up from running 2 or 3 primary schools to being responsible for 10 or more.

As the ULT experience shows, there are strategies for managing the risks associated with growth. Ways of maintaining and/or developing geographical coherence and spans of leadership control are discussed in Chapter 6. Issues relating to modifying governance structures are covered in Chapter 7; leadership development strategies in chapters 8 and 9; and the organisation of back-office functions in Chapter 11. An overarching checklist of actions for managing the risks of expansion is included as part of Chapter 13.

Chapter 6: Geography and spans of control

Introduction

Geographical proximity has been a significant factor in the development of sponsored academy chains. In many chains it has provided the basis for facilitating leadership oversight and enabling leaders, staff and academies to support and learn from each other. But as chains grow in size, so the geographical proximity principle has come under strain. This chapter examines:

- how and why geographical proximity has been important for many sponsored academy chains and is the basis for most converter academy chain activity
- the ways in which chains are adapting their structures to maintain the benefits of close geographical working between their academies
- the growing consensus on appropriate spans of control for managing academy chains

The significance of geographical proximity

Of the 28 sponsored academy chains that responded to the survey, 22 see it as ‘absolutely essential’, ‘very important’ or ‘important’ for the academies in their chain to be in close proximity to each other, as Figure 6.1 demonstrates. These chains use geographical proximity to deploy their senior and middle leaders across the chain, to hold joint training and CPD sessions, coach and support leaders and develop shared practice among staff. In addition, executive principals and CEOs take advantage of geographical proximity to visit academies as part of their quality assurance arrangements.

Geographical proximity is absolutely critical to the way that the University of Chester Academies Trust (UCAT) is building its chain. When five academies are open in early 2012 the head of school improvement will still be able to visit them all in a single morning. This personal, face-to-face contact is a cornerstone of UCAT’s approach to school improvement.

Report from case study visit

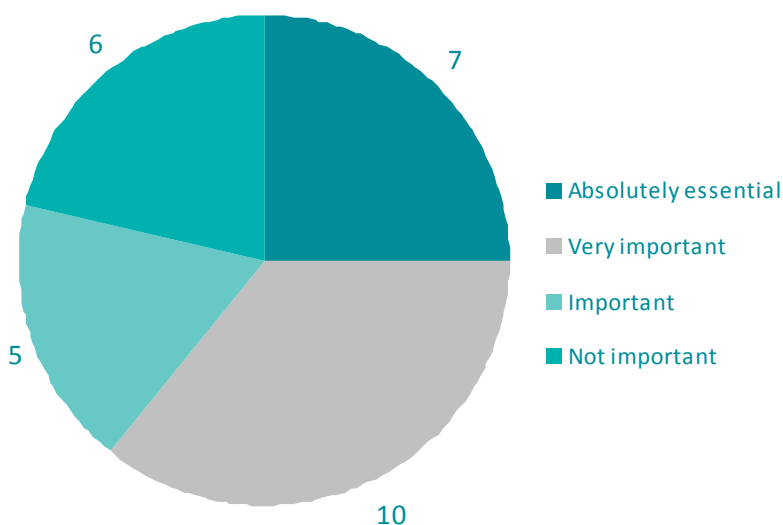
A number of chains have set themselves either formal or informal rules to ensure that any new academy is sufficiently close in travelling terms to maintain the geographical proximity principle. Figure 6.2 provides an example from the Cabot Learning Federation of how geographical proximity works in practice.

Chartered management organisations (CMOs) in the US generally confine themselves to a particular geographic area (defined as a reasonable driving distance). They like to develop tight networks of schools that can be easily supported by CMO staff. Operating outside this network means fewer school visits, a greater challenge to organise professional development and share learning across schools and a potentially weaker bond between the CMO and schools. CMOs are, however, expanding into new areas, particularly where there are obstacles to more immediate local expansion although an earlier study concluded that:

There are numerous and significant financial and political advantages for CMOs that stay regionally focused, at least until they have a proven track record on quality.

Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2007:5

Figure 6.1: The importance of geographical proximity of academies to each other in the operation and expansion of sponsored academy chains



Source: CEO survey (28 responses)

Figure 6.2: An example of the importance of geographical proximity in the operation of a sponsored academy chain

The five academies that make up the Cabot Learning Federation (CLF) in Bristol, South Gloucestershire and Somerset educate over 4,000 pupils and employ over 600 staff.

The federation has set itself an initial objective of ensuring that 80 per cent of all lessons in each academy are good or better. To help achieve this it has brought together outstanding teachers from each academy. The group has developed exemplar lesson plans, videos of outstanding lessons and feedback and coaching mechanisms. Team-teaching and working in each other's schools are being used to spread and encourage the adoption of the co-constructed model. Support is also coming from centrally employed advanced skills teachers (ASTs) who will spend one day a week in each academy.

The opportunity for teachers and support staff to work across the federation and to have experience in more than one school is seen as a central part of the federation's approach to teacher development. This includes:

- cross-federation programmes that focus on enabling teachers to move from delivering satisfactory to good lessons, and another that takes them from good to outstanding
- regular cross-academy in-service twilight training sessions
- network meetings for curriculum teams to share practice
- academies working together on case studies of innovation and impact

Support for newly qualified teachers (NQTs) is also run on a federation basis including all NQTs participating in seven centrally organised sessions over the course of a year to add value to the academy-based induction that runs alongside this.

Twice each year, in October and July, all staff from across the federation come together. These events are often introduced by students, who articulate what they want from their teaching and learning. The rest of the day is typically spent in workshops led by federation staff and focused on addressing the issues raised by the students. The federation is able to operate in this way because all the academies are within reasonable travelling distance of each other.

The litmus test the federation board uses before it will agree to sponsoring another academy within the federation is that it has to be possible for teachers and support staff to drive to another CLF academy within 45 minutes.

Executive principal, Cabot Learning Federation

Source: Interviews with executive principal and leaders of the Cabot Learning Federation

Geography is also fundamental to the activity of most of the converter academy chains, whether they are formal multi-academy trusts or less formal collaborative chains. For example, two middle schools and an upper school in Royston in Hertfordshire have built on their previous partnership work to form a multi-academy trust. The schools plan to use the advantage that comes with being in the same town to develop a curriculum for Royston children that runs seamlessly from Year 5 to Year 13. They also intend to synchronise training days, develop shared CPD and cascade learning between the schools. The combined senior leadership team provides new opportunities for particular leaders to develop specialist roles, and the deputies are also sharing and learning together. NQTs will also be able to experience more than one school without having to leave and find another job.

What is true for Royston also applies to nearly all of the converter chains that were interviewed and visited.

Not all the academy chains see geographical proximity as being so vital. That is in part because the church diocesan education boards put greater emphasis on there being a faith connection between their academies. There have also been those sponsored chains that have developed and have been operating in a more dispersed way as the ULT case study (Figure 5.9 above) illustrated.

It is, however, possible to discern a coming together of those chains where operations have been based on geographical proximity and those that have been operating in a more dispersed fashion. The factor that is changing the equation for both of them as they continue to grow is the issue of spans of control.

Spans of control

Spans of control is a term that refers to how many units or schools can be managed or overseen by one person. As part of this project, one of the reference group sessions brought together some of the CEOs of the larger sponsored academy chains with a senior executive from a major high-street specialist retailer. The experience of this commercial chain in running its business pointed to five lessons that have potential relevance for academy chains:

- It was important to distinguish between operational hands-on oversight and operational hands-off oversight.
- Operational hands-on oversight and support (akin to an executive head role) can extend from three to eight outlets.
- Operational but hands-off oversight (akin to a regional executive role) can encompass from 8 to 20 units.
- Oversight of business development functions should be limited to around 35 units.
- It is important to review structures and spans of control in the light of the evolution of a business.

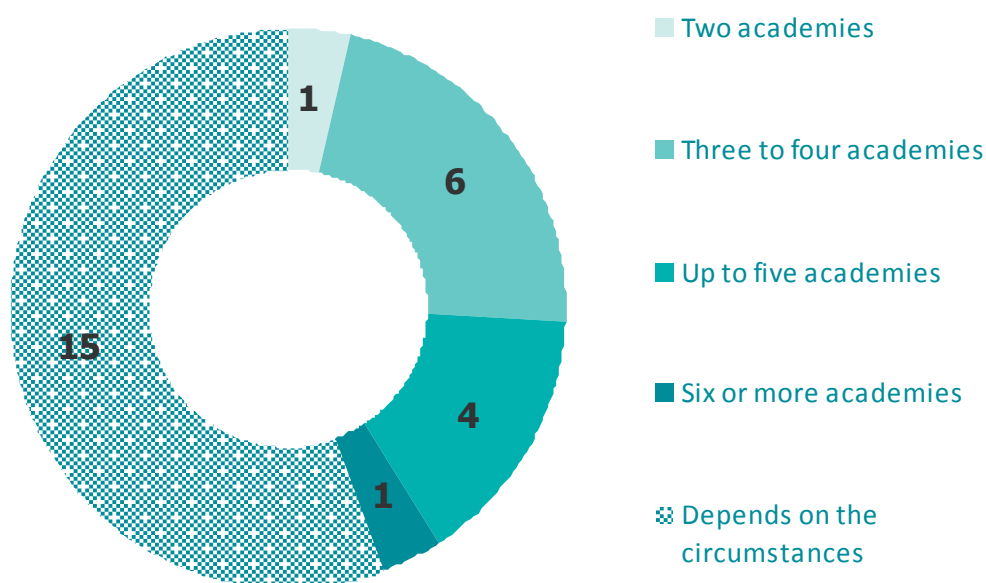
There is nothing magic about these numbers though they seem to fit quite well with how chains – both sponsored and converting – are using executive heads or principals:

- The executive principal of the Cabot Learning Federation has been overseeing five academies.
- In Devon two federations are coming together along with two other schools to form a chain. One of the federations is led by an executive headteacher responsible for five schools and the executive head of the other federation has been overseeing four schools. The CEO of the West Grantham Academies Trust oversees four schools.

- The executive head of the middle schools in the Bedfordshire chain is responsible for three schools, as are the executive heads of Darlington Education Village, the Huntingdon group of academies in Nottingham and the Village Federation in Kent.

The survey of sponsored academy chains asked CEOs for their views on what the optimum span of control should be for an executive principal working within a chain (see Figure 6.3). Most thought that it depended on the particular circumstances, ie how close they were to each other, the scale of the challenge and the calibre of leadership at individual academy level. However, nearly 40 per cent of the chains identified 3–5 academies as a workable span of control for executive principals.

Figure 6.3: Optimum span of control for executive principals working in sponsored academy chains



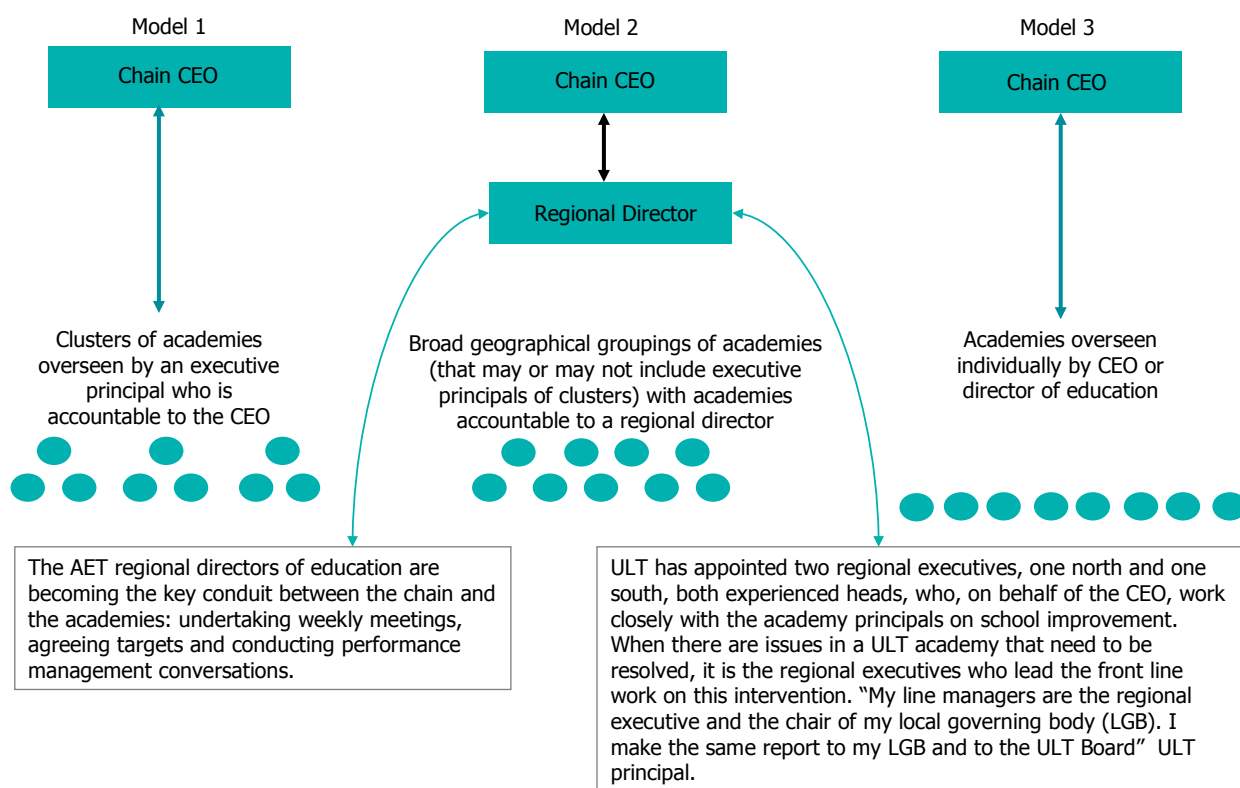
Source: CEO survey (27 responses)

However, as chapters 2, 3 and 4 showed, a growing number of mostly sponsored chains are moving to having more than five or eight academies in a multi-academy trust chain; in other words the size of the chain is going beyond the supervisory scope of a single individual. Chains are broadly adopting one of three models in response to this expansion, as Figure 6.4 illustrates.

In model 1, academies are being grouped into pairs, threes or fours with each geographical cluster being overseen by an executive principal who oversees the work of each academy, supports the academy principals and senior leadership teams and reports to the CEO of the chain. The Cabot Learning Federation is moving towards this model as it expands to include a sixth secondary academy and some primary academies.

Similarly the Devon group of converting primary academies referred to above envisages moving to developing a chain based on four federated organisations, each led by an executive head and with each federation including four or five schools.

Figure 6.4: Emerging models for leading and managing academy chains



In model 2 (Figure 6.4), chains are introducing and using regional directors to oversee a broader regional grouping of academies. The Academies Enterprise Trust (AET) model is to have a regional cluster of about seven secondary schools overseen by a regional director of education:

We have become increasingly convinced that regional clusters linked to a national framework is the most effective way of delivering our single aim.

Academies Enterprise Trust website, Sep 2011

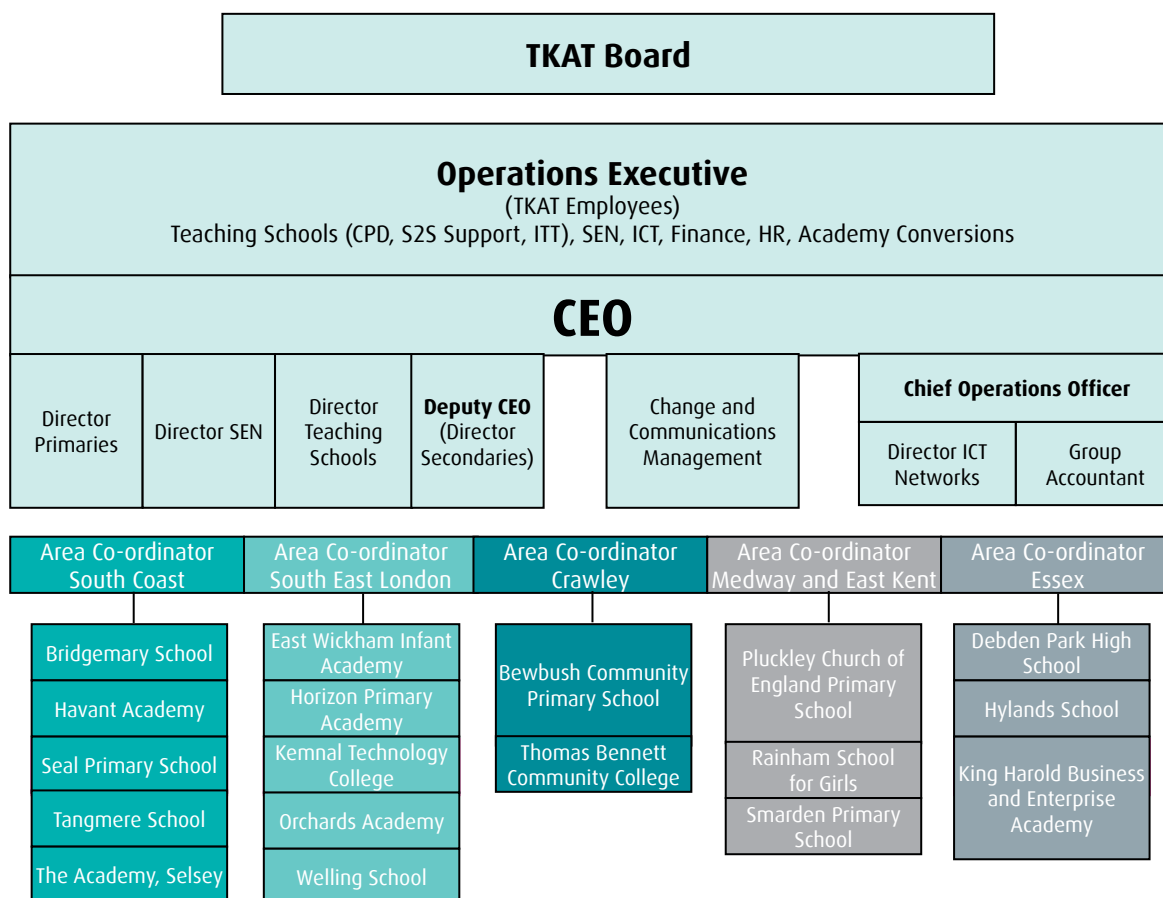
As we saw in Chapter 5, ULT did not start with this model but has migrated to it and currently has two regional directors. The model reflects the approach of the high-street chain described above:

We think that the important way in which academies can develop is in clusters, and if you ask us, part of our method is, in fact, to have schools not so far apart that they can't have a relationship with each other... We reckon that a cluster could be around five schools – something like that – and that two or three clusters could form a region. Now, once you get that sort of model, how many regions you have depends really on just how capable you are in handling a growing and larger organisation.

Sir Ewan Harper, former CEO, ULT, in oral evidence to the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee, 27 Oct 2010

One example of what model 2 looks like in practice is shown in Figure 6.5. The Kemnal Academies Trust (TKAT) is a chain of 12 academies (8 secondary and 4 primary) in Essex, south-east London, Kent, Sussex and Hampshire. During 2011-12 six other academies are expected to join the chain (one converter and five sponsored academies). The chain has therefore changed its leadership and management structure to reflect this expansion using an area cluster model.

Figure 6.5: The Kemnal Academies Trust (TKAT) area organisation structure



Source: The Kemnal Academies Trust

In model 3 (Figure 6.4), academies in the chain are led by a principal and overseen from the centre. The academy chains currently working to model 3 tend to have more resources at the centre of their organisation and have appointed a director of education (and other education specialists) to support the CEO. Conversations with the key leaders in these chains suggest they are also considering the need to adjust their structures and operations as they grow beyond a certain size and introduce regional or other forms of sub-national arrangements.

There is no right or wrong scale model for managing a chain. The model will depend on the geography of the academies in the chain, the history of how the chain has developed and whether it has chosen to base its school improvement expertise in schools, its central organisation or a combination of the two.

However, what one can say is that at some point academy chains that are continuing to expand will need to adapt their structures to accommodate their increased scale of operations. For a number of chains this break-point may come when they have grown to around five or six academies (if they have been relying on an executive head). For those that have a stronger central infrastructure the break-point comes later.

The experience of CMOs in the US suggests that when chains grow to having more than 8-10 schools, then significant expansion challenges emerge (Lake et al, 2010). These challenges are not just related to spans of control but also to governance systems, the role of the CEO and the organisation of back-office functions. These issues are explored further in the next chapters.

Chapter 7: Sponsorship and governance of academy chains

Introduction

For sponsored academy chains, sponsorship and governance are closely intertwined. Drawing on the commercial and corporate expertise of their sponsors, many of the established academy chains have rethought the function, form and practice of school governance. In contrast, converter academy chains are at the start of this journey. This chapter describes the:

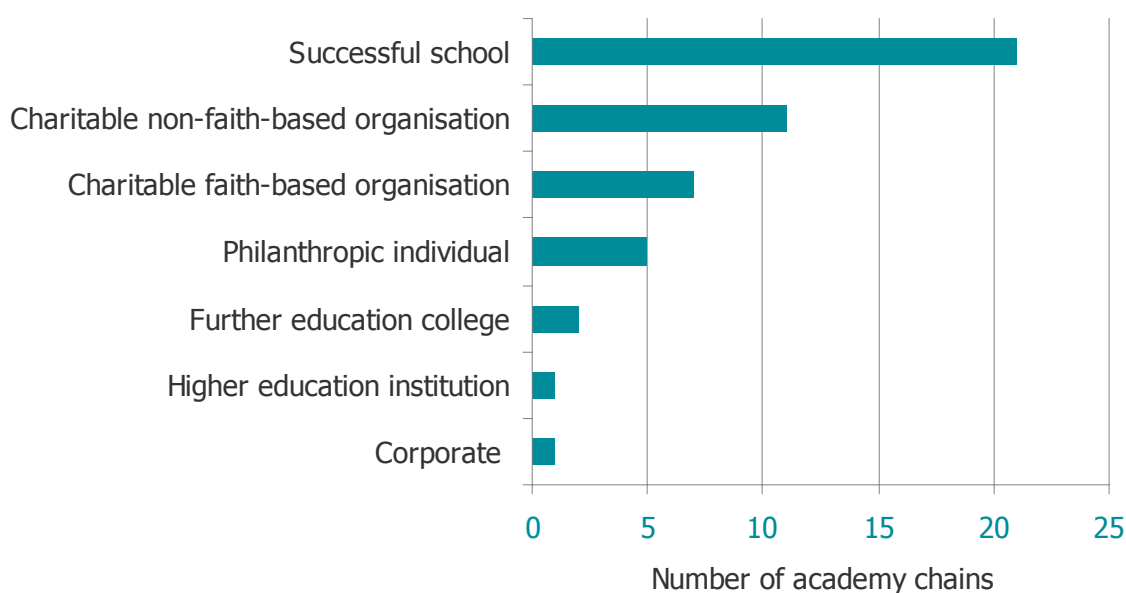
- profile of sponsors involved in sponsored academy chains
- structure and practice of governance in sponsored academy chains and the challenges that these chains face
- ways in which converter academy chains are building new governance arrangements and some of the problems they are encountering

Sponsorship of chains

The National Audit Office (NAO) in its 2010 report on academies identified eight different types of academy sponsor: non-faith-based charitable organisation, faith-based charitable organisation, successful school, corporate, local authority co-sponsor, philanthropic, higher education and further education. As at January 2012, 7 of these 8 categories are represented among the 48 sponsors that have (or are in the process of opening) 3 or more academies in their chain.

Figure 7.1 shows that chains based on successful schools account for nearly half of these chains. Figure 7.1 underestimates the impact of successful schools in driving forward the development of chains as several of the faith and non-faith-based organisations and chains sponsored by philanthropic individuals are drawing heavily on the expertise of successful academies in their chain as their basis for expansion. Successful schools are increasingly the sponsorship engine room powering the growth of school chains.

Figure 7.1: Chains with three or more academies by category of sponsor



Source: Research team analysis of DfE data

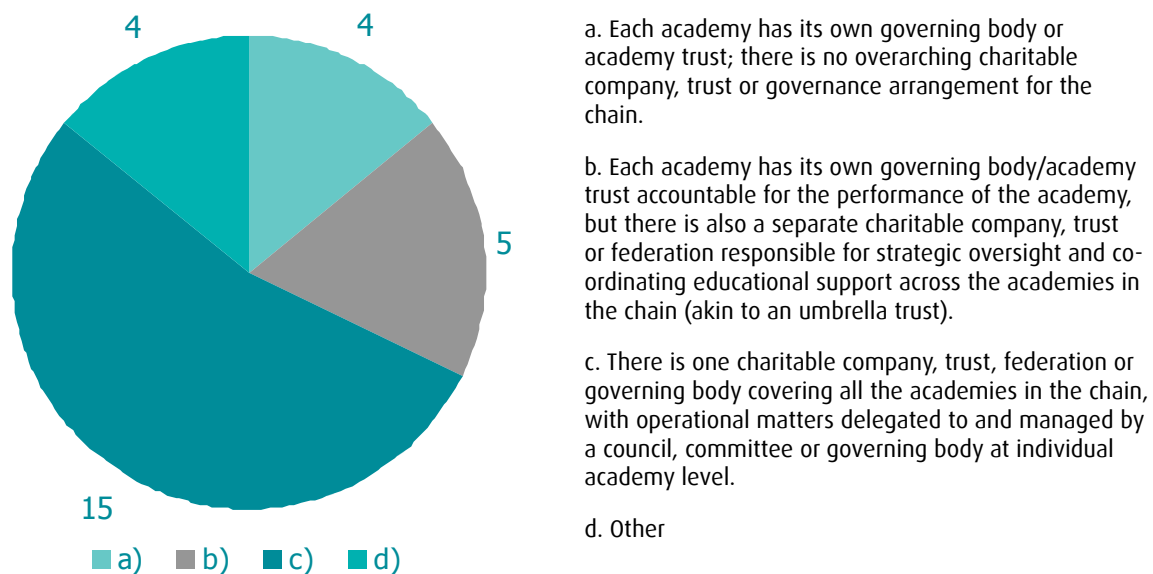
Looking forward we can, as Chapter 5 explained, expect the number of school-based chains to grow. In addition, FE colleges are involved in sponsoring around 30 academies and in setting up many of the new studio schools. Universities are sponsoring over 25 academies and are a key player in university technical colleges. The education sector as a whole could therefore emerge as the dominant force in sponsoring its own improvement and innovation.

Previous research has highlighted how sponsors often play a key role in shaping and driving the vision and ethos of the chain (PwC, 2011). Their sense of moral purpose is often the driver behind the decision to expand a chain, as the case study in Figure 2.4 illustrated. Sponsors are generally identified as bringing added-value in terms of expertise, insight and challenge (PwC, 2011; Hill, 2010) and ensuring that the chain follows business-like practices (NAO, 2010). The findings from inspection reports, described in Chapter 4, suggest that sponsorship is having a beneficial impact on the governance of chains.

Governance of sponsored chains

Sponsored academy trusts have governance arrangements that fall into one of four main categories, as Figure 7.2 shows.

Figure 7.2: Governance arrangements for sponsored academy chains



Source: CEO survey (28 responses)

Taking account of the details provided by those CEOs classifying their governance arrangements as ‘other’¹:

- 4 of the chains have separate autonomous governing bodies for each of their academies (option a); as Chapter 2 explained, these chains are effectively families of schools rather than chains
- 6 of the chains effectively have an umbrella trust (option b)
- 17 are constituted as multi-academy trusts (option c), with responsibility for the performance of the academy in the chain effectively residing with the sponsor and CEO of the multi-academy trust

Chains that have either an umbrella or multi-academy trust are exercising governance at two levels: the level of each academy and the level of the overarching trust. This could be a recipe for confusion and conflict but the research indicates that this is generally not the case. This is because chains have taken the opportunity of the structural autonomy inherent in the academy model to develop a sharper governance model that distinguishes more clearly between strategic direction and oversight and operational accountability. The former is exercised at chain level and the latter at academy level through a committee, local governing body or academy council.

¹ The one remaining ‘other’ (option d) comprises two trusts linked by a formal partnership agreement: one trust (trust A) has two academies and the other trust (trust B) has one academy sponsored by the Church of England. A partnership agreement enables trust A to run trust B’s church academy. This model is discussed below in considering the governance of converter academies.

Many of the chains have formally developed procedures setting out the responsibilities of the respective tiers of governance. Figure 7.3 describes the allocation of formal responsibilities within ARK Schools and Figure 7.4 summarises the respective roles of the directors of the Academies Enterprise Trust (AET) board and those of the individual academies.

Figure 7.3: Allocation of governance responsibilities within ARK Schools

ARK Schools responsibilities	Local governing body (LGB) responsibilities
<p>Governance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Development of core ARK Schools vision and principles – Determining level of delegation to each LGB <p>Strategic management</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Recruitment of principal (jointly with individual sponsor and LGB chair) – Involvement in recruitment of heads of small schools and finance and resources director – Performance management of principal (with LGB chair) – School target-setting and development plan sign-off – School budget approval – ARK Schools staff contracts and policies <p>Network management</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Financial and administrative policies – Planning, budgeting and reporting procedures – Statutory compliance and risk management – IT network strategy – Major procurement policies <p>Education</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Development of overall ARK educational model – Curriculum and assessment provision and support in core subject areas (literacy, mathematics) and certain specialisms (music, possibly others in future) – Support for school improvement and development plan implementation – School monitoring <p>Other services to be offered</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Educational programmes: extended school funding, leadership training, others as required – Co-ordination of sharing of curriculum and practice through ARK networks – Administrative and support services as required by schools 	<p>Monitoring</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Implementation of ARK mission/values/aspirations – Educational offering (in line with ARK Schools model) – Attainment and progress reports – School development plan implementation – Budget management – Special needs provision – Statutory compliance and risk management (health and safety, equality etc) – Pupil admissions and marketing – Pupil discipline and exclusions <p>Oversight of staff matters and performance management</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Review staffing structure for efficiency and affordability – Evaluate performance management systems and scrutinise any bonus requests – Other staff matters (with ARK Schools on staff disciplinary or grievance issues/dismissals where necessary) <p>Help with relationships and marketing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Parent relations (including liaison with any parent council) – Pupil recruitment – Community activities and relationships – Other locally co-ordinated activities: admissions forums, governor forums, other groups – School marketing and PR (jointly with ARK Schools where required) <p>Establishment and review of policies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Establish and review academy policies and procedures, reflecting ARK Schools key criteria – Provide feedback to ARK Schools on the effectiveness of policies <p>Possible sub-committees</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Education (attainment, curriculum, assessment, teaching etc) – Finance, premises and staffing matters (including liaison with any staff council) – Statutory matters: discipline/exclusions/appeals (ad hoc)

Source: ARK Schools governor handbook

Figure 7.4: Allocation of governance responsibilities within AET

The directors of AET hold the ultimate accountabilities for the effectiveness of the AET academies. In this role they will take a largely strategic function, delegating the governance of individual academies to the respective governing body according to the AET accountabilities framework.

In particular the budget share for an academy is fully delegated to its governing body, which has the accountability for setting the budget for the academy according to its budget share. In addition, with the exception of the appointment of the principal, the accountability for all staff appointments is delegated to governing bodies.

However, the directors have the duty to intervene as and when necessary in the governance of an individual academy, and in extremis may remove any or all of the delegated functions (including those for the budget and staffing) from a governing body if this is in the best interests of the students and staff at a particular academy.

Source: AET regulations for governing bodies

Formal procedures are often underpinned by connections between the two layers of governance. For example, chairs of local governing bodies (LGBs) and principals of academies may sit on or attend the main board. Representatives from the main board may also have a place on, or chair, a local academy council or governing body. Main boards may also rotate where they meet, for example visiting academies within the chain and holding scrutiny sessions of that academy when they meet on its site.

The formal frameworks also help to set the tone and forge the culture of how a chain operates. For example, the CEO of one chain that has formal accountabilities mapped out reported:

New academies and principals joining the federation will tend not to look at the formal documents but to ask other principals 'How does it work?' The relationship between the individual academies and the federation has been embedded as part of the culture of the federation.

Report of case study visit

Another distinctive characteristic of the governance of chains is the extent to which there is a focus on monitoring performance. Within the Harris Federation, for example, the role of governor at both executive board and academy level is taken seriously. Local academy governing bodies are expected to be involved in performance monitoring and governors unable to undertake this role are not reappointed or are deselected. The federation aims to appoint people of high calibre to be chairs of academy governing bodies. It also provides regular training sessions for governors covering issues such as understanding and using RAISEonline and managing exclusions.

Sharper stronger governance has definitely helped us on our journey. The governors visit a lot but they are very supportive and it helps that some of them are on the governing body of more than one academy. They can use that knowledge to challenge us.

CEO, Harris Federation

It is also typical for governors to be supported in their monitoring role not only by training but also by receiving data that is collated and presented to main boards and local governors in a standard format. The format will typically report on progress against targets and previous performance, comparisons with national benchmarks and the performance of other academies in the chain. The ARK Schools template for secondary academies to report to the main board on a half-termly basis covers the following seven areas:

- number on roll for each year group
- applications to Year 7 by preference (compared with previous years)
- pupil attendance

-
- exclusions total along with a breakdown of permanent and fixed-term exclusions
 - staff absence
 - pupil progress in English and mathematics for Year 7 to Year 11
 - quality of teaching as assessed by classroom observations using Ofsted criteria

The governance of the larger sponsored academy chains has an edge and sharpness about it that reflects the private sector influence of many of the sponsors.

Governance challenges in sponsored academy chains

However, the sponsored academy sector still faces a number of governance challenges. First, the sponsored chains are having to think about the implications of having more academies in the chain. For example, the practice of chairs of LGBs also having a place as of right on the main board will become less viable the more a chain grows as the main board would swell to a size that would render it unwieldy and ineffective.

Chains are dealing with this challenge in different ways. ULT, for example, has decided that instead of each chair of its LGBs sitting on the main ULT board, this will be replaced as the chain grows by chairs of LGBs electing their peers – three from the south and three from the north – to the main board. In other words there will be a series of mini-electoral colleges. In addition LGBs will be given more responsibility.

The Harris Federation has approached the problem by arranging for chairs of governors to chair more than one governing body which as well as easing the pressure for places on the main board for chairs of governors enables the chairs to bring a comparative dimension to their role: they can compare and contrast what is happening in one academy with another.

ARK Schools is considering a different model for overseeing the primary academies in its chain as it expands to run more of them. Under this model a broad-based parent forum would be introduced, while governance and accountability would flow directly to ARK Schools rather than partly directly to ARK Schools and partly through a local governing body. ARK believes this system will free up heads to focus on teaching and learning and avoid them being distracted by having to spend time supporting and servicing committees.

Second, there can be issues for chains in achieving the right balance between autonomy for academies and accountability at chain level. If the balance between the chain and the individual institution is not right, anecdotal and research evidence (PwC, 2008) and interviews with stakeholders for this project suggest that there are cases where governors and heads of academies feel disempowered: it is the old local authority model in a new guise. Targets are imposed by diktat rather than by dialogue or being worked out from the bottom up. If things go really wrong it could seriously destabilise a chain. Already there has been an instance of one outstanding school that was part of a chain removing itself from the chain and resuming its status as a standalone academy.

However, these relationship issues are far from being the norm. A more typical culture was represented by the CEO (whose description was supported by discussions with principals in the chain) who told the research team that the role of the chain was to focus on improved outcomes and to “let principals run the schools”. A key learning point seems to be that schools and sponsors need to understand from the start the nature of the relationship that is being proposed between each other, as Figure 7.5 illustrates.

Figure 7.5: Example of a school exploring the potential nature of its relationship with a sponsored academy chain prior to joining the chain

One secondary school described how it had been suffering from declining pupil rolls, low standards, a budget deficit and impending closure. In order to protect the school for the community the school leaders began researching opportunities to become an academy. Initially they had been in favour of converting to academy status and had been wary of becoming part of a sponsored academy chain. They feared that systems and processes that might not be right for their school would be imposed from outside.

As a result of researching the options they came into contact with the University of Chester Academies Trust (UCAT) and were struck by the close fit in terms of their core ethos. They were also impressed by the trust's commitment to supporting each school's individual identity while defining a set of central structures and non-negotiables. UCAT seemed to offer the right balance between the in-depth support and strength that comes from being part of a sponsored academy chain with the opportunities to pursue individual policies and ways of working that were right for their school.

Source: Report of case study telephone interview

The third challenge relates to the problems that can arise where there is co-sponsorship of some or all of the academies in a chain, unless there is a clear understanding of how each sponsor sees its role. It hinders rather than helps a struggling school if the various sponsors disagree on the vision for improvement. It makes it difficult to take the decisive action that is needed if there is no consensus on how to operate an accountability framework.

There is a related problem if there is a clash between the trustees or foundation members of an academy trust and the directors/governors exercising oversight of an academy or group of academies. This is not an issue with most sponsored chains. Although all charitable trusts have two layers of governance in most sponsored chains, it is the directors/governors rather than the trustees/foundation members who drive the chain. However, in one of the chains visited by the research team there were unresolved issues regarding the respective roles of trustees and governors.

Governance of converter chains

Governance of converter academy chains is in its infancy. For those chains that take the form of collaborative partnerships there is in effect little if any formal joint governance at this point. Some of the partnerships were very adamant about staying away from any prospect of formalising their partnership:

We have no intention of moving in this direction.

Headteacher, converter academy collaborative partnership

Others were less certain about the future and recognised that if they started to procure significant levels of services jointly, they might need a more robust governance structure.

There were some other interesting developments among the collaborative partnerships. For example, in the case of the Sutton secondary schools (described in Chapter 3) the chairs of governors are now meeting informally to discuss strategic issues that they have in common; this complements the regular headteachers' meetings and also feeds into joint heads and chairs meetings on matters such as admissions and places. In another collaborative chain in Essex the heads and chairs of governors of both schools involved in the partnership have also been meeting together.

Those converter academy chains operating as multi-academy trusts have governance structures similar to those of sponsored chains, as Figure 7.6 describes. One executive head of a federation that had become a multi-academy trust considered that the academy structure was more flexible than the federation governance framework it replaced. He described how the individual schools in the trust had a lot of latitude to determine their own local governance arrangements – an advantage compared with the position under the federation regulations that were more prescriptive about different groups having to be represented on the governing body.

Figure 7.6: Example of governance in a converter multi-academy chain

The Royston chain in Hertfordshire consists of one upper school and two middle schools. Each school has its own governing body but they are all accountable to an overarching academy board. All schools are equally represented on the main board – five members per school (including the headteacher, the chair of governors, a parent and a local representative). Each local governing body uses the same committee structure and reports in a standard way to the main board.

The model thus far has proved effective. A key factor is a shared sense of common purpose and wanting to make the chain work – and not putting their own school first:

Everyone speaks in terms of educating Royston's children. They don't start a sentence with 'in my school'.

Headteacher, Royston multi-academy trust

Source: Telephone interviews with leaders of the Royston multi-academy trust

However, apart from one converter academy chain that was working towards making its governance “smart, strategic and small”, converter chains seemed to be tweaking rather than radically rethinking the governance model they had inherited from their previous incarnation. As a result these chains may find that although their current models meet their immediate needs and circumstances, they may over time have to revisit their governance structures. For example, one of the chains that was interviewed had constructed a governing body of 26 for its chain of 4 schools. It had decided to have a large number on the top tier rather than governing bodies at an individual academy level, preferring to rely on parent-led councils for each academy. However, having so many governors will make it hard to practise and replicate the performance-focused style of governance being adopted by a growing number of sponsored chains.

A more serious issue is the challenge of constructing governance arrangements that enable maintained schools that convert to academy status to work with church schools that become academies, particularly where they are voluntary-aided. Although there are variations of approach in different dioceses, in general church bodies insist on being able to nominate more than half the members of voluntary church academies. Similarly, schools converting from a community background almost universally want to continue to operate as academies within a secular rather than a faith framework. Thus if community schools and faith schools want to work together as a chain within a formal governance structure they are having to set up separate trusts for the voluntary church academies and the other academies, and have a partnership agreement governing how the two trusts will work together.

It is possible for this system to work. As highlighted earlier in this chapter, one of the sponsored academies has such an arrangement. The Devon chain of converter primary schools referred to in Chapter 5 is also planning to make the operation of a scheme of this sort effective by ensuring the two bodies have some members and governors in common, holding joint meetings and acting as a critical friend to each other.

In addition, where it is desirable or necessary for the two sets of schools to work together because school improvement support is required, it is open to the governing body of one of the trusts to either appoint or contract the head from a school in the other trust to lead one or more of their schools. So the two-trust arrangement can be made to work but it is beset with technical challenges and requires a lot of goodwill to operate in practice. It also remains to be seen whether the model can be scaled up if academisation among primary schools becomes the norm, given that a third of primary schools have a faith basis. An alternative approach to this issue is discussed in Chapter 13.

The operation of governance arrangements is closely linked to the exercise of leadership of chains, and executive leadership in particular. This issue is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 8: Leadership of academy chains

Introduction

The leadership of the English school system has been evolving fast. The growth of autonomy for schools has marched hand-in-hand with the empowering of school leaders. The birth of the National College has been accompanied by a big leap forward in the training, development and support of school leaders. System leadership – the responsibility of school leaders for schools other than their own – has taken root as executive headship and national leaders of education (NLEs) have grown apace over the past few years. Government policy sees the school system becoming self-sustaining with school leaders becoming the key players in steering and supporting school improvement. The development of academy chains has the potential to contribute greatly to this agenda. This chapter examines the:

- location of educational leadership within sponsored academy chains
- role of CEOs of sponsored academy chains
- respective skill sets of CEOs and executive principals
- leadership of converter academy chains

Location of educational leadership within sponsored academy chains

There is no single dominant pattern for the organisation and primary location of educational leadership within sponsored chains, as Figure 8.1 illustrates. However, all but 2 of the 9 larger chains (containing 10 academies or more) identify either a CEO or a director of education as the key individual. Of the two larger chains that report that they vest the educational leadership at academy level, both have systems for ensuring they are able to track and monitor progress centrally. However, their responses suggest that their chains are probably more diverse in the school improvement strategies they are adopting. This issue is discussed further in Chapter 9.

The smaller chains have a wider range of arrangements. In some cases this reflects the fact that a chain was formed and grew from an existing strong school and thus principals and executive principals tend to feature more in their leadership structures. In other cases chains have deliberately invested in a strong central leadership resource, despite being relatively small, because they plan to expand.

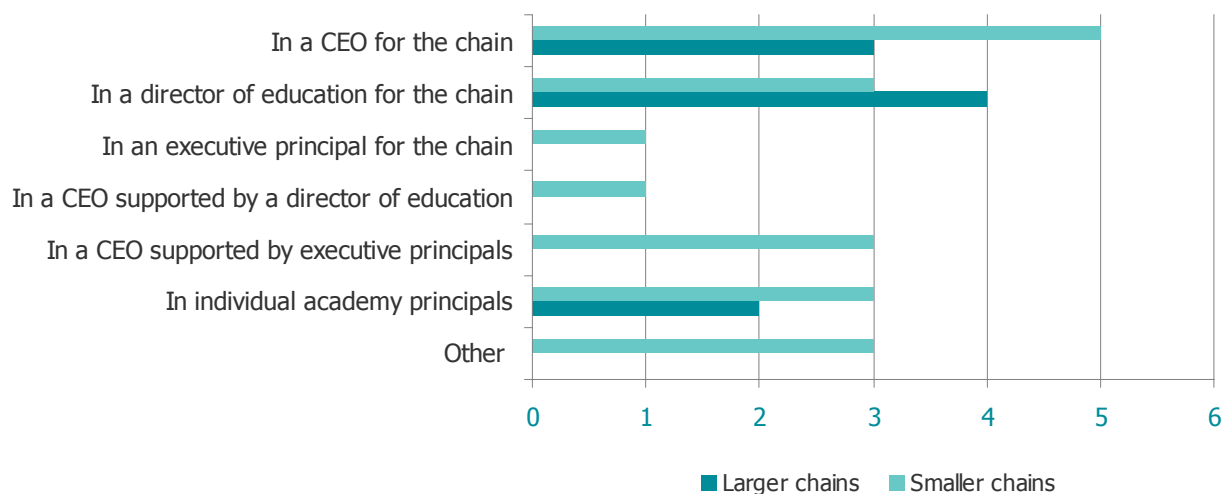
The three ‘others’ represent chains where the leadership is seen as a shared enterprise between a CEO, or an executive principal, and academy principals.

The executive principal [is] supported by academy principals.

The CEO has overarching responsibility, but individual principals have significant responsibility for their own academy. The CEO is also still principal of one of the academies.

Each academy has a number of co-heads and these report directly about their performance to the CEO.

Figure 8.1: Location of the education (ie teaching and learning) leadership and accountability in sponsored academy chains



Source: CEO survey (28 responses)

Note: Larger chains have 10 or more academies; smaller chains have between 3 and 9.

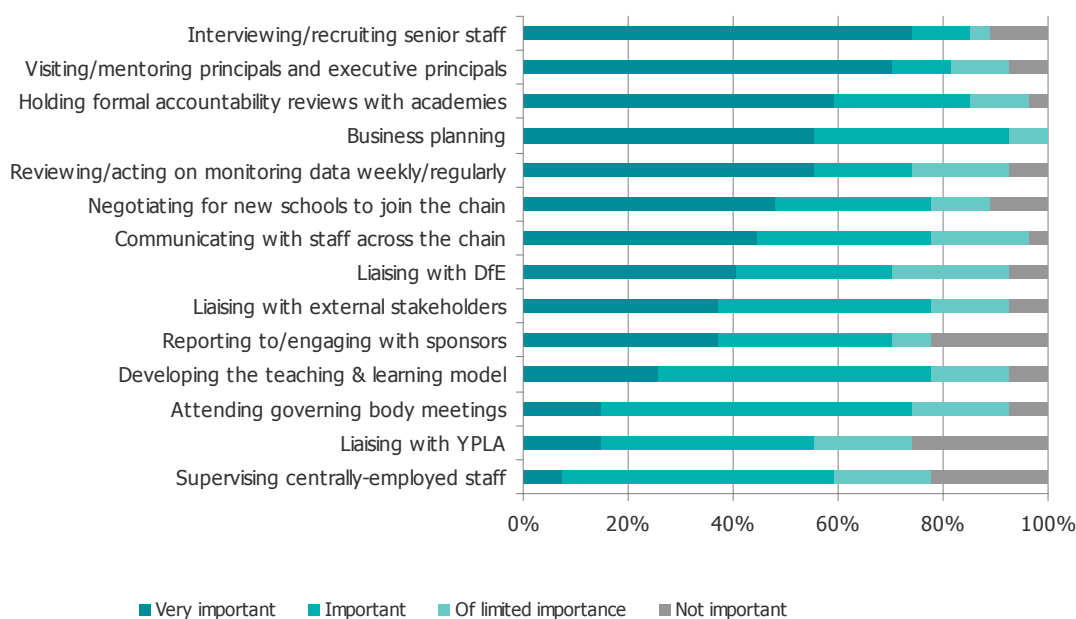
The practice of executive headship causes some concerns in the maintained sector. Issues such as who is the substantive head of a school and on what basis they are paid are not always clear, particularly as the role of executive head is not defined in education law and is not included within the School Teachers’ Pay and Conditions of Service framework (National College, 2010). However, these matters appear to cause less of a problem within the academy sector which has greater freedom over structures and pay and conditions, though as Chapter 13 highlights there can be problems in terms of Ofsted inspections and who the inspectors talk to and hold to account.

The role of CEOs of sponsored academy chains

Over half of CEOs responding to the survey considered that all the potential roles put to them were ‘very important’ or ‘important’ (see Figure 8.2). The development of human capital through finding and supporting academy leaders is given the highest priority. Keeping on top of performance through monitoring data and holding accountability reviews with academies also scores highly, with business planning, negotiating about the future expansion of the chain and communication across the chain all being significant.

Additional roles mentioned by several CEOs, which were not specifically categorised in the survey, include co-ordinating school-to-school support and partnership work outside the chain; seeking out best practice; researching and contributing to the national and local education agendas; futures thinking and strategic development; and leading partnership work within the chain. Another role cited by one CEO, and reinforced in reference group discussions, was being the “keeper of the flame” ie the vision of the chain.

Figure 8.2: The relative importance of different roles for CEOs of sponsored academy chains



Source: CEO survey (27 responses)

The way these different roles play out in terms of how CEOs allocate their time varies from chain to chain. The time allocation seems to depend on the context of the chain: what other posts exist (whether, for example, there is a director of education as well as a CEO); the scale of the chain’s central infrastructure; and where the chain is in its development (for example, if it is seeking to expand significantly, a larger part of the CEO’s time is likely to be spent on business planning, negotiating for new schools to join the chain and liaising with the DfE).

The three examples shown in Figure 8.3 below illustrate these points. The CEO of the larger chain employs centrally around 25 non-education support staff and 16 to 20 staff who provide various forms of education support services. This explains why supervision takes around a fifth of the CEO’s time. A larger chain also results in more time needing to be spent on communication. The medium-sized chain of six academies has at this point a smaller infrastructure but has ambitious expansion plans. The CEO is accordingly scheduling nearly 60 per cent of his time for business planning, seeking new schools to join the chain and negotiating with the DfE. The executive principal for the smaller chain is planning to expand but more slowly and sees the CEO role more in terms of coaching and mentoring the principals of the academies in the three-strong chain.

Figure 8.3: Examples of how CEOs allocate their time on a weekly basis to different roles (by percentage of the working week)

	A larger chain growing steadily	A medium chain growing significantly	A smaller chain growing more slowly
Business planning for the chain		40%	10%
Supervising centrally employed staff	20%	2%	8%
Interviewing and recruiting senior staff		2%	2%
Visiting/mentoring principals and executive principals	20%	10%	30%
Holding formal accountability reviews for each academy	10%	3%	10%

Reviewing and acting on monitoring data on weekly/regular basis		5%	10%
Reporting to and engaging with sponsors		10%	5%
Attending meetings of governing bodies	10%	2%	2%
Seeking and/or negotiating for new schools to join the chain	10%	10%	2%
Developing the teaching and learning model of the chain		2%	10%
Liaising with YPLA	5%	2%	1%
Liaising with DfE	10%	8%	
Communicating with staff across the chain	15%	2%	5%
Liaising/communicating with external stakeholders		2%	5%

Source: CEO survey

Note: The intensity of shading relates to the degree of time commitment by a CEO on an activity.

This difference of emphasis is also reflected in how executive leaders of larger and smaller chains describe their roles. As Figure 8.4 illustrates, the former tend to see their role in terms of the bigger picture – building and leading an organisation – while the latter tend to be focused more on supporting and developing leaders in schools. One of the challenges for leaders of smaller sponsored chains who focus on modelling headship and coaching principals is how to adjust their role as the chain expands. Part of the answer may lie in their moving to focus more on coaching and mentoring executive leaders of clusters, and holding them to account.

Figure 8.4: Respective role of executive leaders of larger and smaller chains

The CEO of the Harris Federation of 13 schools chairs the meeting of the principals' executive group, which is the federation's key operational management body. The group meets half termly and reports directly to the federation board through the CEO. The CEO visits the academies regularly and will be in email or phone contact with the principals every couple of days. He sees his role as encouraging the principals to work together:

A lot of the co-operation bypasses me – that does not matter. I am a bit like a bee – I see good practice and tell others where you can get it.

The executive principal of the Cabot Learning Federation that has five academies sees his role as being to:

- appoint, coach and mentor new heads and the senior leadership team
- deliver the CLF leadership programmes
- quality assure the quality of education including observing lessons and sharing best practice with the SLT
- lead learning reviews across the academies
- facilitate teacher exchanges
- talent spot and ensure succession planning is in hand
- develop strategic planning and plans
- report to the CLF board
- manage relations with the unions and the media, sponsors and external agencies

The executive principal's working week will span the range of these tasks but is still very educationally focused. His diary will include observing lessons, taking some assemblies, meetings with groups of staff and students and one-to-one coaching sessions.

Executive leadership does not just reside in the CEO. Weekly meetings of the federation strategic leadership team, which comprises the executive principal, the principal of each of the academies and the federation's director of finance, provide much of the vision and drive for the federation.

Source: Reports of case study visits

The respective skill sets of CEOs and executive principals

The roles of CEOs and executive principals, therefore, overlap but each has its own distinctive focus. This is reflected in the skill sets needed to undertake each role. The development of the role of executive head or principal is relatively recent in the English education system but the scope has become reasonably well defined. The skills listed in the right-hand column of Figure 8.5 are based on the National College's research on executive heads (National College, 2010) but have been amended to reflect the findings emerging from visits to and discussions with executive heads working within chains. The skills listed in the left-hand column have their origins in work undertaken to identify the skills and behaviours of director of children's services (Leslie et al, 2011). However, the skills have been adapted and refined substantially following discussions with CEOs to provide this revised list. The two-way arrows show those areas where there is an overlap between the skills, though the context in which they are practised remains different.

Figure 8.5: Key skills for CEOs and executive principals

Key skills for CEOs of larger chains		Key skills for executive principals
Strategy: translating the chain's vision and the board's priorities into a plan of action with agreed milestones	↔	Operate at a strategic level, including the ability to think and plan ahead
Communication: creating a simple, clear narrative or strategy for what the chain is trying to achieve	↔	Communicate effectively with staff, parents and pupils about the ambitions and strategies for the schools
Entrepreneurial judgement: encouraging new ideas and approaches as a chain develops and being able to assess and mitigate risks from new ventures		Be even-handed between schools and balance their different interests and challenges
Performance: an unremitting focus on improving results and outcomes, as well as on inputs, outputs and process	↔	Stay focused on performance, including the performance of schools providing support
Analysis: committed to delivering increased value and to understanding the different options for resource deployment	↔	Deploy staff and resources efficiently across schools according to need and maximise economies of scale

Teamwork: demonstrating a belief in staff, fostering a sense of teamwork and adopting practices to enable working through others	↔	Practise interpersonal skills, persuade through vision and model collaborative behaviours
Accountability: a strong, open culture of accountability between leaders within the chain and the directors, staff, students and parents	↔	Lead in a clear but open way by working closely with chairs of governors and empowering senior and middle leaders
Motivation: creating and sustaining commitment across a system; aligning people to work towards a common goal		Coach and mentor heads and emerging leaders
Discernment: achieving the appropriate balance in the tight-loose relationship between the chain and individual academies		Understand the different contexts of schools, identify their distinctive problems and the strategies needed at different points in their improvement journeys
Strong influencer: at an individual and chain level and in discussions with government officials and government agencies		
Champion: promoting the chain's vision, values (its brand) and managing reputation		Continue to be a leader of learning and foster staff development
Personal resilience and tenacity: demonstrating the ability to see things through and work through challenges	↔	Develop personal resilience, being able to work under pressure and manage the demands of staff, parents and external agencies

Sources: Leslie et al (2011) adapted; National College (2010), adapted

Both sets of skills reflect and resonate well with learning that comes from other sectors, particularly in terms of the importance of interpersonal skills. Sustainable success comes from being able to value, trust and collaborate with others. The quality of leadership should be judged by its capacity to build and contribute to the collective capacity of the organisation rather than by its ability to inspire followers (Goss, 2005).

Leadership of converter academy chains

In this research, 8 of the 15 converter chains¹ interviewed included a multi-academy or umbrella trust, ie a hard governance arrangement between 2 or more schools. Seven of these eight trusts had a CEO, executive head or heads responsible for the schools in the trust. These heads see their role in terms that are very similar to those of executive principals working within sponsored academy chains. For example, in the Village Federation in Kent the executive head is supported by a head of school in each of the three schools, who is the first port of call for parents. The executive head sees one of his key roles as being to coach and support the heads of schools. Another executive head reflected on his experience:

¹ Two of the chains were waiting for academy status to formally take effect.

There are five aspects to the executive head role – the emotional dimension, distributing leadership, building capacity and empowering people, leading the system and keeping the faith. The emotional dimension is the biggest challenge. You can sort out the other things. But you have to be able to understand the issues in the other schools, which are having to adapt.

Executive headteacher, multi-academy trust

None of the converter collaborative chains had an executive head. They might have formal arrangements for meeting together to oversee their joint activity but they did not have leadership responsibility for each other's schools. As part of prizing their autonomy the individual schools within these partnerships maintained the practice of having their own head. That is not surprising but it is worth putting that alongside the finding from the recent research commissioned by the National College (Chapman et al, 2011), which shows that secondary federations with executive leadership outperform federations with traditional leadership structures in secondary schools. The onus will be on the leadership of collaborative chains to demonstrate their effectiveness and added-value.

Where leadership of the chain is vested in a group of headteachers it helps if there has been a history of collaborative working on which they can build, but there can still be challenges, as Figure 8.6 illustrates.

Figure 8.6: Example of a chain vesting authority in a group of heads

The heads described leadership of the chain of three schools as being “quite interesting” and “requiring careful negotiation”.

The three headteachers are all strong-minded but very different, and that helps the dynamic. They meet every week, take joint decisions, and are in constant email contact. The relationship is very transparent and honest; for example, they all know details of each other's budgets. They have agreed that decisions on appointing senior staff will be taken together.

The deputies are also sharing and learning from each other, and there are opportunities for sharing CPD and cascading learning between the schools.

Source: Report of case study telephone interview

What comes across from the snapshot above is how being involved in leading a collaborative partnership requires an adjustment of leadership thinking and style. Leaders involved in partnerships do not have authority as of right, as they do in their home schools: they have to earn it by the way they act and their ability to persuade others to buy into their vision or agenda. They also have to reflect on broader objectives and not just on the interests of their own school.

There is a significant difference in the kind of leadership needed to make federations work. As heads even with distributed leadership we tend to lead from the apex of our institution in a still hierarchical fashion. Within federations leadership is much more lateral: balancing individual gains or losses against the value of the whole. It requires one to look across at the implications of the developments and see them from the point of view of others in the group and see how different strands of development fit together. It is a kind of leadership that, as heads, we are not at all comfortable with and it does not come easily to some of us.

Leader of a federation quoted in Hill, 2008: 256

Leadership in chains – but in collaborative chains in particular – also involves going back to a home school and persuading others within the school to come on board with the agenda agreed by the wider partnership. This task will be that much easier if, as many of the collaborative chains are doing, leadership is operating at several different levels so that deputies, middle leaders and subject co-ordinators from the schools within the partnership are also meeting and working together and forging a common sense of purpose.

Chapter 7 described how some of the collaborative chains accepted that they might need to move to harder forms of governance in due course as their work together developed. Similarly there are those partnerships that do not rule out introducing executive leadership in the future:

In the future there may be opportunities for an executive headteacher to work across a group of schools – and this would be a sensible way to overcome some of the recruitment problems for Catholic headteachers – but they are a long way from that at the moment.

Report of case study visit

Leadership structures and roles and relationships are as vital for chains as they are for individual schools. However, they are just one aspect of the leadership landscape. Equally significant are the strategies being adopted for talent management and leadership development across chains. These issues are examined in the next chapter.

Chapter 9: Appointing, developing and deploying leaders of academy chains

Introduction

Talent management and leadership development have become high priorities for the school system in recent years. In part this has been necessary as a result of the bulge in retirements of school leaders in the decade between 2005 and 2015. But in part it has reflected the ambition of successive governments to attract and enable the most talented and inspirational individuals to lead schools and take on broader responsibilities for leading the school system. In addition, in the last few years research from across the world has helped to establish the characteristics of high-quality leadership development arrangements. This chapter:

- describes the ways in which sponsored academy chains are appointing leaders of academies
- examines the extent to which sponsored and converter academy chains are using their autonomy to follow and implement the principles of good leadership development practice
- compares what is happening in academy chains with developments in CMOs in the US
- identifies some continuing leadership development challenges

Appointment of principals within sponsored academy chains

A quarter of the sponsored academy chains surveyed rely on internal development as their main means of recruiting principals (see Figure 9.1). In the Harris Federation, for example, 9 of the 13 principals have been internally appointed. It is not unusual for the principal of one academy in a chain to go and lead the opening of a new academy in the chain and for his or her place to be taken by the deputy. For example, in 2011 the principal of Bristol Brunel moved within the Cabot Learning Federation to set up Hans Price Academy in Weston. His place was filled by his vice principal.

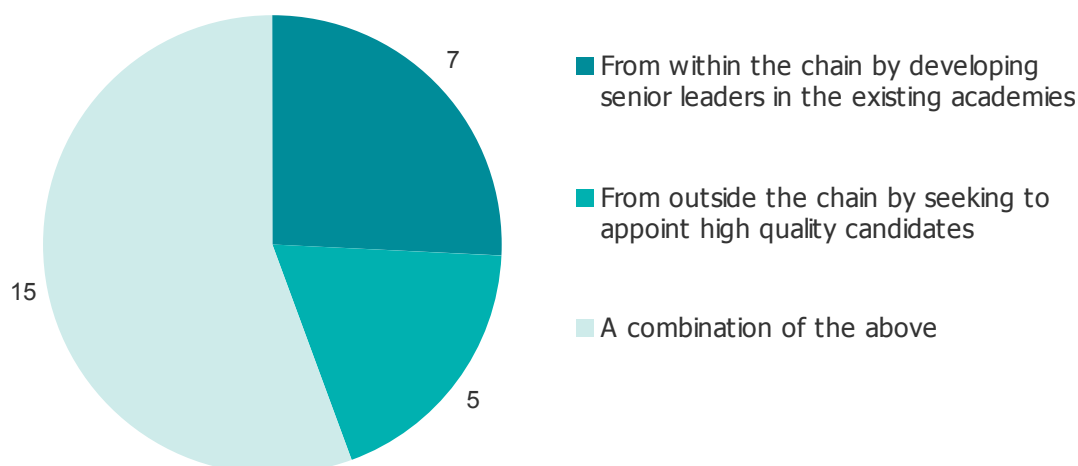
One advantage that internal appointees bring is that they understand the mission, culture and systems of the chain, as this extract from one of the case study reports illustrates:

The current principal of one of Academies Enterprise Trust's (AET's) London academies had previously been the principal at another AET academy. He and his senior team have recognised the benefits of him being conversant with the AET self-evaluation processes and systems which helped their introduction in the new academy.

Report from case study visit

However, most chains are recruiting new principals from a combination of homegrown and externally appointed talent. In some cases chains are responding to expansion by placing external adverts to recruit several new principals at the same time. All the chains that reported relying solely on appointments from outside the chain were small chains.

Figure 9.1: Main source of recruitment of principals in sponsored academy chains



Source: CEO survey (27 responses)

Development and deployment of leaders in sponsored academy chains

The research literature suggests that there are five principles that underpin successful talent management and leadership development¹:

1. Having senior leaders who play an active and personal role in championing leadership development by attracting, supporting, evaluating, promoting and deploying emerging leaders.
2. Identifying potential leaders and giving them opportunities to take on leadership responsibility and to be leaders of schools in a different context.
3. Giving developing school leaders the opportunity to learn from one another, particularly through networks and clusters, opportunities that are valued more highly than other development interventions.
4. Providing strong leadership role models and sharing their expertise through effective coaching and mentoring.
5. Using 'a professional apprenticeship approach' to leadership as an effective way of familiarising and inducting leaders into more demanding roles, at all levels up to and including executive headship.

The literature is also clear that the potential to implement this agenda is greater in school partnerships, federations and chains than in standalone schools. Emerging leaders have access to more numerous and diverse leadership development opportunities, especially where staff are appointed to the group of schools rather than to a single institution and so can be deployed to other academies (Matthews et al, 2011; Hill, 2010). Chapman et al (2011) confirm this and report that federating also brings more leadership opportunities for other staff, in particular middle managers. In addition it seems that the lower staff turnover reported in many high-performing federations, trusts and chains can be attributed largely to the opportunities available for professional and career development within the organisation (Matthews et al, 2011).

Not all sponsored academy chains are necessarily practising all five leadership development principles but the research team did find considerable evidence of the increased capacity of chains to be strong nurturers and enablers of school leadership.

¹ See Mourshed et al, 2010; Barber et al, 2010 and Matthews et al, 2011

Leadership of leadership development

Leadership of leadership development needs to be embedded at the heart of a chain and be championed by the most senior leaders within the organisation. ULT provides one of a number of examples that could be cited.

We've been to some of the major growth organisations in the country – Tesco, John Lewis and people like that. They will tell you that they need between 70 per cent and 85 per cent internal recruitment for succession, and when they couldn't have that height of internal recruitment, they didn't work as well as they're working now...

I've now got six heads at the moment going on executive business courses at full business schools because we believe that is the sort of quality of leadership we've got to encourage heads to have if we're going to have cluster leaders and if we're going to have regional leaders.

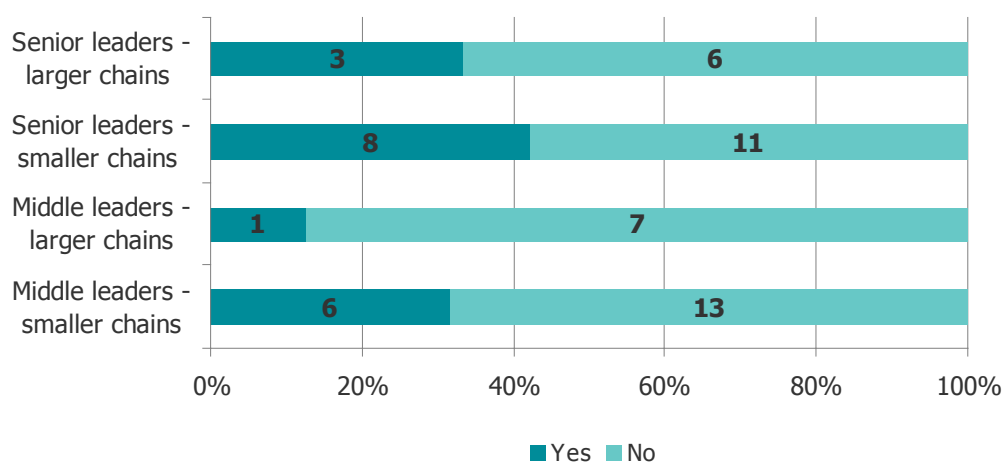
Sir Ewan Harper, former CEO, ULT, in oral evidence to the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee, 27 October 2010

But it is not just the most senior leaders ULT is supporting. Young leaders are identified early and supported up the ULT leadership ladder, with structured experiences provided for them – research and management projects, for example – and assistant principals across the chain are given significant projects to undertake. There is a ULT developing leaders programme for middle leaders and leadership opportunities are provided whenever possible, for example, to join the ULT academy leadership team on a temporary basis. ULT also has an aspiring leaders programme.

Identifying emerging leaders and providing opportunities to lead in different contexts

Matthews et al (2011) say that the biggest contribution to school leadership development lies in providing rich and varied opportunities to lead, innovate and take responsibility. A minority of chains, particularly smaller chains, have introduced contractual arrangements that enable them to deploy senior and middle leaders across the academies in their chains (see Figure 9.2). The feasibility of cross-chain deployment is really only realistic where academies are within reasonable travelling distance of each other (which may explain why smaller rather than larger chains have thought it worthwhile to go down the contractual route). The use of contractual obligations may therefore grow as the practice of geographical clustering expands.

Figure 9.2: Proportion of senior and middle leaders employed on a contract that enables them to be deployed/assigned to other academies within a sponsored academy chain



Source: CEO survey (28 responses)

Other chains are achieving the same end of assigning or using emerging leaders in other academies through more informal means, for example, through leadership development programmes. Either way, chains are able to use deployments to support the development of leaders as a complement to more formal leadership development training, as Figure 9.3 illustrates.

Figure 9.3: Example of a chain deploying middle and senior leaders

The Cabot Learning Federation runs three leadership development programmes: one for emerging leaders (teachers in their first five years of teaching), one for middle leaders and one for emerging senior leaders. The courses are typically run over six terms with three formal twilight sessions a term. In addition participants will be expected to undertake a written assessment (the University of the West of England, one of the federation's sponsors, helps with marking), a school-based assignment and, in term six of the programme, an exchange with another academy.

The formal leadership development programmes are complemented by a network of opportunities for middle and senior leaders to develop their skills by taking on assignments at other academies. In total 18 senior leaders have worked in more than one academy. Examples include the following.

- An assistant principal has been able to spend two weeks at another academy looking at how it uses data to personalise programmes of study and has been able to return and apply the approach within his home academy. This has also resulted in stronger relations between the two academies and productive conversations on organising and costing the curriculum.
- There have been opportunities for middle leaders to join the leadership team of an academy as guests for a year and contribute to the work of the team by taking on a particular responsibility.
- One of the assistant principals at Bristol Metropolitan Academy has had assignments across three academies over the past four years. Not only has he gained from working with a range of different leaders but he has been able to develop expertise in using data to help raise achievement which he is now using in his current role.
- The vice principal at Bristol Brunel spent half her time in 2010-11 supporting Kingsfield School in South Gloucestershire, as it prepared to join the federation as an academy in September 2011.

Source: Interviews with executive principal and leaders, Cabot Learning Federation

Giving developing school leaders the opportunity to learn from one another, particularly through networks and clusters

The ULT and Cabot Learning Federation examples show how providing opportunities for developing school leaders to learn together is an integral part of their systems. Similarly the Harris Federation offers a range of opportunities for emerging leaders to interact with each other. The federation provides training for middle leaders and runs the National College's Middle Leadership Development Programme (MLDP). This is supported by practical opportunities for learning between middle leaders in the federation's academies. As one Harris academy principal observed:

We have sent staff to observe, watch and talk with colleagues and look at schemes of work in other federation academies.

Emerging leaders also have the opportunity to participate in a Master's degree in leadership and management delivered in conjunction with the Institute of Education at the University of London. The Harris Federation subsidises the programme so that it only costs participants half the cost of a standard Master's degree. The sense of collegiality between senior and middle leaders is reinforced through a federation-wide leadership conference held every two years. The event focuses on sharing learning between the academies and developing a shared approach to the strategic challenges facing the federation.

Most of the middle-sized and larger sponsored academy chains provide programmes and opportunities along these lines.

Providing strong leadership role models and sharing expertise through effective coaching and mentoring

Again chains are using their CEOs and experienced principals to undertake this role. In Chapter 7 the CEO of the Cabot Learning Federation described how he saw coaching and mentoring as an essential part of his role. ULT has appointed a former principal who is based at its headquarters to undertake a pastoral

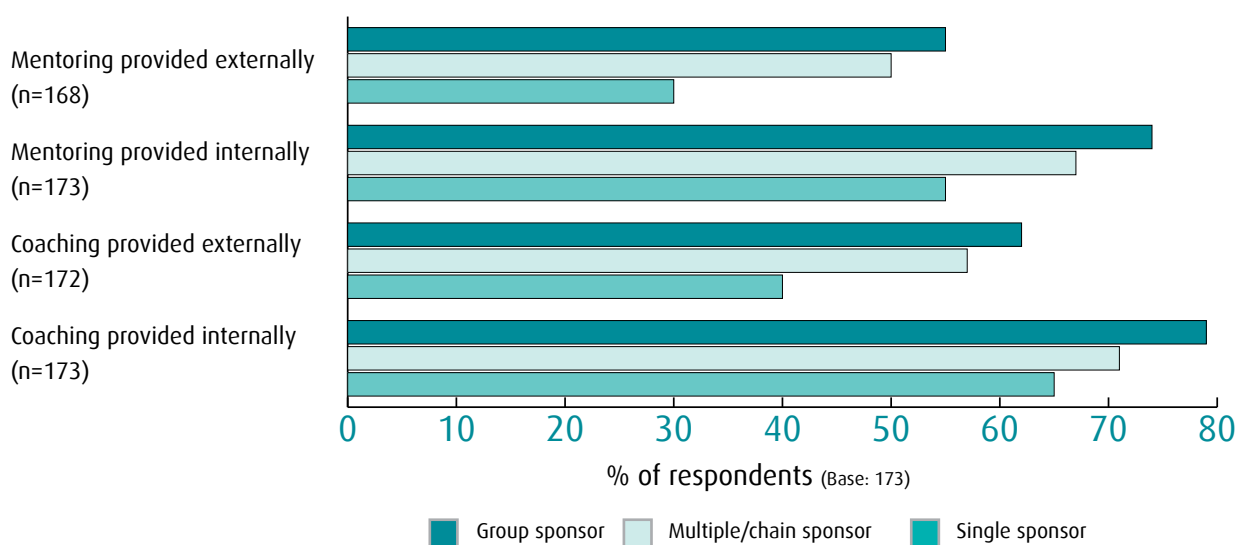
role, supporting principals on difficult issues and mentoring new principals. At one of the reference group seminars, a CEO of one of the smaller chains described his role in the following terms:

Leadership as an executive principal is about emotional intelligence – empathising with principals, their struggles and challenges, etc. It’s different in nature from one school to another. It’s related to mentoring, how you mentor – mentoring a head is quite challenging – you’ve got to avoid telling them what to do.

Executive principal, small sponsored chain

Significantly, middle and senior leaders in academies with either chain or group sponsorship enjoy more opportunities for both internal and external coaching and mentoring, compared with academies with a single sponsor, as Figure 9.4 demonstrates.

Figure 9.4: Coaching and mentoring opportunities in sponsored academies by type of sponsor



Source: PwC, Sponsored academies survey, 2010

Using a professional apprenticeship approach to leadership development

This approach reflects the way in which many CMOs in the US see leadership development. They view principals as instructional leaders or carriers of educational DNA. Nearly three-quarters of CMOs affirm the importance of principals apprenticing within the organisation prior to being appointed. The training programmes vary from one CMO to the next but generally involve internships of a year in one of several network schools and one-to-one mentoring for aspiring school leaders (Lake et al, 2010).

In England ULT has adopted a five-level structure of principalship, from what might be termed ‘principal-lite’ (strongly supported by the regional executive and not holding the full range of principal responsibilities) to executive principal, running more than one academy. Other chains are not using such a formal system but are following similar practices. The CEO of the Harris Federation believes that the way leadership development is organised and distributed can itself add to the process of creating an escalator of leadership talent:

Not only do we have effective networks which provide challenge, support and professional development for middle leaders and NQTs etc, but the leadership of them is distributed across the federation. This builds our capacity. I see this as fundamental to what goes on and spend a good amount of time encouraging it – if you leave it unattended it vanishes.

Leadership development in converter chains

Many of the characteristics shown by sponsored academy chains can also be seen in converter chains, particularly those that are working together as part of a formal chain, as in the following examples:

- In the West Grantham Academies Trust two of the four principals have come from within the federation as have two senior members of the central staff: the finance director and company secretary. The federation is participating in the National College programmes Leading from the Middle and Leadership Pathways and is also developing a middle leadership programme with an external provider.
- The CEOs of the federations in Devon that came together to form an overarching trust have already identified the advantages of rotating their heads of teaching and learning throughout the chain, both for their career development and also to improve the consistency of teaching and learning approaches across the schools. They also recognise that with a larger group of schools, it will be easier to plan and grow the executive headteacher roles that the chain will need.
- One of the heads in a multi-academy trust is an acting head and has not yet had an opportunity to take the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH). However, she has found the experience of working alongside two other very experienced heads invaluable, both in terms of managing the practicalities of running the school and her own development as a leader. The same chain also believes that with a combined senior leadership team of nine there will be new opportunities for senior leaders: “the future potential to specialise and develop will be great”.
- The executive principal of the St Neots Learning Partnership, a multi-academy trust comprising two academies described how “a huge proportion of what I do is to bring on other staff and leaders”.
- Darlington Education Village, a federation on the way to becoming an academy trust, has facilitators trained to deliver the National College’s MLDP and two of the headteachers have been promoted from within:

Having lots of assistant principals helps with succession planning... and a stunning teacher in the primary school has moved to be deputy head of the special school.

Executive principal

There is therefore lots of potential for converter academy chains to develop the leadership development agenda as positively and imaginatively as sponsored academy chains. From the interviews and visits with converter chains, leadership development comes through as a high priority for many of them, as this report indicates:

Succession planning and leadership development will be priorities for the chain. The executive head sees a possible career route for heads within the chain. The executive principal is looking to develop a leadership plan and will apply to become a teaching school alliance.

Report from interview with executive head, converter chain

Even those chains that are collaborative partnerships are acting as the basis for a degree of shared leadership development, as in the following examples:

- A collaborative chain of one secondary and two primary schools in Cumbria sees the partnership as a real opportunity to develop middle leaders. The secondary school in the chain has just been licensed by the National College to deliver MLDP, working with other schools in the area.
- In Sutton the heads are working in pairs and visit each other’s schools and offer advice and it is planned to rotate the pairings. One of the schools runs a taking the lead programme for middle leaders in schools across the borough.

However, what is missing from what the collaborative chains are able to do and offer is the ability to assign and deploy leaders from one school to another. They are unable to provide their emerging leaders with the experience of working in different contexts. As the leader in one converter collaborative chain put it, when it comes to leadership development:

the schools see themselves as autonomous and sharing staff/leaders is not a large part of the culture.

Principal, converter academy

So collaborative chains are constrained in being able to assemble all the various bits of the package that go towards providing an integrated and comprehensive leadership pathway. It may be that the advent of teaching school alliances and specialist leaders of education (SLEs) will bring about a change of culture and enable this vital piece of the leadership jigsaw to be put in place. There are some grounds for optimism in this respect judging by the experience and work of national support schools (NSSs)². An Ofsted study of 24 NSSs described how they were able to use the pairing of one school with another to support leadership development:

In the schools visited there was a particularly strong emphasis on providing opportunities, through shared or distributed leadership, for all staff to develop their skills and effectiveness... One way of sharing responsibilities was to move staff periodically into different teams. This helped them to learn about the variety of leadership roles and gave them opportunities to take on new responsibilities. They also had the opportunity to observe highly effective leaders, establish wider professional links and share responsibility across the wider school community.

Ofsted, 2010b

However, as the next chapter on school improvement models and strategies reveals, collaborative chains not only face challenges to deliver the same level of leadership development support as more formal chains; they also have limitations when it comes to taking responsibility for tackling hard, challenging issues in other schools.

² National support schools, led by national leaders of education (NLEs), provide leadership, curriculum expertise, teaching and learning, special educational needs and business management support to other schools requiring assistance.

Chapter 10: School improvement models and strategies

Introduction

Chapter 4 showed how sponsored chains of academies were making a significant contribution to school improvement. It identified what was described as a positive chain effect. This chapter analyses the school improvement methodologies being used by chains, to try and identify what is contributing to this success. The chapter:

- describes the school improvement strategies being used by sponsored academy chains
- compares the extent to which chains are adopting standardised approaches in all of their academies
- explains how joint practice development¹ and quality assurance procedures have become integral to those chains that are most effective
- examines the school improvement agendas being adopted by converter chains

School improvement strategies in sponsored academy chains

The school improvement strategies being used by sponsored chains have much in common with those deployed by NLEs and leaders of performance federations when taking on underperforming schools. Many of the sponsored chains operate in what were previously National Challenge areas and have also been influenced by the strategies adopted there. So there is arguably nothing unique in the school improvement strategies being used by sponsored academy chains. Discussions with CEOs at reference group seminars identified the following as key levers in the school improvement toolkit of chains:

- a clear vision for school improvement: all but 3 of 28 sponsored chains that were surveyed said that having a common mission and set of values to the operation of a chain was ‘absolutely essential’, and the other 3 considered it ‘very important’
- a strong emphasis on behaviour, discipline and attendance
- a tight grip on target-setting, pupil tracking and performance monitoring, linked to raising pupils’ aspirations and expectations
- ensuring curriculum content is relevant to student ability
- the intensive use of formative assessment to provide feedback to students
- intensive support for student in exam years, for example, Year 11
- building up the capacity of teachers to deliver high-quality lessons through feedback via frequent lesson observations and programmes such as the improving and outstanding teacher programmes
- developing and coaching middle and senior leaders
- practising action research among staff from different schools in the chain
- working with and securing the support of parents

In keeping with research on school improvement practice more generally, leaders of academies in sponsored chains deploy or emphasise different strategies at different phases of the school improvement journey. For example, sorting out behaviour, discipline and attendance are early priorities when becoming involved in a

¹ Joint practice development describes a way of working together than moves beyond transferring knowledge or skills from one teacher to another, and involves groups of staff working together to test, assess and evolve more effective approaches to teaching and learning.

school, particularly if it has been operating in a dysfunctional way². All chains give a high priority to target-setting, tracking and performance monitoring, reflecting developments within the school system more generally.

One issue, not on the list, but which also featured in discussions with CEOs, was using capability procedures to deal with those teachers not able or willing to step up to the demands of the new culture. But again that is not unique to academy chains.

So what is different about what sponsored academy chains are doing? The answer is that the best of them are doing four things. First, they either start out with or develop a particular set of school improvement strategies in such a way that it becomes the chain's defined school improvement model. Second, they are leveraging the advantages that come from having different academies in the chain to move leaders and specialist staff around the chain to tackle the really hard issues. Third, they are systematically developing capacity across the chain through joint practice development. Fourth, they are consistent and demanding in applying quality assurance processes across the chain. The sections below explore each of these points in turn.

Defined school improvement models

Sponsored chains formalise and are more transparent about the principles of the school improvement model they adopt. *Chain reactions* (Hill, 2010) described the seven strands of the Outwood transformation model, the six key principles adopted by ARK Schools and the Kunskaappolan educational programme used in the Learning Schools Trust academies in Ipswich and the London borough of Richmond. Figure 10.1 below provides a further example from the Academies Enterprise Trust (AET). In some chains the school improvement model has evolved and is more implicit than explicit. The way in which the school improvement model is articulated (and is made a reality across the chain) is one of the key factors that helps to turn a collection of schools into a chain.

Figure 10.1: The AET school improvement framework

The IMPROVE™ framework provides the overall structure for school improvement across AET academies. The key elements of IMPROVE™ are as follows:

Initial needs analysis: when AET starts work with an academy the starting point is to identify what is working well in an academy and what needs to be improved. This involves a due diligence process undertaken by members of the AET senior team with the new principal.

Monitoring: academies complete high-level self-evaluation against 24 key indicators of performance (KIPs) (28 for academies with sixth forms).

Partnerships: academies are supported in developing partnerships with local communities, employers, other schools and public agencies to help achieve AET's ambition to be an educator of choice for pupils, an employer of choice for staff and an investor of choice for parents.

Raising standards: this is at the heart of the IMPROVE™ framework and is designed to ensure that staff understand what effective teaching, learning and assessment look like. One of the key tools is a set of matrices that is used in analysing lesson observations and describes practice under five headings: unsatisfactory, basic, developing, established and extending.

Operating procedures: a set of shared standard operating procedures and policies covering the annual planning cycle, senior leadership responsibilities and systems for a range of functions are used by all the AET academies. These are not seen as a bureaucratic imposition:

² The study of CMOs in the US found that two education strategies were associated with positive school improvement impact: comprehensive behaviour policies and intensive coaching of teachers (Furgeson et al, 2011).

These were much better than the ones we previously had, and saved us a lot of time in not having to produce them from scratch; time we could then use to get on with our core jobs.

Academy vice principal

Values and vision: AET's mission statement ('to help world-class students achieve world-class learning outcomes by developing world-class teachers in a world-class community') is underpinned by policies to provide development and training opportunities for all levels of staff.

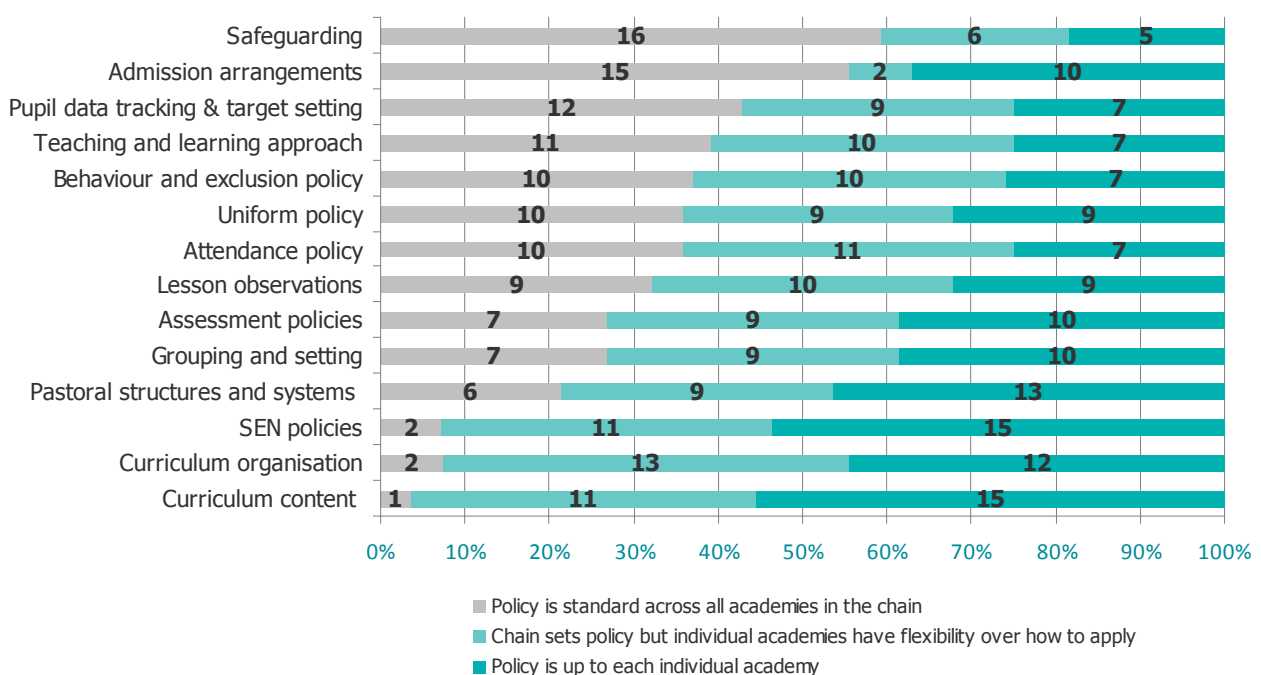
Evaluation and review of success and impact: a set of tools linked to a review cycle provides a framework for academies to monitor the impact of their activities.

Source: AET

Having a defined school improvement model is one thing; applying it across a chain is another. It is not simply a question of saying: 'This is the model: follow it' – it is much more complex and subtle than that. In some areas it is the case that sponsored chains are fairly prescriptive about the specific policies and practices to be followed; in others the chain will set the general approach and leave the application to individual academies; while in other areas it will be left to individual academies entirely to decide what practice to adopt. The areas that are mandatory and discretionary vary from chain to chain but Figure 10.2 summarises the approaches being taken by sponsored academy chains and Figure 10.3 provides one example of how things work in practice.

Chains are most standardised in the areas where procedural issues are a factor, namely admissions and safeguarding. Some 40 per cent also adopt standard approaches towards target-setting and pupil data tracking. In 12 of the 14 areas between a third and two-fifths of the chains set the overall policy but leave individual academies flexibility over its application. A number of chains refer to this relationship as the '80/20 split': 80 per cent being standard across a chain but with 20 per cent flexibility to adjust systems and models to the local context. Individual academies have the greatest autonomy in relation to pastoral structures, curriculum content and SEN policies, all areas where schools particularly need to reflect their context.

Figure 10.2: The application of policies and practices across sponsored academy chains



Source: CEO survey (28 responses)

Figure 10.3: The practice of school improvement within the Harris Federation

Some aspects of the Harris approach to school improvement are givens, ie they are mandatory. For example, the federation adopts a standard approach on school uniform and admission arrangements.

In other areas academies are free to make their own decisions, for example, in relation to curriculum content and how they use grouping and setting.

However, in many areas the federation works to a middle way: what might be described as ‘a core plus flexibility’ philosophy where principals have freedom to adapt the implementation of a core principle to their academy and context. So while all academies are required to use the same data-tracking systems, the system is flexible enough for principals to be able to adapt it to their specific requirements. Similarly the Ofsted template of what makes for an outstanding lesson is used as the basis for assessing the quality of classroom teaching across the federation, but the forms that are used and the precise arrangements that apply vary from one academy to another.

This approach is supported by the Harris in a box initiative. This is a set of online resources about a Harris way of doing things. It represents the distilled learning from the academies in the federation on a range of practical issues such as assessment systems, management structures and best practice in performance management. It covers:

- the Harris philosophy
- teaching and learning
- quality assurance
- professional development
- the learning environment
- assessment, data and tracking
- behaviour for learning
- involving students (roles and responsibilities for students, student voice etc)
- alternative support (bespoke curriculum and care)
- curriculum design
- new academies (optimising an opportunity, the first term)
- new sixth forms
- securing attainment (curriculum, enrichment, targeting etc)
- getting ready for Ofsted
- other policies

Source: Interview with CEO, the Harris Federation

Moving leaders and specialist staff around the chain

Chapter 9 described how sponsored chains moved their middle and senior leaders from one academy to another both to support career development and exploit to the full the experience and expertise of their best leaders. The chain provides a leadership resource bank on which academies can draw as they address the school improvement agenda, as these examples illustrate:

I lost my vice principal after 12 months. I was able to lift the phone to the principal of another academy and borrow someone for three days a week.

Academy principal, Harris Federation

Being able to draw on additional leadership capacity provides encouragement to face up to rather than shy away from some of the most entrenched problems a school may be facing. In addition chains deploy other specialists across their academies to provide support. In some cases experts or consultants are employed centrally and work in academies as they are needed³. In other cases school improvement support is embedded in the academies and staff move from one to the other. In many chains they work on a combination of the two approaches. To take one example, the Cabot Learning Federation has four part-time ASTs in English and mathematics that it employs centrally and they work for one day a week in academies within the chain. The federation's work with six local primary schools is underpinned by the central employment of Key Stage (KS) 2 literacy and numeracy experts and a leader of primary support. However, this support runs alongside a programme of broader staff interaction as the next section describes.

Developing capacity across the chain through joint practice development

Improvement programmes that are directive and standardised will only go so far in delivering sustainable school improvement. They are often effective in stabilising a school that is in free fall and getting it on an upward trajectory. Deeper and longer lasting change comes from developing the capacity of staff within a school or chain. It is joint practice development or co-construction of learning rather than knowledge transfer that drives learning and improvement across a group of schools (Higham et al, 2009).

The evidence on the extent to which co-construction of learning is happening within academy chains is at this stage more anecdotal than systematic. However, it may be indicative of an emerging culture within academy chains that in a recent study (PwC, 2011) two of the top five leadership development opportunities identified by leaders of sponsored academies since they had become academies were:

- opportunities to learn on the job through peer review
- opportunities to learn on the job through action research

Examples of how joint practice development is featuring in the school improvement work of chains are described in Figure 10.4.

Figure 10.4: Examples of joint practice development in sponsored academy chains

We develop case studies of effective practice in the federation to target support from one academy to another and support this by sharing successful high-quality staff between academies.

CEO, sponsored academy chain

We also host regular principals' forums where improvement strategies/issues are discussed and collaboratively reviewed.

CEO, sponsored academy chain

The Cabot Learning Federation has set itself an initial objective of ensuring that 80 per cent of all lessons in each academy are good or better. To help achieve this it has brought together outstanding teachers from each academy and this group has developed exemplar lesson plans, videos of outstanding lessons and feedback and coaching mechanisms. Team-teaching and working in each other's schools are also being used to spread and encourage the adoption of the co-constructed model.

The federation also encourages academies to work together on case studies of innovation and impact, for example, focusing on a discrete area of development in one or two academies and then sharing the learning and value with other academies in the federation.

Report of case study visit

³ Chapter 11 provides more details of the number of education support staff employed centrally by chains.

Applying quality assurance processes across the chain

Organisations that excel have a remorseless commitment to continually improve. The best schools adopt such a philosophy. Chains of sponsored academies are helping to bring that culture to broader groupings of academies with quality assurance being a key weapon in their armoury. Chains need to apply quality assurance procedures not just to support continuous improvement but also to ensure consistency and manage risk.

A series of quality assurance mechanisms were put to CEOs via the survey and all the potential means of assuring quality across chains scored relatively highly (see Figure 10.5). Five were particularly heavily used:

- setting improvement targets for each academy; discussions with CEOs suggest that this is the area where many chains are tightest in their requirements
- monitoring a dashboard of KPIs; ARK Schools has developed a series of at-a-glance colour-coded dashboards that report on progress for English, mathematics and science and showing progress by sub-level and whether pupil cohorts are at or above, slightly below or significantly below target
- formal appraisals with principals, undertaken both individually and collectively:

The CEO meets with executive principals weekly and all principals and directors of subject every three weeks for a full day. These meetings focus on curriculum-led financial planning, target-setting and praising star performers, English and maths RAG ratings, sensitive personnel issues, lesson observations and showcasing of exemplar practice.

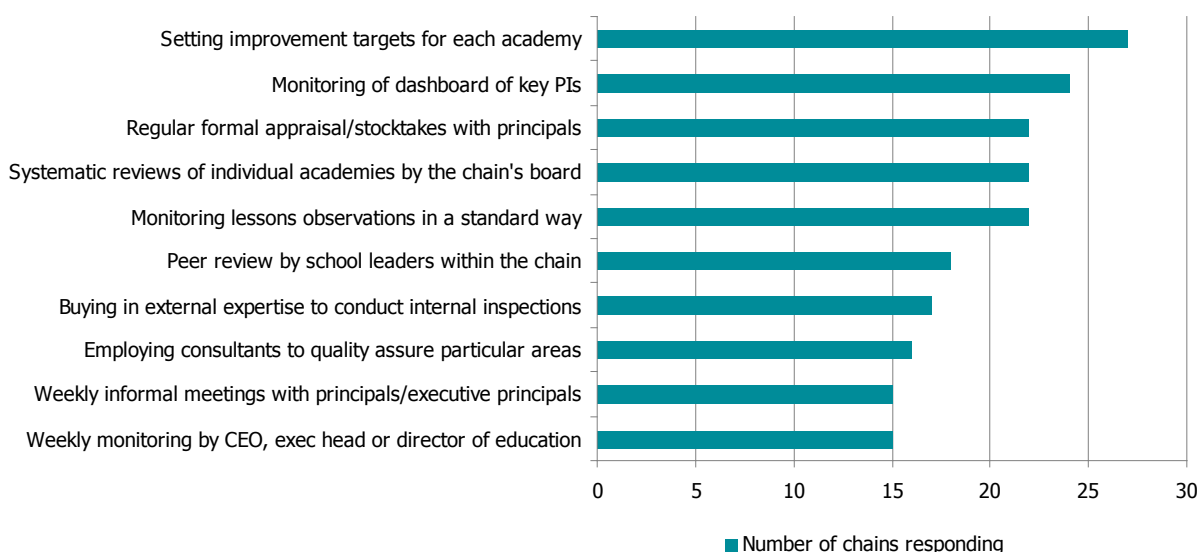
Report from case study visit

- regular systematic performance review by boards of chains. As part of its IMPROVE™ framework, AET commissions an external team to provide a short and sharp review of each academy's performance against Ofsted criteria on an annual basis. The results are used by AET's senior team to identify progress and priorities for improvement. In another chain the CEO described how:

we hold co-ordinated regular reviews and improvement planning [sessions] with all governing bodies and our director of education, so that governors can actively participate in reviewing progress and principals and senior leadership teams are suitably and regularly challenged/supported to ensure an effective quality assurance cycle.

CEO, sponsored academy chain

Figure 10.5: Quality assurance processes in sponsored academy chains



Source: CEO survey (28 responses)

-
- monitoring the quality of what goes on in the classroom. ULT, for example, uses the Ofsted criteria for assessing the quality of teaching and learning and provides staff with training in observation and feedback and so that there is consistency of judgement.

In discussions with CEOs and academy principals the other quality assurance process (not included in the survey above) to which they attach considerable importance is performance appraisal. The Kemnal Academies Trust and Cabot Learning Federation interview and assess each member of staff in a school or academy as it joins their chain. In the Harris Federation, staff are employed on a federation-wide contract and are paid on a federation set of terms and conditions of service. These include bonuses linked to a strong performance management culture and framework which involves agreeing targets with each teacher and reviewing progress and performance on an annual basis.

The Priory Federation, responsible for running four academies in Lincolnshire, has an annual performance cycle for its teaching staff. All staff are assessed against up to five objectives that will have been set following discussion with the individual teacher. The objectives have to contribute to improving the progress of pupils in the schools and they are expected to be:

rigorous, challenging, achievable, time-bound and equitable in relation to teachers with similar responsibilities and experience.

Priory Federation of Academies Trust performance management policy

School improvement in converter chains

The converter chains that have previously been federations and are now multi-academy trusts are operating in ways not dissimilar to sponsored academy chains. For example, one executive principal described the key features of his school's support for its academy trust partner prior to both schools' conversion to academy status. The stronger school had been able to bring the neighbouring school:

- a stable, experienced leadership structure and support after a period of upheaval
- a more co-ordinated approach to school improvement: prior to the federation all sorts of consultants and other expert teachers were being parachuted into schools but not in a way that was building capacity
- the means to address hard issues relating to the competence of some staff which required "persistence and determination"
- systems for facilitating two-way learning between the schools
- a resolution of budget problems, which necessitated the removal of several support staff posts and some teaching posts
- common systems and culture, particularly in the areas of performance management and appraisal

Another head of a school in a converter chain that had come from being a federation led by an executive head described how she could "already see the benefits of working closely between our three schools" and described how in the area of performance management, "getting deep professional dialogue between schools is already changing practice". A further converter chain based on a hard federation described how leading staff are used to provide lesson observations and coaching support across the three schools in the federation: "the expertise of the highest quality staff is a driver of improvement across the federation" was how the executive head described it. Significantly one converter chain used the same language as many sponsored chains and referred to the 80/20 split when talking about how it was going to operate in the future (see Figure 10.6).

Figure 10.6: Example of the 80/20 split operating in a converter chain

The First Federation in Devon has focused on establishing internal consistency in around 80 per cent of the systems across its 5 schools while allowing 20 per cent creativity to suit the individual context of each school. This 80 per cent internal consistency is apparent in approaches to assessment, marking policy, expectations about pupil voice, display work around the school and pupil tracking and monitoring. The executive heads describes it thus:

The 80 per cent is good school improvement; the 20 per cent allows the opportunity to move from good to great.

For example, one of the federation schools aims to use the 20 per cent creativity to become one of the best coastal schools in the country, developing a particular offer that maximises the benefits of local resources.

As the federation becomes part of a larger chain the schools and heads will need to agree what constitutes the 80 per cent of consistent practice to ensure common standards, a minimum expectation of the learning experience for all pupils and a common teaching experience for staff. This could mean some tough negotiations, with the likelihood that some favoured approaches will need to be given up by all four of the organisations forming the new chain. However, the executive leaders take the view that the content of the chain's 80 per cent is likely to be improved because it has incorporated the best from each of them.

Source: Interview with executive leaders

The learning that comes from talking to and visiting multi-academy trusts that have been federations is reinforced by research findings. These indicate that performance federations are good exemplars of co-construction: they have a clear focus on raising standards and this in turn leads them to work collaboratively on how to improve teaching and learning in different contexts. Federations that provide more opportunities for CPD and staff working within them recognise the potential power of collaborative learning (Chapman et al, 2011).

The collaborative converter chains were also engaged in or planning lots of joint school improvement activity that promises to be useful for pupils and staff. Examples included:

- senior leadership teams of two schools jointly reviewing their school development plans, with the next step being to review their joint self-evaluation processes
- sharing CPD and jointly commissioning providers of training and development to deliver courses and events
- improved provision for pupils who have been excluded or are not at school, with teachers within a partnership visiting those schools that are seen as having good inclusion provision and practice
- the provision of a joint training programme for NQTs
- joint training on how to improve reading
- shared curriculum development across the KS2 and KS3 transition
- opportunities for teachers to share planning, moderate assessments and increase challenge
- creating a joined-up approach to student support and family intervention

However, it is not clear whether or how these more informal collaborative chains have the means and capacity to tackle the hard issues such as when a school starts to slip back, when the leadership of a school loses its way or when a particular department struggles to provide a good standard of teaching and learning. In some ways it is unfair to criticise this lack of capacity as collaborative chains do not see it as their role to step in to such scenarios as each academy is considered autonomous. That means, however, that collaboration has its limitations in terms of building a self-improving school system.

The strong sense of responsibility of one school for another that one finds in a federation or chain is either not there in a collaborative chain or, even if a sense of mutual obligation is present, the systems are not in place to allow intervention and support. As one executive principal told the research team:

Structural change facilitates a change in responsibility.

Or as an academy principal in the Harris Federation described it:

If one academy was heading toward a failure that would be bad for all of us so we would all pitch in to help sort out the problems.

The nearest that any of the converter collaborative chains come to expressing this sense of responsibility was in Sutton where the partnership agreement among the secondary academies includes triggers for providing academies with support, examples being the loss of two grades in an Ofsted inspection or dips in attainment. However, the governors of a particular school would retain their right as autonomous academies to refuse support, though as one head put it, "They would be pretty silly to do so". It is expected that through data-sharing and open discussion, performance problems will be identified as they arise and that help will be offered and support accepted. More of the collaborative chains will need to adopt arrangements of this sort if collaborative chains are to be strong contributors to a self-improving school system. Even then the arrangement is hugely reliant on there being high trust between the various leaders involved.

Following a visit to one converter chain the research team engaged in an email dialogue with one of the academy leaders around this issue. The leader and the research team agreed that the following outcome expressed their shared view of the relative merits of hard and soft collaboration, based on what had been discussed during the visit:

Hard federation provides a strong basis for delivering and sustaining school improvement. Given enough commitment on the part of key players and the support of a co-ordinator role, a looser partnership of schools can make excellent progress on issues of mutual interest and can sustain partnership, though it may find it harder and take longer to tackle tougher issues of standards and performance.

There are also some issues relating to the way in which arrangements are being made for some converter academies to support other schools. The head of one of the schools in a converter collaborative chain told the research team about receiving a phone call from the DfE a matter of days before the conversion to academy status was due to take effect. The head of a high-performing school was advised that it would be linked with another local primary school that was satisfactory and would be expected to provide school improvement support. Both schools had applied for academy status as part of a broader local collaboration.

The head of the outstanding primary is an NLE and experienced in providing school-to-school support via London Challenge which, the NLE considered, provided a clear context, contract and resources for delivering a specified school improvement project. However, in this case there was no written mandate for supporting the satisfactory schools, and no additional resources to release staff from one school to support another. Furthermore the head of the satisfactory school believed that it had made significant progress since it had last been assessed by Ofsted. There was therefore no clear remit for the relationship between the two schools; nor was there a shared understanding of how it could fit into the working of the broader collaborative chain. Despite this rather unpromising context the two schools have started to make the relationship work in the way that the DfE intended, but that is despite rather than because of how things were set up.

One area where collaborative chains are moving into harder-edged arrangements between each other is in the organisation and delivery of back-office functions as described in the next chapter. It is possible that the structures for running these services could provide a framework for more formal school improvement responsibilities towards each other.

Chapter 11: The organisation and management of academy chains

Introduction

The development of academy chains is taking place against the backdrop of an unprecedented squeeze in public finances. Schools have to a degree been shielded from the full effects of reductions in public expenditure but nonetheless face considerable financial pressures. This chapter examines:

- how sponsored academy chains are organising their management and back-office functions and the extent to which they consider this is assisting them in generating savings and achieving better value for money
- the number of education and support staff employed by sponsored academy chains
- the arrangements made by sponsored academies for funding their centrally delivered activities
- the emerging picture for commissioning, procuring and sharing central services in converter academy chains

The organisation of back-office functions in sponsored academy chains

Over half the sponsored academies¹ surveyed are providing the following (non-education) services at a chain level (in descending order of frequency):

- human resources (HR)
- insurance
- legal services
- audit
- ICT network development, hardware, software and licences and maintenance
- marketing
- financial and business services
- payroll
- health and safety
- recruitment services
- estates management, including capital projects

As with school improvement functions, some of these functions are a given for academies to use; HR, ICT and payroll were the ones particularly mentioned during case study visits. In other cases the responsibility is shared. In the United Learning Trust (ULT), for example, an academy conducts the procurement process when it requires a new cleaning contract and makes the recommendation, but the group finance director has the final say. In some areas the issue is left to individual academies to organise delivery of a service such as grounds maintenance.

¹ Based on 26 responses to the CEO survey

Generally there does not seem to be tension between the chain's central management team and academies on the provision of central services. One school business manager (SBM) told the research team:

The central services are very good value for money. There is a good balance between central and local.

Chains ought to be capable of delivering economies of scale, and many think they are achieving that. For example, the director of finance of the Harris Federation has adopted a rolling strategy for maximising economies from the academies working together. Savings of around £1.5 million were, for example, realised in 2009-10. The Cabot Learning Federation (CLF) estimates that there is a saving of around £50,000 to £60,000 as a result of organising a range of services centrally, assuming that some of the posts would need to be replicated in the academies if the CLF did not offer them. However, sponsored academy chains will have to remain on their mettle and ensure that they continue to provide good value for money, especially in those areas where the use of central services is mandatory and academies have no choice over who provides the service. As the SBM quoted above explained, there are risks associated with the expansion of chains:

If the chain increases in size, I worry that central services will become more bureaucratic.

The organisation of the finance function differs from chain to chain. In ULT, management accounts for each academy are produced at a chain level. In contrast in the Academies Enterprise Trust (AET) the responsibility lies with schools but the director of finance oversees the process (see Figure 11.1).

Figure 11.1: Example of the organisation of the finance function in a sponsored academy

The AET director of finance currently has a team of 4.5 full-time equivalents (FTEs). The team checks that academies joining the chain are financially sound and can manage their funding effectively. All AET academies work to a consistent set of financial codes and use the same reporting templates (a policy established through financial regulations and schemes of delegation).

Financial reports are collated monthly with members of the finance team checking spending more frequently if necessary, as they are able to access and view individual academy accounts. Financial reports go to the governing body of the school as well as the main board. If any financial issues relating to an academy are identified, the director of finance contacts the academy direct through email or makes a visit if the issue is significant.

AET monitors a range of financial indicators across its academies and three key benchmarks in particular: the percentage of the overall budget spent on staffing (where the target is 75 per cent); the adult:pupil ratio (where the aim in secondary schools is 1:16); and teacher time spent in the classroom (where the target is at least 0.79 of a teacher's working week).

Source: AET

A quarter of the sponsored chains have set up a separate company to provide services to the academy in the chain and in some cases more widely. Figure 11.2 describes two examples.

Figure 11.2: Examples of the role of a sponsored academy chain operating a separate trading company

Part of the cost of the central team for the Cabot Learning Federation (CLF) is recovered from services provided to other schools. Through the executive principal's role as NLE, the CLF has contracts to provide school-to-school support. These services are traded through John Cabot Ventures, which is a separate charitable company that gifts back any surplus it makes to the CLF. John Cabot Ventures does not charge for support and services to academies within the federation.

Source: Report of a case study visit

The E-ACT academy chain has set up a company, E-Act Enterprises. It will sell intellectual property and services such as school improvement, and possibly set up fee-paying schools abroad. The company can make profits, but 100 per cent of these, [the former CEO, Sir Bruce] Liddington says, "will be ploughed back into our English academies", providing extra funding for scholarships, prizes, staff and experiences for pupils. Selling services to E-Act itself is "not on the cards".

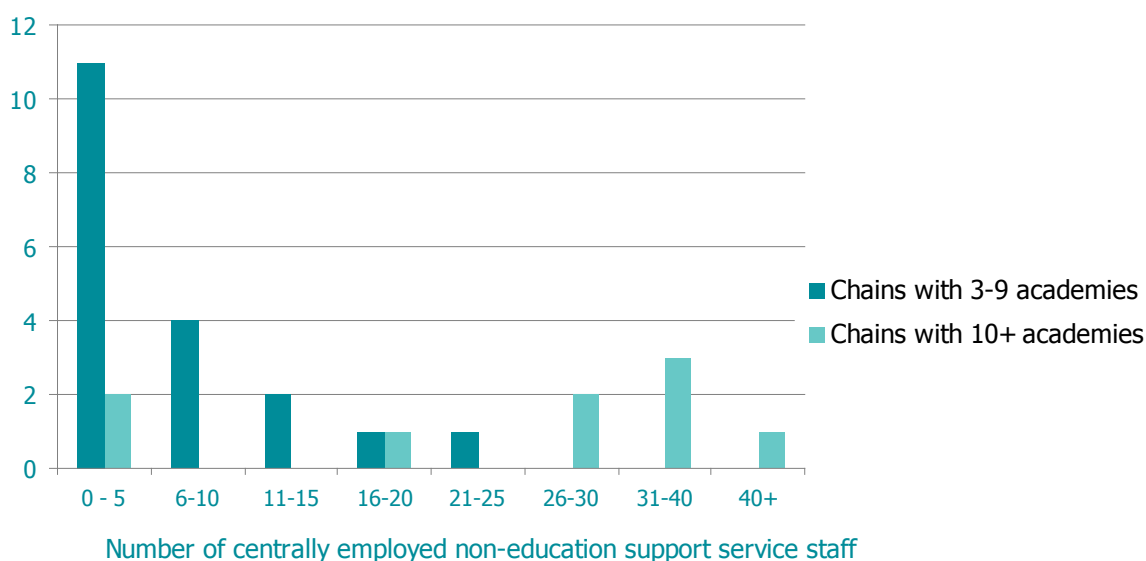
Source: The Guardian, 7 November 2011

The numbers of centrally employed staff in sponsored academy chains

Unsurprisingly, larger chains, with two exceptions, employ more non-education support service staff than smaller chains (Figure 11.3). The chain employing the largest number of staff is a chain that was set up de novo (ie it did not grow out of an existing strong school or group of schools) and so all its services and support have been developed around a central model. The chain is working to a different approach from most other chains that to a degree use more school-based staff for some functions.

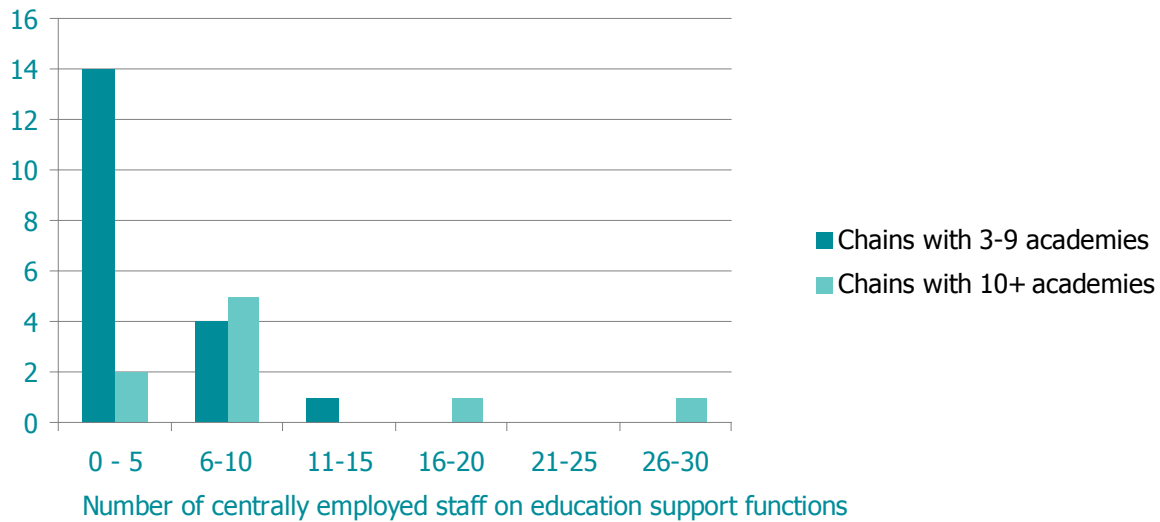
With centrally employed education support services the same trend of larger chains employing more staff than smaller chains is also evident (see Figure 11.4), although larger chains are closer to their smaller colleagues in the numbers employed. The education support services provided by these staff are mostly specialist improvement support, data analysis and internal quality assurance and inspection, reflecting the strategies and approaches described in Chapter 10.

Figure 11.3: Numbers of centrally employed non-education staff in sponsored academy chains



Source: CEO survey (28 responses)

Figure 11.4: Numbers of centrally employed staff on education support functions in sponsored academy chains

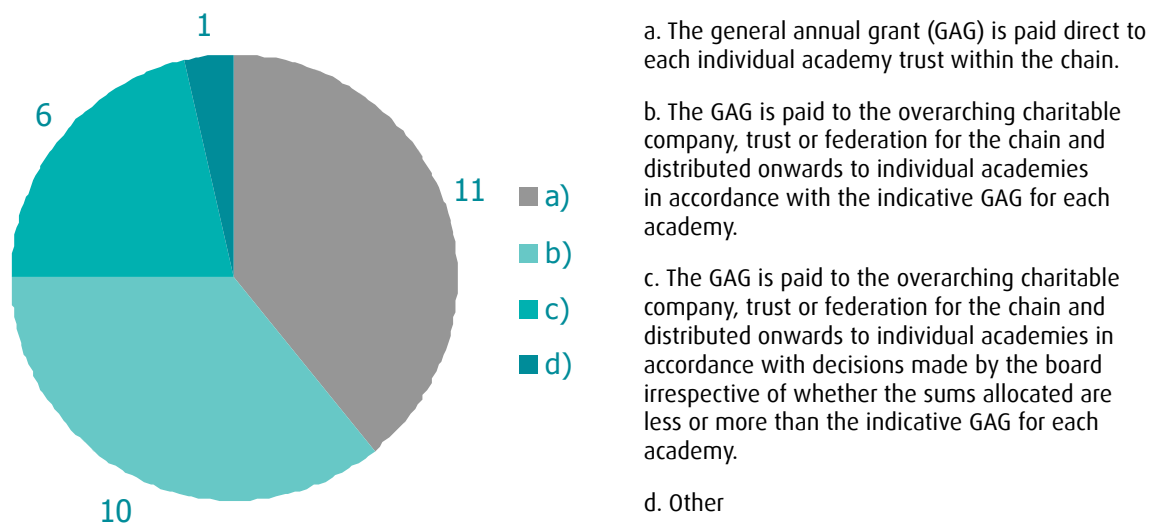


Source: CEO survey (28 responses)

The funding of sponsored academy chains

The funding of three-quarters of the academies in sponsored chains is based on them receiving their indicative general annual grant, ie the sum they would have received had they not been part of a chain (see Figure 11.5). However, the per capita funding for academies within a chain can vary significantly according to their pupil profile and the local authority in which they are located. A minority of academy chains (just under a quarter) decide therefore to smooth some of these differences according to the specific needs and circumstances of academies in the chain. In these cases academies within the trust will receive a sum – either greater or less – than the sum due under the indicative amount.

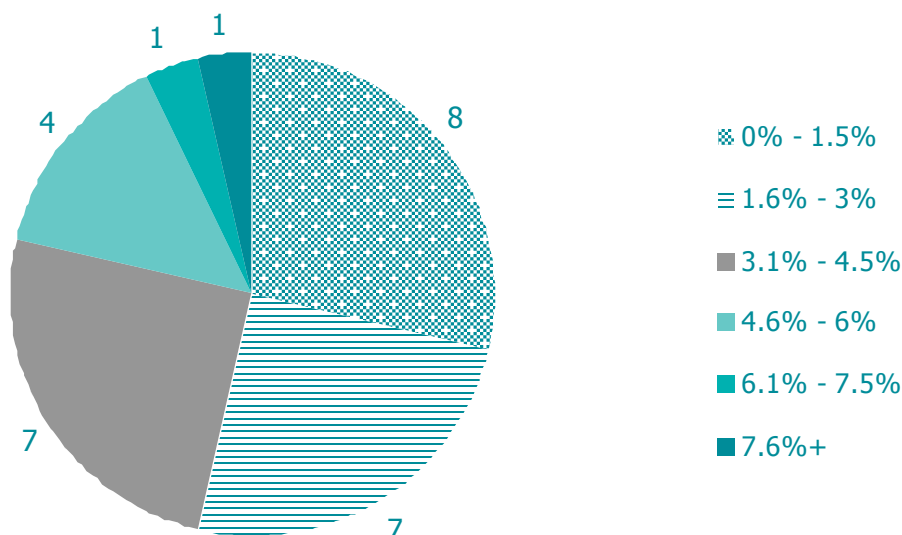
Figure 11.5: Funding arrangements for academies in sponsored academy chains



Source: CEO survey (28 responses)

Academies in more than half the sponsored academy chains are contributing 3 per cent or less of their general annual grant to the chain to cover central running costs (see Figure 11.6). In more than three-quarters the contribution is 4.5 per cent or less and there are only two academy chains where the contribution is higher than 6 per cent. The two chains with the highest percentage are both smaller chains. To put these figures in context a 1 per cent contribution might on average equate to around £50,000. The research team is aware of at least two sponsored chains where the sponsors or the charitable trust acting as sponsors are subsidising the central costs of the chain.

Figure 11.6: Percentage of GAG contributed by academies in sponsored academy chains towards the cost of central services



Source: CEO survey (28 responses)

Organisation and management of converter academy chains

The development of joint services in converter chains is at this stage far less developed except in those academy trusts that were formerly federations. Converter chains are continuing to use local authority central services where they represent good value but moving to make their own arrangements where they think they can obtain better value for money.

The list of support functions being shared or procured jointly by converter chains is broad and includes areas such as behaviour services, supply cover, education welfare and CPD as well as more nitty-gritty issues such as insurance, HR and grounds maintenance (see Figure 11.7). Collaborative chains are also being innovative in extending the scope of what they might do together. In the London borough of Sutton, for example, a careers service covering all the schools in the authority has been procured.

Figure 11.7: Examples of converter academy chains jointly commissioning services in three London boroughs

In the London borough of Harrow a collaborative chain of seven secondary academies is planning to jointly procure HR services. HR support is currently coming from the authority but it is an area where the chain believes it can commission a more effective service. They may also jointly procure a case worker, who is likely to be jointly employed, to provide education welfare support. The academies are not, however, merging their ICT support and will continue to utilise the London Grid for Learning.

In the London borough of Sutton the 14 schools, together with a special school and the pupil referral unit are commissioning an increasing range of services collectively, including procuring a careers service across the whole borough to replace Connexions.

A joint employment contract for behaviour services has been put in place across three schools, sharing the cost of the individual employed. Other schools have chosen to undertake a range of different ways to support behaviour services, but can also opt in and pay for services as they require support.

Other areas that are on the list for joint procurement include occupational health, grounds maintenance and insurance. Different schools have taken the lead on examining the options for jointly procuring different services.

In the London borough of Bromley 6 academies that are part of a collaborative primary chain of 10 academies have been tasked with examining the pros and cons of jointly procuring, as a chain, grounds maintenance, education welfare, insurances and behaviour services. They will report back to the whole group which will then make decisions on the scope of their joint activity.

Source: Interviews with leaders in converter chains

In several cross-phase federations, secondary schools are opening up their finance, HR, payroll and other services to primary academies in the chain and to other local primary schools. This builds on the work of National College programmes aimed at developing the use of business managers across clusters of schools.

Building up central services is seen by some chains as a challenge. In one chain, an umbrella trust, no arrangements for providing shared support services are yet in place. It is intended that schools in the chain will buy into a service level agreement for a range of services such as HR, payroll and executive headship from the lead school in the chain, but as the chair of governors of the lead school commented:

Currently there is no resource at the centre. Building it will be a challenge... Central services in the chain will be very important, because it is through this uniformity of operation that the group will be held together. Buying into the group's central services will be a condition of entry.

Funding of converter chains

Academies in converter chains are in general only contributing small amounts, if anything, to central costs. In one London borough chain the sum is £750 per school. However, there is a recognition that if partnership activity is to be meaningful it will need resourcing, as in the following instances:

- The members of collaborative chain A are building on long experience of having worked together. The chain recognises that the funding it had been receiving from the local authority will come to an end and that the academies will need to make a contribution to their joint work together.
- Collaborative chain B has decided at this stage not to go down the route of pooled budgets or a subscription route. It is, however, thinking of charging its members for joint activities.
- Chain C is a converter multi-academy trust where the funding currently comes to the academy trust and is passported to the three schools. However, the trust will in future retain a percentage of the budget for joint priorities such as buying two minibuses to use between the three schools in the chain.

-
- Chain D is a secondary/primary collaborative chain that anticipates setting up a funding pool into which all the schools will pay. Potentially joint funds could be used to create joint posts such as a transition co-ordinator who would teach across all the schools.

Another issue is the basis on which academies in a chain should contribute to central costs: on a per capita or per school basis? In the Village Federation which comprises 3 small primary schools with 60, 120 and 160 pupils, the executive head and bursar posts are funded on a federation basis. The board gave consideration to schools contributing to the cost of the post on a per-pupil basis but in the end decided that each school should contribute a third of the costs.

The decisions that chains – and converter chains in particular – make on procurement and funding have knock-on implications for the services currently or previously provided by local authorities. Authorities have to determine whether, on what basis and for which services it is still viable to provide central support for a diminishing number of schools. This is part of the agenda that is explored in the next chapter.

Chapter 12: Working with others

Introduction

Chains of academies do not operate in a vacuum: they are part of a broader network of local schools. Their relations with those schools and with the local authorities in each area determine how well the local education system as a whole meets the needs of all young people in a locality. In some areas relations are very positive and the combined effort of academy chains, other local schools and local authorities are effective in raising attainment, meeting the needs of pupils and supporting the development of teachers and leaders. Mutual support is a key driver of system-wide improvement. In other areas relations are not so positive. This chapter discusses:

- the extent to which sponsored chains of academies work with other schools outside their chain
- the way that sponsored academy chains engage with other chains
- relations between sponsored academy chains and local authorities
- the impact of converter academy chains on school-to-school collaboration
- the impact of converter academy chains on the role of, and relationships with, local authorities

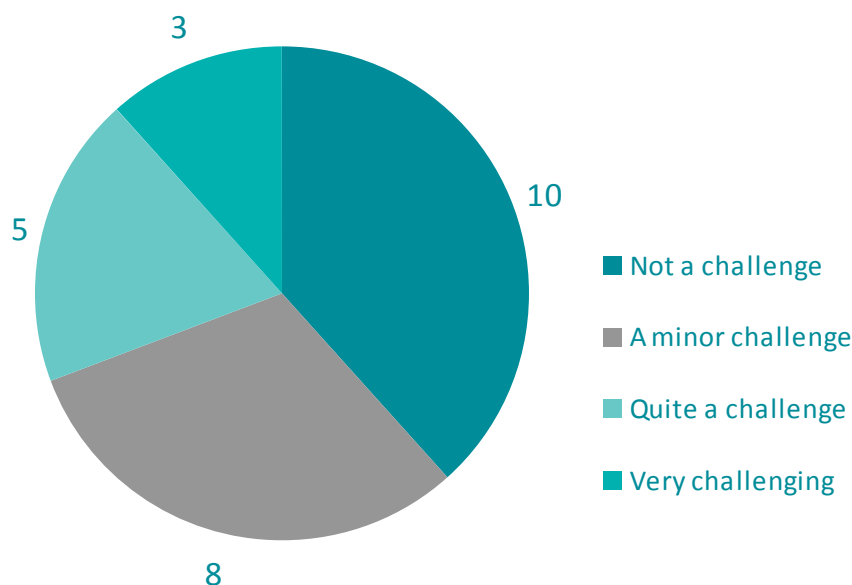
Sponsored academy chains and relations with other schools

Over two-thirds of sponsored chains reported that it was either ‘not a challenge’ or ‘quite a minor challenge’ to engage effectively with schools outside the chain (see Figure 12.1). This self-assessment by chains receives some support from Ofsted. In a number of inspection reports inspectors comment positively on the role that academies within chains play in the wider school community. For example:

Moreover, it is highly committed to working in partnership and takes a leading role in a range of activities that widen its positive impact. The academy is highly effective in working within its federation and also in other local schools to promote the high quality of experience for their students and others across the city.

Inspection report for Priory LSST Academy (carried out 17 Nov 2010, published 12 Feb 2011)

Figure 12.1: The scale of the challenge for sponsored academy chains in establishing effective partnerships with other local schools outside the chain



Source: CEO survey (26 responses)

Further examples of the ways in which sponsored academy chains work with other local schools are described in Figure 12.2. The survey asked about this issue from the perspective of the chains. In some areas other schools do always not see the role of sponsored chains so positively and perceive academies in a chain as being introverted and only concerned about the schools in the chain. Case study visits suggest that the relationship of sponsored chains and other schools is driven by a number of factors:

- the vision and ethos of the chain and whether it sees itself as being an island of educational excellence or as a catalyst for broader change across the education system
- the need felt by some chains to focus efforts on school improvement within the chain, particularly in the early days of taking over one or more underperforming academies
- whether or not the chain has a facility (leadership training centre) or service that provides a spur to engage with, or market an offer to, other schools
- whether or not the chain has one or more NLEs and NSSs that will engage and provide support for schools outside the chain on a contractual basis
- the extent to which a chain considers that its long-term performance is affected by the level of attainment in its feeder primary schools which in a number of cases has triggered academies to work with and support them
- the culture and history of relations between local schools and how far collaborative activity between schools has been the norm. In some areas academy principals still see themselves as part of the local family of schools and attend conferences organised for or by all heads within the authority, and in others they opt out of them. As one director of children's services told the research team:

There is a tension in the extent to which academies engage effectively with other local schools. Some local heads see academies as a threat, and when academy principals are unwilling to engage with local structures it goes down very badly. There are examples of where chains have their own arrangements and are seen to be 'just talking to themselves'. However, there is also an onus on local areas to make headteacher and partnership meetings worthwhile - if they are just a talking shop there is little incentive for academies to engage.

Director of children's services

- the development of teaching schools and role that sponsored chains play in their development. The first 100 teaching schools to be designated include 14 academies that are either part of academy chains or are converter academies involved in sponsoring at least one other school. Teaching schools with their emphasis on brokering and providing school-based teacher training, leadership development, improvement support and CPD have the potential to harness the strengths and learning coming from sponsored chains and enabling these benefits to be shared and deployed across the local school system:

Teaching school status forms the cornerstone of our development as an academy chain. All aspects of the teaching school agenda are being used to support not only the ever-growing group of academies within the Kemnal Academies Trust (TKAT) but also schools in the areas where TKAT academies are based. Each of our academies serves a local community and therefore the teaching schools agenda should benefit all schools within that community.

Chief executive, TKAT

Figure 12.2: Examples of sponsored academy chains working with other local schools

The Cabot Learning Federation invites other schools to CPD events organised by academies in the chain, and staff from the federation attend events run by other local schools. Through the executive principal who is an NLE the federation provides improvement support to schools outside the chain and has a partnership agreement with six local primary schools.

The Harris Federation sees its focus as being on raising attainment and improving performance within the federation. However, it also engages with schools outside the federation. For example, the Harris Academy at South Norwood is the leadership and innovation hub for the London region of the Schools Network and delivers a range of training and leadership development sessions for other London schools.

The Harris Academy Merton chairs the fair access protocol involving all schools and academies in the borough and the academy's student referral centre provides staff training, advice and targeted student intervention programmes for other schools within Merton.

Source: Interviews with leaders of the Cabot Learning Federation and the Harris Federation

Partnership working between sponsored academy chains

There are few arrangements in place that enable chains to learn from each other in a systematic way. The National College brings together CEOs from sponsored chains every six months for debate and dialogue. The annual conferences of the Independent Academies Association and the Schools Network provide workshops and other informal opportunities for networking and sharing learning between chains. The Foundation, Aided Schools and Academies National Association (FASNA) also acts as a network for academy leaders. In addition the CEOs of the main chains meet regularly at consultation sessions organised by the DfE. There are also some instances where individual chains have taken specific initiatives to draw on the knowledge of other chains and learn from them, as in the following instances:

- Both Oasis Community Learning, responsible for running 14 open academies, and the United Learning Trust are strategic partners of the Future Leaders' Charitable Trust in which ARK Schools, another academy chain, is also heavily involved. The programmes provided by Future Leaders are enabling emerging leaders in academy chains to train and develop together.
- The Leigh Academies Trust is a chain of four academies. It commissioned another chain, Academies Enterprise Trust (AET), to undertake a review of its organisation and performance. The CEO reported that the review was "short, sharp and inexpensive but very valuable".
- The senior leaders and regional managers within AET at one of their bi-monthly meetings used the performance of another academy chain to challenge themselves on how well they were doing in improving attainment.

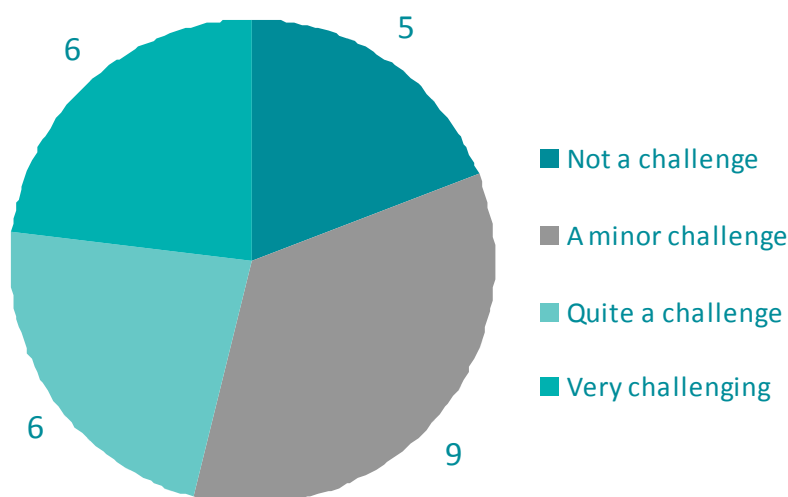
One factor that can inhibit collaboration between chains is competition, particularly if two chains in an area are effectively rivals in seeking to attract parents to their academies. Interestingly, some chains have a gentleman's agreement not to go on to each other's patch to seek new schools to sponsor, except with prior agreement.

Several sponsored chains are trademarking their school improvement systems. It is entirely understandable that they should want to protect and market their intellectual capital but it will be detrimental to the system as a whole if this were to prevent teachers and schools sharing ideas and thinking on teaching and learning and school improvement. Teaching schools, particularly where they decide to collaborate on a regional or sub-regional basis, could potentially provide a forum to counteract these tendencies and facilitate greater learning and engagement between chains.

Relations between sponsored academy chains and local authorities

Many local authorities have gone through, or are going through, a process of radical restructure and redesign as their role within the education system evolves and budget pressures take their toll. Figure 12.3 shows that sponsored chains are less positive about working with local authorities than they are with other schools, though a majority see this as either 'not a challenge' or 'a minor challenge'.

Figure 12.3: The scale of the challenge for sponsored academy chains in working with local authorities to establish and develop new academies



Source: CEO survey (26 responses)

For those chains that do find the relationship with authorities problematic it can be a serious issue. Case study visits identified examples where CEOs considered certain authorities to be 'very anti academies'. They are critical of these authorities for:

- failing to identify and deal with underperforming schools and being resistant to engaging with sponsored chains that want to offer a solution. CEOs consider such authorities to be ideologically opposed to using academies to bring about school improvement. One director of children's services interviewed by the research team indicated that where elected members are politically opposed to academies this does influence the attitude of the local authority
- being weak in awarding academies to academy sponsors that provide soft options, ie bidders and sponsors who shy away from confronting authorities with the hard actions that may be needed to turn a school around

The circumstances in which a sponsored academy is established (in particular whether it was set up against the backdrop of a collaborative or confrontational environment) often determine the tone for the ongoing relationship between a sponsor and an authority. Previous research indicates that problems between sponsored academies and local authorities tend to be exacerbated where the quality of the relationship was seen as poor prior to taking on academy status (PwC, 2011).

However, the research team also found several cases where sponsored chains had a positive experience of working with local authorities. For example, they were happy to include local authority representatives on their local governing bodies and buy in some local authority services. They also reported how they were commissioned by local authorities to undertake wider school improvement projects and invited to bid to take individual or even groups of schools into their chain.

Similarly there are local authorities that see the merits of academies and understand how to work strategically with the sponsored chains, as Figure 12.4 illustrates. The director of children's services for one local authority interviewed sees it as potentially a positive development that sponsors have more direct powers than local authorities ever had in relation to performance management and, if necessary, changing school leadership. It means that sponsors have the potential to make a very rapid impact on improving schools that are failing. However, this director also argued that there needs to be mechanisms for local authorities to be able to hold sponsors to account where the performance of an academy or chain is slipping, and to ensure that chains are part of a broader local approach to delivering education for vulnerable children.

If a sponsor is not responsive to a local authority's concerns, it could become very difficult to effect any change via other routes.

There is also a risk that the important community leadership role of schools, particularly of secondary schools, gets overlooked if a chain is too inward looking, with schools becoming isolated if they don't feel accountable to local children and their families.

Director of children's services

One local authority reported that it had taken a deliberate decision to try to limit the number of different sponsors in its area so it was able to develop really effective relationships with a few of them and involve them in issues relating to the planning of school places, deployment of NLEs and the authority's performance management system for schools.

Figure 12.4: Example of a local authority working with sponsored academy chains

The first academy sponsored by the local authority was part of a Building Schools for the Future (BSF) project. A local FE college was the main sponsor and the authority was a co-sponsor. The FE college is now considering stepping back from its sponsorship role because the principal is retiring and there is less of a case for the local authority being involved. The authority is therefore brokering in an established academy chain to be the new sponsor for this academy.

The second academy was a local-authority financed new-build secondary school. The school was improving, but had a dip in performance at the point when it was due to have an Ofsted inspection. The school became anxious about its position and volunteered to become an academy under AET, although subsequently as expected the school improved and got through its inspection successfully with the support of the authority. Relationships with AET have been good: it feels "like a good fit". The authority and the sponsor meet regularly and AET has committed itself to the local arrangements for supporting and educating vulnerable children.

Source: Report of telephone interview with director and assistant director of children's services

Converter academy chains and school-to-school collaboration

Many of the converter chains, whether they are part of an academy trust or a looser collaborative partnership, have been formed out of a commitment to broader collaborative working¹. In terms very similar to those described in Chapter 3, one of the heads of a converter academy described how colleagues in his partnership wanted the autonomy and the additional funding that came with academy status but “did not want to go back to the bad old days of grant-maintained divisions”. School-to-school collaboration is at the heart of the converter chain phenomenon.

Many of the converter chains have adopted an inclusive approach to working with schools beyond their chain and are maintaining links with schools with which they have previously worked, as Figure 12.5 illustrates.

Figure 12.5: Example of a collaborative converter chain continuing to work with other local schools

In Cumbria one headteacher described how all the schools in the Brampton cluster are operating “in the same way as they always have done” and meeting regularly to discuss policies and teaching and learning. They are making a concerted effort not to let those schools which are not currently part of the chain get left behind. “No one is pushed out because they are not an academy.”

Another of the leaders of the collaborative converter chain described how adamant they were about wanting to “make sure that all the cluster schools are included in everything that we do”. It would take drive to make sure that all the cluster schools continued to share ideas, but all the heads were committed to this.

Source: Telephone interviews with leaders of a collaborative converter academy chain

The formation of converter chains has, however, not been entirely without challenge to previous collaborative activity. For example, existing primary cluster arrangements may be disrupted by some primary schools opting out or being pulled into working more with other primary or secondary converters in their chain, rather than with their previous local geographical cluster. In some areas all the secondary schools have converted to academy status (with the exception of one or two that have complex PFI building project, deficit or performance issues to address) and are working together in a new way. Unless the converter academies are inclusive of all schools a small rump risks being left behind and attached to a local authority that has reduced or little scope to support them.

Another challenge comes from the governance complexities (described in Chapter 7) which are making it difficult though not impossible for community and faith schools to work together within an academy trust framework. There is a risk that church school chains could lead to schools working mainly or solely just with schools sharing the same ethos. And finally some local authorities have concerns about whether all converter academies, including some chains, will remain committed to local protocols for dealing with hard-to-place pupils and other inclusion issues.

As with sponsored chains, teaching schools could be a powerful means for converter academy chains to engage with schools more widely and thus help to address some of these challenges. In the first round of designations, 27 converter academies were designated as teaching schools.

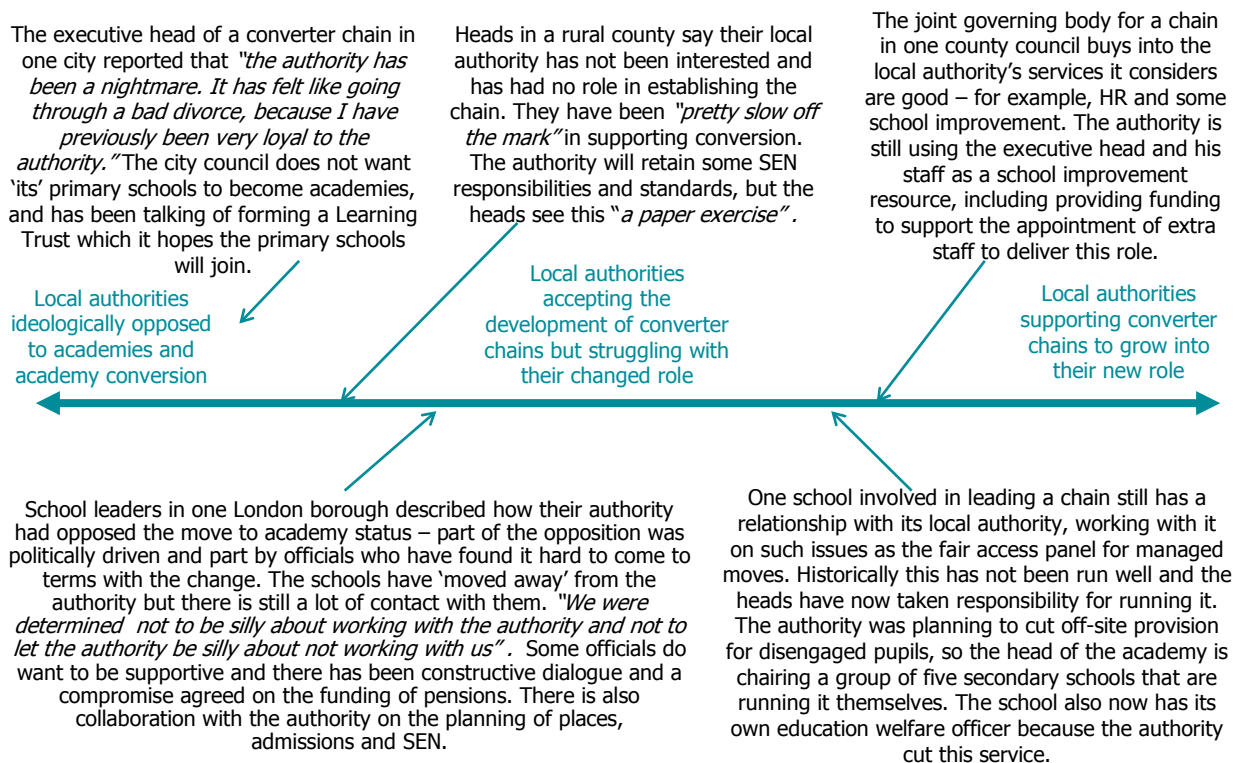
Relations between converter academy chains and local authorities

There are two sides to the coin of how the development of converter academy chains is affecting relationships with local authorities. The interviews with leaders of converter chains suggest that the position of local authorities falls into one of three categories as shown on the horizontal axis of Figure 12.6. The vignettes drawn from converter chains are matched against the categories on the axis.

The general sense emerging from the interviews with leaders of converter academy chains is not so much one of hostility to local authorities as one of frustration at what they perceive to be the inability of authorities to relate effectively to the new world of academies.

¹ The government has reflected this in its insistence that all converter academies must have plans for working in partnership with at least one other school, although it was beyond the scope of this project to investigate the extent to which this commitment is being put into practice in all cases.

Figure 12.6: Examples of converter chain perceptions of local authority responses to the development of academies



Source: Interviews with leaders of converter academy chains

From the perspective of local authorities things look a bit different. The conversion process has been time-consuming and resource intensive for authorities and has come at a point when local authority budgets have been reduced in real terms very severely. In addition, the payment of local authority central spend equivalent grant² (LACSEG) to converter academies means that authorities have been losing funding for central services while, in some cases, still having a responsibility for a large number of maintained schools. Trying to square this circle has been a contributory factor in authorities becoming involved in disputes with converter chains over the cost of continuing to buy services provided by the authority.

Perhaps the most telling critique of converter chains relates not to finance but to school improvement issues. The critique came from a director of children's services who was clearly committed to the principle of school-to-school support. He cited the example of one of the converting chains in his authority which has seen a coasting school linking up with a satisfactory school: "These are not two schools that the local authority would ever have paired up together". This director is sceptical about the scope for this as an improvement mechanism:

It feels like this pairing has been more about helping one school convert when it shouldn't, rather than real school improvement. There is a danger that decisions on conversion are being done as part of a desk exercise which doesn't look beyond the headline data or take account of local knowledge.

Director of children's services

² Schools converting to academy status receive the same basic funding they would have received if they had remained as local authority maintained schools. In addition, they receive a top-up called LACSEG. This is allocated to academies based on the number of pupils on roll. The cash amount varies from authority to authority because of the different policies for delegation and funding central services. LACSEG is paid to enable academies to purchase the services they no longer receive by becoming independent of the local authority.

However, the same director also accepts the need for local authorities to face up to the challenge of being clear about their role and vision, and using that as a basis for building relationships with academies, converters and sponsors in order to develop an agreed strategy that promotes the interests of all children and communities.

These issues raise significant policy questions, both about the future role of local authorities and what is often described as 'the middle tier' between government policymakers and local schools. The next chapter examines some of the broader management and policy issues that academy chains, the National College and the wider education system need to consider.

Chapter 13: Challenges arising from the academy chains' agenda

Introduction

The previous chapters of this report have attempted to paint a picture of how the growth of both sponsored and converter academy chains is unfolding and the implications for leadership at both academy and chain level. The pace of change has been rapid and shows no sign of slowing down. This final chapter stands back from the more immediate developments and reflects on the challenges and policy issues that different parts of the school system need to consider and address over the coming period. In particular this chapter discusses the challenges as they relate to:

- sponsored academy chains
- converter academy chains
- the National College for School Leadership
- the wider education system

Challenges for sponsored academy chains

The challenges for sponsored academy chains fall within three broad headings: what it means to be a chain, managing the rate of expansion and engaging with others outside the chain.

What it means to be a chain

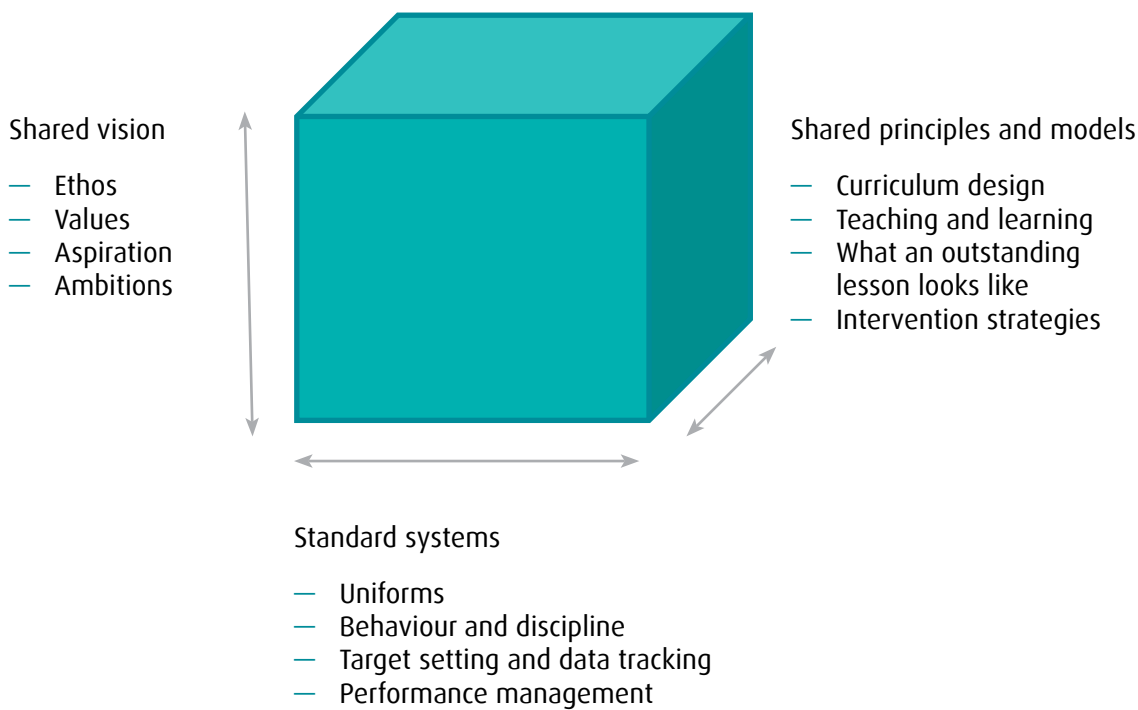
The definitions of an academy chain used by the DfE and summarised in Chapter 1 are functional and they are not intended to describe what it means to be a chain in operational or educational terms. *Chain reactions* (Hill, 2010) suggested that academy chains might typically display the nine features summarised in Figure 13.1. The research for this study has found these features still to be valid, and this report has included descriptions, evidence and examples relating to all of them. However, the extent to which all these features are embedded in all sponsored academy chains varies significantly. Figures 13.2 to 13.5 suggest an alternative way of thinking about what it means to be an academy chain.

Figure 13.1: Features of academy chains as described in Hill, 2010

1. Clear vision and values, describing the central driving educational ethos of the chain
2. A distinct teaching and learning model
3. A system for training leaders and other staff
4. Deployment of key leaders across the chain
5. Direct employment of all or key staff
6. Geographical proximity
7. Central resources and system
8. Strong quality assurance arrangements
9. Effective and clear governance

Figure 13.2 describes three core dimensions to being a chain. The first is having a shared ethos, vision and set of values. The second relates to having a series of managerial systems in place governing the operation of the chain. These would include admissions, attendance and behaviour management standards, target-setting and data tracking, and performance management.

Figure 13.2: Core features of an academy chain functioning well



The third dimension relates to the pedagogical approach deployed across the chain including:

- the extent to which there is either a shared approach to curriculum content and design or action to develop one
- a shared understanding and assessment of what constitutes excellent teaching and learning
- crucially, joint practice development in the form of leaders, staff and students working together across the different academies to develop the teaching and learning model. Chains do not find it easy to define and articulate this dimension but its significance should not be underestimated:

Self-similarity is achieved not through compliance to an exhaustive set of standards and rules, but from a few simple principles that everyone is accountable for, operating in a condition of individual freedom.

Wheatley, 2006

One example of what this means in practice and how significant it is to the concept of a chain comes from the Aspire chain of schools in California:

As visitors to a number of Aspire schools, the similarity between different schools and classrooms in their teaching practice was very apparent. This non-mandated uniformity is a product of collaborative practice. Instructional materials and methods are co-developed by teachers, tested in classes, and the results studied. What works well is shared widely and adopted by peers. What does not work is discarded. The expectation of teachers is not only that they should develop and employ effective practices in the classroom, but that they should share them throughout the whole system. Best practice therefore quickly becomes standard practice, adding to the pedagogy.

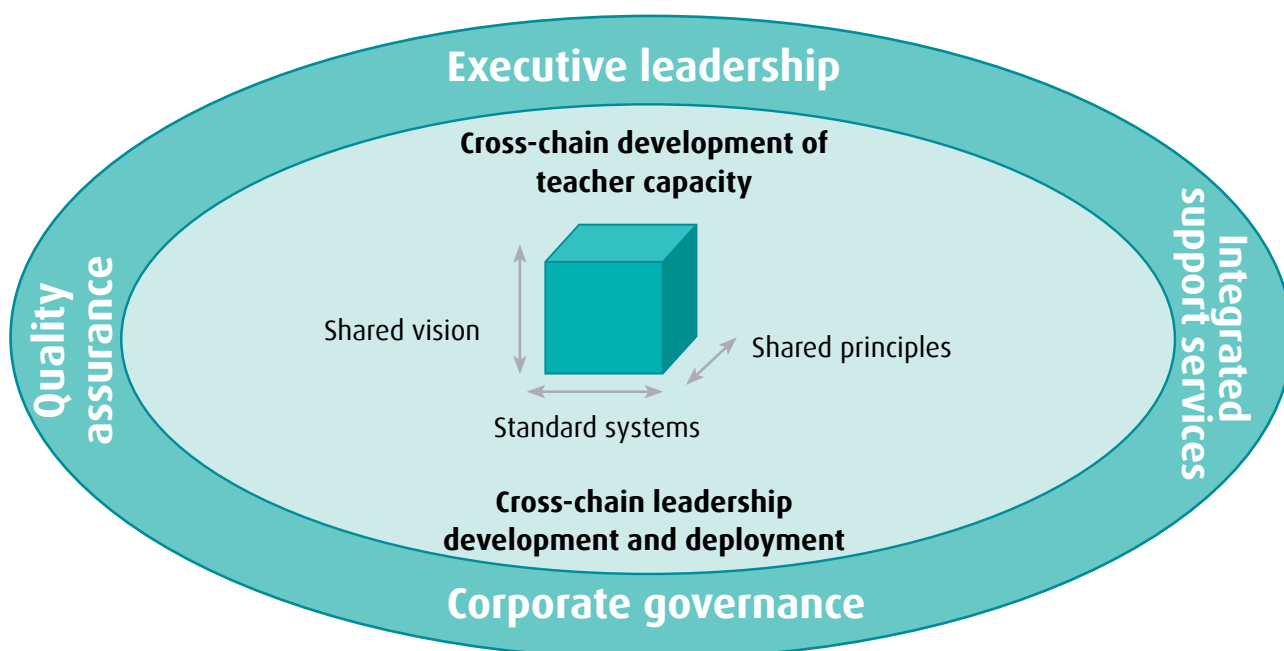
Mourshed et al, 2010, p.77

The uniformity is not prescribed: it is non-mandated and comes through working and sharing together in a disciplined way.

In a chain that is functioning well and likely to achieve its educational potential all three of these dimensions would be evident and in balance. It is not being suggested that all these factors would be centrally determined – as we saw in Chapter 10 in some areas chains may lay out principles but leave it to academies to implement them in their own way, and in other areas the 80:20 principle allows for academies in a chain to adapt overarching principles and systems to their context and so contribute local variation and innovation to a chain's broader learning.

Figure 13.3 illustrates the leadership, organisational, governance and quality assurance framework necessary to enable a chain to apply the three dimensions. They include executive leadership, an ability to deploy and develop leaders across a chain, quality assurance systems and integrated corporate governance. Implicit in this framework is sufficient geographical proximity (which could include geographical clusters working within a regional or national structure) to enable school leaders, teachers and students in the chain to interact with each other to provide mutual support and joint practice development and to refine the chain's pedagogical model.

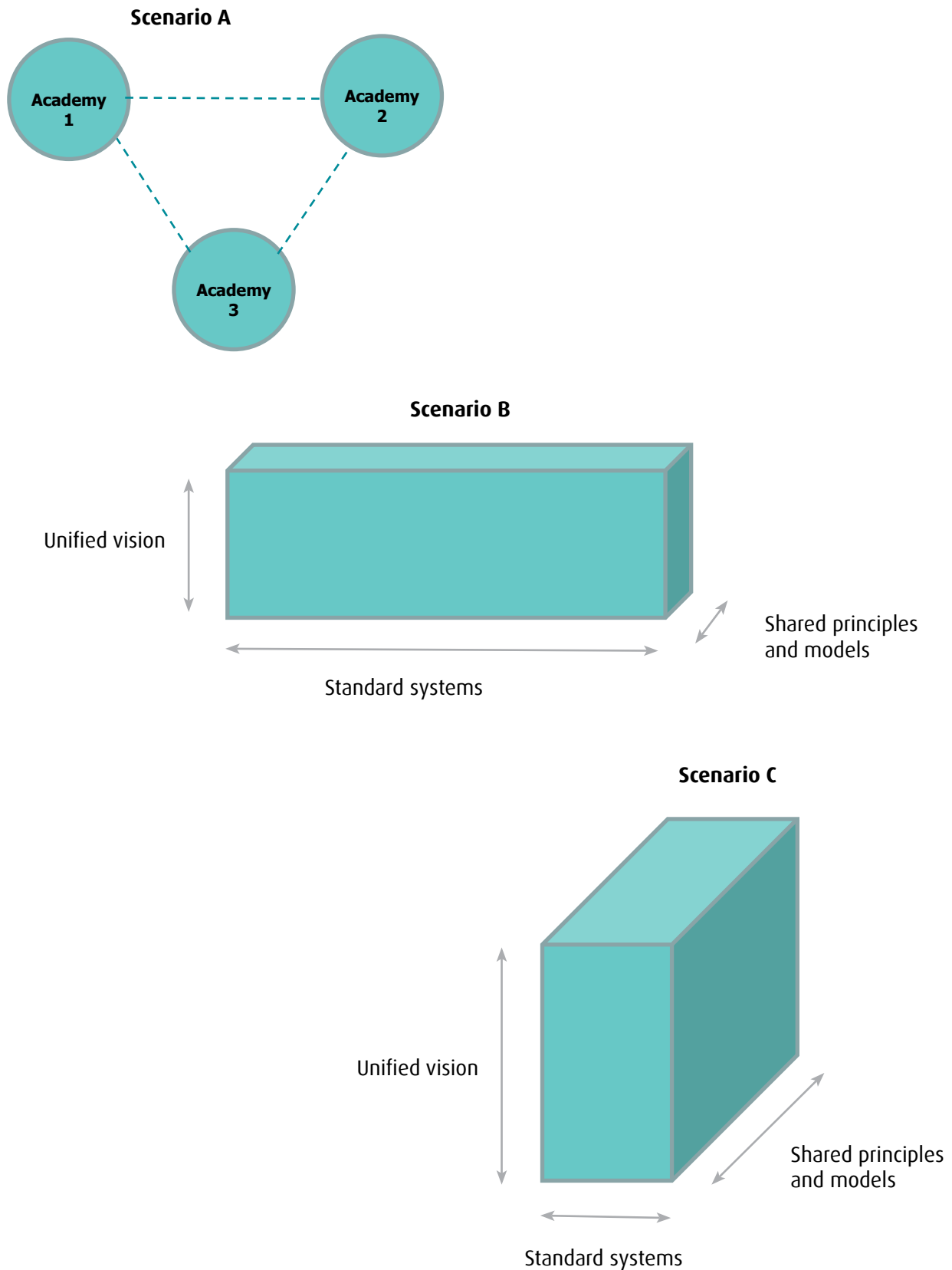
Figure 13.3: Framework to support an academy chain that is functioning well



There are now some chains that exemplify the full chain model as set out in Figure 13.3. They are operating in a way that reflects all the characteristics and features captured in the diagram. However, such chains are probably still a minority. In some cases a collection of academies shares the same sponsor but, as scenario A in Figure 13.4 illustrates, they are only joined together loosely. There is no overarching governance or executive leadership. Accountability is effectively exercised at academy rather than at chain level and few if any shared services are provided across the chain. The academies in the 'chain' may have some informal contact with each other and share some CPD sessions but there is no joint leadership development or deployment across the academies.

Scenario B illustrates those chains that do have a strong mission and ethos but are essentially managerialist in their approach to running the academies in their chain. They put the emphasis on the right systems being in place: setting targets, monitoring data and having strong performance management of staff. These chains would probably also have strong corporate governance systems and back-office support functions and the academies in the chain may well be making great strides in performance. However, such chains are likely to be less strong in having a shared approach to teaching and learning and in developing a distinctive pedagogical approach.

Figure 13.4: Illustrative models of the operation of some academy chains



Scenario C illustrates a chain that does have a distinctive approach to addressing school improvement and to providing education in general. The model often comes from the chain having a clear educational mission and culture that springs from the vision and aspirations of the sponsor or the founding school. However, in this scenario managerial systems are running to catch up with the activities and performance of the academies. These chains may be characterised by lots of innovation but performance management and quality assurance may not be as strong as they need to be.

These scenarios are hypothetical though the research team has observed chains that in broad terms fit these descriptors. Chains may wish to review their operating model to consider how they measure up to the full framework depicted in Figure 13.3 and consider what this means for their future operations.

The challenges of expanding chains

Ensuring that a chain's operating model is fit for purpose is all the more essential if a chain is proposing to expand. The pace of expansion being considered by some sponsored academy chains does pose a significant level of risk. Experience from other sectors suggests that it will need only one project to go wrong for a chain's reputation to be damaged, potentially irreparably. Issues that need to be addressed in order to manage and minimise the risks include:

- being clear about the strategic future of the chain in terms of its geographical spread and the balance between different phases of schooling
- reviewing and adapting governance arrangements so that they can accommodate the additional academies joining the chain and maintain the desired balance of accountabilities between academy and chain level
- developing leadership and management arrangements so that spans of control do not become too stretched, eg using local clusters to make a large chain feel small
- supporting the emergence and appointment of executive principals and the development of senior and middle leaders in order to build sufficient distributed leadership across the chain
- ensuring there is sufficient breadth and depth of school improvement expertise that can be deployed across the chain to support the number of academies being incorporated into the chain
- carrying out full due diligence on each project before agreement is reached to sponsor an academy and avoiding having too many new academy projects on the go at the same time
- reviewing the organisation of back-office functions to ensure they can support an increased number of academies and can take advantage of the increased economy of scale on procurement
- continuing to champion the vision, ethos and culture of the chain as new academies join and as the scale and size of the chain risks relations among academies and between academies and the chain's central office becoming more remote
- maintaining strong quality assurance processes throughout the period of expansion in order to ensure that existing academies do not start to slip back while leadership focus and energies may be directed elsewhere

Another development that may accompany the expansion of sponsored academy chains is that some academies may ask or decide to leave a chain. This might not necessarily arise from a falling-out or dispute but because an academy sees its educational mission as now being different from that of the wider chain. We could also see chains deciding to split in a rather amoeba-like fashion to create new mini- or sub-chains. Or a chain could, in the language of the commercial sector, spin off one of its academies to found a chain with a new distinct ethos, in effect create a new brand or type of academy.

Working with others outside the chain

Many of the chains have much to offer the rest of the school system, as well as much to gain and learn from others. If sponsored academy chains are to be one of the main drivers of a self-improving and self-sustaining school system, they will need to become more proactive in their relations with other schools. This will also be of benefit to them: organisations that have a culture and philosophy of being closed and inward looking find it that much harder in the long term to renew themselves.

Sponsored academy chains can increase their engagement with each other and with the rest of the school system by:

- adopting peer review of each other's operations as a regular feature of their quality assurance and self-evaluation procedures
- using teaching school status to expand their involvement and work with other local schools
- opening up more of their CPD and leadership development sessions to other local schools
- applying to be licensed to offer National College leadership development programmes and qualifications, such as NPQH, to schools more widely
- enabling middle and emerging leaders to have experience outside as well as across the chain
- continuing to engage with the local network of schools, particularly on issues relating to inclusion

Challenges for converter academy chains

Converter chains also face a number of challenges: the future development and role of collaborative chains; resourcing converter chains and the expansion of converter academy trusts.

The future development of collaborative chains

This report has shown how the less formal converter collaborative chains have much to commend them in terms of the joint activity they are organising and the support and challenge they are providing to each other. They are adding educational value by working together and have the potential to increase efficiency by providing the basis for joint commissioning, procurement and delivery of services. However, as Chapter 3 highlighted, these less formal collaborative partnerships are not chains and do not see themselves as chains. There is also a question mark over whether some of them contain sufficient expertise and leadership capacity to make the partnership effective. In addition there are doubts about their capacity to tackle really hard school improvement issues if one school in the collaborative chain starts to slip or fail.

It may be that some of these collaborative chains will develop by expanding to encompass other local schools. Some partnerships might decide that as their work together becomes broader and deeper than they originally envisaged, they need to migrate to harder forms of governance. Some may find that they gravitate more to contributing to and being supported within the developing teaching schools alliance. Others may stay with informal or less formal arrangements but develop robust peer review and support models, such as those being developed by Challenge Partners. Some may go down the road of forming education companies to provide a harder framework within which to organise joint procurement activity.

Tracking the development of collaborative chains would, therefore, be a worthwhile research initiative that would help to inform future policymaking. In particular it would help to establish whether the value added by collaborative chains is such that it justifies encouraging further academy partnerships of this sort or whether it would be more appropriate to steer converting academies towards harder forms of collaborative arrangements.

Resourcing converter chains

Most converter chains are operating on a relative financial shoestring. Few are adequately resourcing their joint work. Those multi-academy and umbrella trusts that have executive heads or leaders have the advantage of dedicated leadership for their partnership activity and are more likely to support the leadership structure with other earmarked funding and resources. Those converter, mainly collaborative, chains that are relying solely or mainly on shared leadership and have minimal dedicated resources for partnership activity may well find it a challenge to sustain the energy of their joint work. The depth and impact of their work together is also likely to be limited.

The financial climate for many schools is difficult. Governors of autonomous academies will probably require a lot of persuasion before they agree to funds being allocated to finance collaborative activity. The irony is that they are unlikely to get the most out a partnership in either financial or educational terms unless they have invested in a critical mass of dedicated leadership and project management resource. The challenge for converter chains is to be clear-headed and hard-headed enough to work out what they want to do together, assess the resource implications, set these against the projected increased value and benefits and make decisions on that basis. The structure of a federation or trust provides a ready-made context for following this business case approach. It is possible for collaborative chains to build consent for partnership-based leadership and resource, as the example of Challenge Partners cited in Chapter 3 illustrates. But it requires a high degree of trust and a strong sense of shared vision and purpose, allied to having a strong delivery model and clear accountabilities, if governors at an academy level are going to be persuaded to invest in supporting such arrangements.

Expanding converter trust chains

Chapter 5 noted how some of the more formal converter chains, particularly the multi-academy and umbrella trusts, were thinking in terms of expanding their chains. There are three sets of sometimes distinct but often overlapping motivations in play here. For some the issue is about achieving sufficient economy of scale:

The board now has a choice whether to remain with four schools or to expand. If it does not expand, the trust will find it difficult to afford a new CEO. If it expands, the structure will have to change.

CEO, converter multi-academy trust

The motivation to expand for some converters comes primarily from a desire to bring improvement to more schools, allied to a concern that if they don't take advantage of current opportunities they might lose out:

In an ideal world, I would keep to three schools for a year or two, then add a fourth and so on. But we must make the most of the present opportunity.

Executive head, converter academy chain

For the churches in general and some dioceses in particular the motivation is the imperative to maintain their influence within the education system and to be able to continue to offer an education linked to a faith tradition and ethos. As Chapter 5 described, some of the dioceses have thought through the implications of running a large umbrella trust more than others. Arranging for voluntary-aided or voluntary-controlled schools to become academies within the framework of an umbrella trust is the easy bit; the difficult challenge lies in ensuring excellent academic performance as well as a high quality of religious education.

The situation facing these groups of converter academy trusts is, therefore, in many ways similar to that of sponsored academy chains even if their context is different. The challenge is for expansion to occur at a pace that is manageable and sustainable. The principles and implications of the model described in Figure 13.3 and the checklist of actions to consider when expanding (see pages 92-94 above) are as relevant for converter academy trust chains as they are for sponsored ones.

Challenges for the National College for School Leadership

In his remit letter in March 2011 the secretary of state for education set out his priorities for the National College to undertake in 2011-12. These included an expectation that the College would:

continue to invest in work that will secure the supply of high quality school leaders.

DfE, 2011c

Against this backdrop this report presents a number of challenges for the National College to consider.

Keeping abreast of a fast-moving agenda

The National College has been proactive in tracking the changes taking place within the education system and understanding the implications for school leaders and for leadership of the wider education system. It has used this knowledge to develop and adapt its programmes by, for example:

- introducing an academy module into the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH)
- offering an associate principal academy programme
- enabling groups of schools and academies to run their own middle leadership development programmes with National College support and materials

This report has shown how the academy chain landscape is moving extremely rapidly. For example, the number of sponsored chains with three or more academies in the chain increased by nearly a quarter during the course of the project. Leadership of academy chains at CEO, executive principal and senior leader levels is continuing to evolve in both sponsored and converter academy chains. The National College will need to keep abreast of developments so that its programmes can continue to reflect the challenges academy leaders are facing.

Most immediately there could be a need to support those successful schools and converter academies moving into sponsorship and the provision of school improvement support for the first time. This would complement the role of the National College in managing the NLE deployment fund that is being used to extend support for underperforming schools.

Another urgent priority relates to the National College's remit to support chairs of governors. There is a need to explain to governors, particularly in the primary sector, the implications of current policy developments. The College is already running a series of training workshops across the country for chairs of governors. In the light of feedback from these events and the appointment of national leaders of governance, the College should consider what further actions might help to stimulate debate about the best ways of supporting the development of primary schooling.

Developing programmes to support executive headship and leadership

Clusters of academies will become more and more the norm in both small and large chains and in both the primary and secondary sectors. Very often chains will use an executive principal to lead and oversee these clusters. In medium-sized and larger chains CEOs and existing executive principals are identifying and beginning to coach and support other principals to move into an executive role. This is an area where the National College could help to develop and license the delivery of programmes that would support this process.

The National College has already adopted an approach along these lines for executive heads working within the primary sector. The programme is designed to be flexible and can be personalised to meet the needs of the individual participant. It is delivered through a combination of residential conferences, school-based visits, online networking, links to online materials, peer coaching and school-based development activities. The core programme takes six months to complete and can be linked to accreditation in the form of credits for postgraduate qualifications. Some 200 primary leaders a year participate in the programme which is

providing an important means of developing increased system leadership in the primary sector.

A similar programme is urgently needed for the secondary sector that can be tailored to the needs of executive principals working within academy chains.

Developing other programmes to support directors of education and CEOs

The education system is used to having directors of education working within local authorities but the development of CEOs and education directors within academy chains is a very recent phenomenon. Some of the CEOs have evolved from being heads of schools and have in effect acted as entrepreneurs and built up a chain. Other CEOs are being appointed for their strategic management capacity and in some cases have not been involved in teaching or leading a school. Similarly, some education directors have led schools while others come from a background of school improvement consultancy or local authority work.

This report has identified the skill set necessary to undertake the CEO role but it was beyond the scope of this project to identify the content of potential training and development programmes to support these new posts. The National College has strong relations with CEOs of the sponsored academy chains and we support the work it has under way to discuss the scope and content of support that should be provided as more chains start to appoint CEOs and/or directors of education.

Maximising the leverage of teaching schools

This report has identified the risk of academy chains becoming too inward looking: of making great educational progress within the chain but not engaging significantly with schools outside the chain. The remit of teaching schools, as identified in earlier chapters, requires the lead school and its alliance partners to develop school-based services and support in the areas of initial teacher training, school-to-school support, CPD and talent management and leadership development.

Some chains could deliver this agenda in a highly effective way, but the resources and scale of the chain and all the effort and benefit could end up being focused within the chain. The National College and the Teaching Agency (formerly the Training and Development Agency for Schools) should use their leverage to ensure that there is real engagement with other schools as well as, of course, providing benefit to academies within the chain.

Of the first 100 designated teaching schools 14 are either part of established sponsored academy chains or are converter academies involved in sponsoring at least one other school. More sponsored and converter academy chains are likely to be designated as teaching schools as the programme builds towards its target of establishing 500 teaching schools. The value and impact of these chains engaging with the broader school network in their localities could be considerable and would help make a significant contribution to creating a self-improving school system.

Supporting the facilitation of learning between leaders of chains

As highlighted earlier the National College is already playing a part in building links between leaders of chains. The six-monthly dialogue with CEOs, the Fellowship programme for experienced NLEs and the more informal contacts fostered by the College are all valuable in promoting learning. In addition we suggest that as part of the conversations with CEOs on their future development needs, the National College explores whether more formal systems to encourage chain-to-chain learning would be welcomed. Options include a learning set for executive principals of chains, brokerage to match chains interested in being reviewed by their peers, joint action research projects, occasional policy seminars designed for leaders of chains, dedicated sessions at the College's national conference and master classes involving senior executives from the commercial sector. These ideas could potentially add value in their own right and cumulatively they would help to promote an open culture among the chains.

Challenges for the wider education system

The nature of the education system in England is that much of the framework is set by ministers and officials in the DfE. Allowing for and accepting the policy objectives that the government has set, there are nonetheless some challenges that need consideration.

Regulating the pace of academy chain expansion

The secretary of state has talked openly and honestly about the tension of wanting to make rapid change and address urgently the situation of those schools that are failing pupils and parents, while at the same time not pushing academy chains to bite off more than they can chew. The pace of chain formation and expansion is formidable and ministers and officials need to assure themselves that chains have the capacity to deliver each new project and that cumulatively a chain's growth at any one time is realistic and manageable. A failed project would not merely damage a school or the chain but could also start to call into question the validity of the whole programme.

Developing the growth of chains within the primary sector

Chapter 2 showed how sponsored academy chains mostly comprise secondary schools. Even though this position is changing fast and even though over 700 primary schools have applied to convert to become an academy, the primary sector is still, as yet, relatively uninvolved in either the chains' or academies' agenda. As at January 2012 fewer than 5 per cent of primary schools had applied or are being considered for academy status.

However, on succession planning, leadership development, school performance, CPD and efficiency grounds there are, as Hill (2010) highlighted, strong grounds for developing federations and chains to support the development of primary schools and their pupils. The government has taken decisive action in respect of those primary schools that are seriously and persistently underperforming. However, with regard to the vast swathe of the remaining primaries a clearer strategy is needed to encourage more far-reaching and more formal collaboration.

It may be that, as some primary heads have put to us, the development of primary academy chains should be viewed as a two-stage process, with the first stage being about creating effective teaching and learning partnerships led by an executive headteacher and with formal shared governance. This could then lead on in due course to these federations choosing to become multi-academy trusts. Where such federations were not operating effectively, another federation or chain could be brought in to take over the organisation and leadership of the schools.

We would encourage the government and the National College to continue the dialogue with leading heads and chairs of governors about the most appropriate way forward in the primary sector.

Reviewing the procedures for awarding new academies to chains

During the last decade the overwhelming priority for both the previous and current governments has been to address the needs of students in underperforming schools in areas of deprivation by stimulating the supply of able and competent academy sponsors, and matching them to the schools requiring support. However, now that the growth of sponsored academies is well established and the list of approved sponsors is growing fast, the government might wish to consider whether the time is now right to consider creating a greater sense of competition between academy chains. When applying to take over a school, sponsors and academy chains could be asked provide clear and definable strategies along with a description of their capacity and key personnel. These plans could be scrutinised and compared with those of other applicants. This would bring an additional dimension of rigour and quality assurance and would help ensure value for money.

Such a process could have another benefit: it could help with regulating chains' rate of expansion by providing a more robust test of whether chains have sufficient capacity for each project they want to take on.

It would also address the concerns of those CEOs, highlighted in Chapter 2, who felt that there was a case for improving the process by which chains are shortlisted and selected for particular academy projects.

A further argument for a more open process is that it could contribute to delivering the government's agenda for failing primary schools. Openly advertising for sponsors to run groups of primary schools whose SATs results at KS2 have consistently been below the floor target could help stimulate schools and other not-for-profit providers to become sponsors.

Refining the approach towards collaborative converter chains

The development of collaborative chains poses challenges at two levels. First, the nomenclature. As Chapter 5 reported, the academies in collaborative partnerships do not see themselves as chains – and those chains that are chains do not view these collaborative arrangements as being characteristic of chains! Therefore continuing to refer to loose school collaborations as chains is confusing the debate and discussion on effective school-to-school improvement.

The second challenge is more substantive. Some schools that would not qualify for academy status under the DfE criterion of 'making good progress' are being approved to become academies because they have been linked with another academy that has a higher Ofsted rating. In some cases the partnership may be real: a commitment from both partners to make the school agenda work and with the higher performing school having the expertise to know how to support its partner. However, as the headteacher described at the end of Chapter 10 and as the director of children's services quoted in Chapter 12 pointed out, not all these arrangements are passing this test.

Where a school-to-school partnership is a key feature in approving a satisfactory school to become an academy, the DfE should consider asking for stronger evidence that the partnership is well structured and has the appropriate skills and commitment necessary to promote improvement; and/or it should set out some outcome indicators as measures of effectiveness for the partnership.

Performance managing academy chains

A key part of the government's strategy on raising the performance of schools is to make publicly available a rich source of data on schools' activities, outputs and outcomes. In this way parents and policymakers can scrutinise the performance of schools and make more informed choices about children's schooling. The DfE has an abundance of information on the performance of academy chains and has indicated to sponsors that where they have academies performing below the government's floor targets they will need to take steps to address this (DfE 2011d).

It would fit with the government's broader strategy to publish information on the performance of academy chains. Not only would this help parents to make judgements about academies being run by chains (particularly in the early days of a chain taking over a school in an area where local knowledge about the chain was low) but it would also support discussion and debate about the different leadership, management and teaching and learning models being used by chains to achieve progress. Were such an approach to be adopted it should encompass converter chains as well as sponsored chains.

However, allowance should also be made for the fact that, as highlighted in Chapter 4, it can take time for the full impact of chains and federations to take effect. The performance management arrangements should therefore identify those academies that are in their first or second year of being supported by a chain. Without such a safeguard there could be a disincentive for sponsors or successful schools to engage with academies that have been previously been in a weak position and will inevitably take some time to be established on a strong upward trajectory.

Introducing an open performance management system should also enable the early signs of problems within a chain to be identified and addressed. Chapter 5 described how chains were generally making a positive impact on educational attainment. However, it also showed how being part of a chain did not result in an academy being immune from failure. If academies within a chain get into difficulty then a properly established and organised chain will have the resources, leaders and staff to deploy in order to remedy the situation and/or to bring in external support.

However, given the rapid rate of growth of academy chains it is conceivable that some chains may overreach their capacity. One of the most obvious ways to address this scenario is to involve another chain(s) in providing support. This is already starting to happen. In December 2011, for example, it was reported that Academies Enterprise Trust (AET) has been contracted by the Young People's Learning Agency to provide a significant level of support to Marlow Academy in Kent, part of a two-strong chain (Murray, 2011).

Inspecting academy chains

The inspection system is predicated on assessing the performance of individual institutions. Ofsted does sometimes inspect schools in a federation on a co-ordinated basis but the inspection reports are issued for each individual school having its own unique reference number.

Accepting that the policy of individual inspection is likely to remain for the medium term, there are still some sensible measures that could be taken to help the inspection system to adapt to the reality of chains. For example, inspectors should be given a mandate to engage with executive principals and CEOs (or whoever is helping to provide education oversight of the institution). One CEO told the research team that when Ofsted inspected the four academies in his chain simultaneously they spent barely half an hour talking with him, even though he was playing a key role in leading teaching and learning, supporting leaders and assessing the performance of the academies. Where academies are part of a cluster it may also make sense to inspect the cluster together. Inspection results should also feed into the wider performance management framework for chains advocated above.

In the longer term there is a case for considering moving to inspecting chains as a whole. It is beyond the scope of this report to discuss in detail how this might work but essentially it could combine examining the data for all the academies in the chain; visiting and inspecting a sample of academies; and assessing the chain's central systems and support. This would lead to an overall judgement on the chain rather than each of the academies it runs. If chains come to be the dominant feature of the education landscape then a fundamental change of this nature should be considered.

Addressing the complexities of faith school governance

Converter academy chains (and some sponsored chains) are facing challenges in incorporating voluntary-aided schools into their chain, even where the school leaders and governors are keen for this to happen. Though the problems are not insurmountable they are complex and time-consuming to resolve and involve negotiating and operating a separate partnership agreement, as Chapter 7 explained.

Many diocesan church bodies seem to be steering those church schools minded to convert to academy status to do so within an umbrella trust comprising other, same-faith schools. Where a diocesan education board has the resources, expertise and critical mass of high-performing schools within the umbrella this could well be an effective strategy. However, it is not clear whether all diocesan bodies have a sufficiently strong basis for securing school improvement within each trust.

There is another way forward that seems to work well for both church bodies and academy sponsors. Essentially a chain (or converter academy trust) agrees to run or sponsor a church school and to do so in such a way that safeguards the religious character, education and practice of the school. This assurance is written into both an academy's funding agreement with the secretary of state and into a separate legal agreement between the sponsor and the diocesan body. The legal agreement also stipulates the composition of the local governing body, arrangements for chaplaincy work, involvement of church authorities in senior appointments and consultation on the development of the academy. The sponsor has the freedom and authority for running the school and in particular for school improvement. ARK Schools and the London Diocesan Board for Schools have agreed an arrangement along these lines in respect of the highly successful Burlington Danes Academy.

It would seem sensible for the DfE to build on this model and see it adopted more widely.

Conclusion

Academy chains are a positive development within the English education system. They are bringing innovation and systematic improvement and helping to raise attainment in some of the most deprived parts of the country. They are nurturing an able new generation of school leaders with experience and expertise in leading in different contexts. They are evolving new structures and roles for executive leaders. They are using their economy of scale to drive efficiency and to organise support functions so that school leaders spend more time on their core business. They are reinventing the concept of school governance so that governors focus more clearly on strategy and performance. They are standardising the best aspects of school improvement and driving new learning and practice through joint work across the academies in the chain. They have the potential to make a huge contribution to the wider education system.

But academy chains are not a panacea for all the problems of schools. Sponsored chains have challenges to address as they expand. They need to reflect on what it means to be a chain and be clear about their teaching and learning and operating model. They are having to adapt their leadership, governance and management structures and practices. The performance of weaker chains needs addressing. Converter chains too have a host of issues to consider as they consolidate and seek to maximise the gains from their new status.

As the policy momentum draws more schools into working together through academy chains this report will have fulfilled its function if it helps school leaders and policymakers alike to understand what is happening, build on the strengths that are emerging and navigate the challenges that lie ahead.

Glossary

CEO – chief executive officer

CMO – chartered management organisation. Charter schools are publicly funded schools in the United States operated by independent organisations but responsible to public authorities such as local school districts, universities or states. Charter management organisations are non-profit bodies that set up and operate charter schools and often follow a particular instructional approach

collaborative converter chain – groups of academies that are governed individually and that each have their own funding agreement with the secretary of state but which agree to work together through a collaborative partnership that may or may not be underpinned by a partnership agreement

CPD – continuing professional development

CTC – city technology college

DCS – director of children’s services

DfE – Department for Education

FE – further education

federation – two or more schools sharing a single governing body

free schools – all-ability state-funded academies set up in response to local community demand

GAG – general annual grant paid annually to academies by the YPLA as their main source of funding

HR – human resources

ICT – information and communications technology

ITP – improving teacher programme

LA – local authority

larger academy chains – chains with 10 or more academies

LGB – local governing body

MLDP – Middle Leadership Development Programme

multi-academy trust – an academy trust responsible for more than one academy. It has a master funding agreement with the secretary of state and a supplementary funding agreement for each academy. If it wishes, the academy trust can set up a local governing body for each academy, to which it can delegate some matters. Alternatively, the academy trust can set up an advisory body for each academy with no delegated powers

NAO – National Audit Office

National College – National College for School Leadership

NLE – national leader of education

NPQH – National Professional Qualification for Headship

NQT – newly qualified teacher

NSS – national support school

Ofsted – Office for Standards in Education

OTP – outstanding teacher programme

SEN – special educational needs

smaller academy chains – chains with up to nine academies in the chain

SLE – specialist leader of education

teaching schools – schools designated by the National College to help train new entrants to the profession alongside other partners such as universities, lead peer-to-peer learning (including using specialist leaders of education), spot and nurture leadership potential and provide support for other schools

sponsored academy chain – a group of academies sharing the same lead sponsor and usually operating as either a multi-academy trust or an umbrella trust

studio schools – small, innovative new schools for 14-19 year olds, delivering project-based, practical learning alongside mainstream academic study

umbrella trust – an overarching charitable trust established by a faith body or group of schools which in turn establishes individual or multi-academy trusts to run the schools coming under its umbrella. Each of the individual academy trusts within the umbrella has a separate funding agreement with, and articles of association approved by, the secretary of state

UTC – university technical college, technical academies for 14-19 year olds sponsored by universities

YPLA – Young People’s Learning Agency

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Annex A: Survey of CEOs of academy chains

Section 1: Profile of academy chains

1. How many academies are there in your chain/group as at 01/09/11?

Primary	
Secondary	
All through 3-18	
Total	

2. How many pupils are there in total in the academies in your chain?

Primary (3-11)	
Secondary (11-19)	
Total	

3. Which of these descriptions best describes the formal governance arrangements for your chain? (Please put an X in one box)

a) Each academy has its own governing body/academy trust, there is no overarching charitable company/trust or governance arrangement for the chain	
b) Each academy has its own governing body/academy trust accountable for the performance of the academy, but there is also a separate charitable company/trust/federation responsible for strategic oversight and co-ordinating educational support across the academies in the chain	
c) There is one charitable company/trust/federation/governing body covering all the academies in the chain, with operational matters delegated to and managed by a council/committee/governing body at individual academy level	
d) Other	

If you have put an X in 'Other' please describe in summary the governance arrangements

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**4. Which of the following funding arrangements applies to the academies in your chain?
(Please put an X in one box)**

a) The General Annual Grant (GAG) is paid direct to each individual academy trust within the chain	
b) The General Annual Grant is paid to the overarching charitable company/trust/federation for the chain and distributed onwards to individual academies in accordance with the indicative GAG for each academy	
c) The General Annual Grant is paid to the overarching charitable company/trust/federation for the chain and distributed onwards to individual academies <u>in accordance with decisions made by the Board irrespective of whether the sums allocated are less or more than the indicative GAG for each academy</u>	
d) Combination of the above – ie some academies receive funding direct and some are paid via the chain	

Section 2: Potential expansion of academy chains

5. How many additional schools do you expect to incorporate into your chain in the next 12 months up to and including September 2012? (Please put an X in one box for Primary and one for Secondary)

Primary		Secondary	
a) None		a) None	
b) 1-3		b) 1-3	
c) 4-6		c) 4-6	
d) 7-10		d) 7-10	
e) 11-15		e) 11-15	
f) 16-20		f) 16-20	
g) More than 20		g) More than 20	

6. How many additional schools do you expect to incorporate into your chain in the next three years to September 2014? (Please put an X in one box for Primary and one for Secondary)

Primary		Secondary	
a) None		a) None	
b) 1-3		b) 1-3	
c) 4-6		c) 4-6	
d) 7-10		d) 7-10	
e) 11-15		e) 11-15	
f) 16-20		f) 16-20	
g) More than 20		g) More than 20	
h) 40-50		h) 40-50	
i) More than 50		i) More than 50	

7. How are you acquiring new schools to add to the chain? (Please rank on a scale of 1-4 how significant each of the factors below is in the expansion of your chain: 1 = not at all significant; 2 = marginally significant; 3 = significant; 4 = very significant)

a)	<i>DfE brokerage</i>	
b)	<i>Local authority invitations/competitions</i>	
c)	<i>Consequence of supporting a school as an NLE/NSS</i>	
d)	<i>Working with and/or approaching outstanding or 'good with outstanding' converting academies</i>	
e)	Welcoming struggling schools via the converting academy route	
f)	Applying to open a free school	
g)	Applying to open a university technical college or a studio school	
h)	Other	

If you have put a score in 'Other' please briefly describe the factor(s)

Section 3: Operation of academy chains

8. How important is a common mission and set of values to the operation of your chain? (Please put an X in one box)

a)	Absolutely essential	
b)	Very important	
c)	Important	
d)	Not important	

9. How far does the chain apply common policies and procedures across academies in the chain in the following areas? (Please put an X in one box in each row)

	Policy is standard across all the academies in the chain	Policy is up to each individual academy	Chain sets policy but individual academies have flexibility over how they apply it
a) Uniform policy			
b) Attendance policy			
c) Behaviour, including exclusion policy			
d) Curriculum organisation (eg faculty structures, organisation of KS3, use of competence frameworks, structure of the school day and term)			
e) Curriculum content (eg standard modules, schemes of work)			
f) Teaching and learning approach (eg approach to lesson planning and understanding of an outstanding lesson)			
g) Frequency, form and practice of lesson observation			
h) SEN policies			
i) Grouping and setting			
j) Assessment policies (eg approach to formative assessment)			
k) Pupil data tracking and monitoring (including target-setting)			
l) Pastoral structures and systems (eg house systems and vertical tutor groups etc)			
m) Admission arrangements			
n) Safeguarding			

10. How important is the geographical proximity of academies to each other in the expansion and operation of your chain (ie how important to your operating model is the capacity to deploy school leaders and other expert staff across academies within a locality and organise cross-academy learning and CPD)? (Please put an X in one box)

a)	Absolutely essential	
b)	Very important	
c)	Important	
d)	Not important	

11. How do you maintain/organise quality assurance across your chain of schools? (Please put an X in all boxes that apply)

a)	Setting improvement targets for each academy in the chain	
b)	Monitoring of a dashboard of key performance measures	
c)	Monitoring the quality of teaching and learning through lesson observations conducted in a standardised way across the chain	
d)	Regular systematic reviews of the performance of individual academies by the board of the chain	
e)	Buying in external expertise to conduct internal inspections	
f)	Weekly (or more frequent) monitoring by executive head, CEO and/or director of education (ie visits, classroom observations, walk-throughs)	
g)	Weekly informal meetings with principals/executive principals	
h)	Regular (half-termly or termly) formal appraisal/stocktakes with principals	
i)	Employing specialist consultants to quality assure progress in particular areas/subjects	
j)	Peer review by school leaders within the chain	
k)	Other	

If you have put an X in 'Other' please briefly describe the method(s)

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12. Which, if any, of the following categories of staff in the academies in your chain are employed on a central chain contract? (Please put an X in all boxes that apply)

a)	Senior leaders	
b)	Middle leaders	
c)	All teaching staff	
d)	Support staff	

13. Which of these services does the chain provide for the academies in the chains? (Please put an X in all boxes that apply)

Education improvement	
a) Education support services (eg literacy, numeracy, subject specialisms, assessment for learning)	
b) Data analysis	
c) School-to-school support for underperformance	
d) Quality assurance/internal inspection	
Staffing	
e) Recruitment services	
f) Health and safety	
g) Payroll	
h) Human resources	
Governance	
i) Audit	
j) Legal services	
k) Clerking	
Pupil services	
l) Admissions	
m) Exclusions administration	
n) SEN	
o) Education welfare	
Procuring or providing general administrative services	
p) Photocopying, stationery, telephones etc	
q) Financial and business services	
r) Energy	
s) Insurance	
t) Marketing (school prospectus, website etc)	
ICT	
u) Network development	
v) Software and licences	
w) Maintenance	
x) Hardware	
Other services	
y) Catering	
z) Cleaning	
aa) Estates management, including capital projects	
bb) Other	

If you have put an X in 'Other' please itemise the services

14. How many people does your chain employ centrally (ie not based in schools) on providing non-education support services? (Please put an X in one response)

a)	0-5	
b)	6-10	
c)	11-15	
d)	16-20	
e)	21-25	
f)	26-30	
g)	31-40	
h)	40+	

15. How many people (excluding teaching staff based in schools) does your chain employ centrally on providing education support services? (Please put an X in one box)

a)	0-5	
b)	6-10	
c)	11-15	
d)	16-20	
e)	21-25	
f)	26-30	
g)	31-40	
h)	40+	

16. Has your chain set up a separate (educational) company to provide education services to the academy in your chain? (Please put an X in one box)

Yes	
No	

17. What percentage of the General Annual Grant do each of the academies in your chain contribute towards the cost of central services? (Please put an X in one box)

a)	0% - 1.5%	
b)	1.6% - 3%	
c)	3.1% - 4.5%	
d)	4.6% - 6%	
e)	6.1% - 7.5%	
f)	7.6%+	

Section 4: Leadership of academy chains

18. Are your senior and middle leaders employed on a contract that enables you to deploy/assign them to other academies in your chain, as need arises? (Please put an X in one box in each row)

	Yes	No
a) Senior leaders		
b) Middle leaders		

19. What is the main source of recruitment for the principals of the academies in your chain? (please put an X in one box only)

a) From within the chain by developing senior leaders in the existing academies	
b) From outside the chain by seeking to appoint high-quality candidates	
c) A combination of the above	

20. Where is the educational (ie teaching and learning) leadership and accountability of your chain mainly located? (Please put an X in the box that corresponds most closely to your model)

a) In a chief executive officer for the chain	
b) In a director of education for the chain	
c) In an executive principal for the chain	
d) In a chief executive officer supported by a director of education	
e) In a chief executive officer supported by executive principal(s)	
f) In a chief executive officer supported by a director of education and executive principal(s)	
g) In a cluster/group of executive principals	
h) In individual academy principals	
i) Other	

If you have put an X in 'Other' please describe in summary the educational leadership model

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21. What is the optimum span of control for an executive principal within a chain - ie how many academies can an executive principal lead before the group needs to be split into a sub-cluster? (Please put an X in one box)

a)	Two	
a)	Three or four	
c)	Up to five	
d)	Six or more	
e)	Depends on the circumstances	

22. How do you assess the relative importance of the following roles as CEO? (Please rank each item below on a scale of 1-4: 1 = not important; 2 = of limited importance; 3 = important; 4 = very important)

a)	Business planning for the chain	
b)	Supervising centrally employed staff	
c)	Interviewing and recruiting senior staff	
d)	Visiting mentoring principals and executive principals	
a)	Holding formal accountability review sessions for each academy in the chain	
f)	Reviewing and acting on monitoring data on weekly/regular basis	
g)	Reporting to and engaging with sponsors	
h)	Attending meetings of governing bodies	
i)	Seeking/negotiating for new schools to join the chain	
j)	Developing the teaching and learning model of the chains	
k)	Liaising with YPLA	
l)	Liaising with DfE	
m)	Communicating with staff across the chain	
n)	Liaising/communicating with external stakeholders	
o)	Other	

If you have put a score in 'Other' please itemise the roles

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23. In your role as CEO, approximately how much time do you roughly devote to the following tasks on a monthly basis? (Please indicate a percentage for each task – summing to 100%)

a)	Business planning for the chain	
b)	Supervising centrally employed staff	
c)	Interviewing and recruiting senior staff	
d)	Visiting mentoring principals and executive principals	
e)	Holding formal accountability review sessions for each academy in the chain	
f)	Reviewing and acting on monitoring data on weekly/regular basis	
g)	Reporting to and engaging with sponsors	
h)	Attending meetings of governing bodies	
i)	Seeking/negotiating for new schools to join the chain	
j)	Developing the teaching and learning model of the chains	
k)	Liaising with YPLA	
l)	Liaising with DfE	
m)	Communicating with staff across the chain	
n)	Liaising/communicating with external stakeholders	
Total		100%

Section 5: Challenges, advantages and risks of academy chains

24. What have been the main challenges in developing your chain? (Please rank each item below on a scale of 1-4: 1 = not a challenge; 2 = a minor challenge; 3 = quite a challenge; 4 = very challenging)

a)	Developing and securing a shared ethos and vision across the chain	
b)	TUPE and managing the different terms and conditions of inherited staff/schools	
c)	Dealing with inadequate staff inherited from a predecessor school	
d)	Finding and recruiting sufficient high-quality senior leaders	
e)	Finding and recruiting sufficient high-quality teaching staff	
f)	Starting up or taking over several new academies at the same time	
g)	Overseeing the development of capital projects	
h)	Raising attainment in all academies simultaneously	
i)	Responding to the cycle of Ofsted monitoring and inspection visits	
j)	Establishing central support services for academies in the chain	
k)	Negotiating with the Department for Education on start-up and other funding issues	
l)	Developing a new curriculum and pedagogical approach across the chain	
m)	Securing parental buy-in to taking over new academies	
n)	Working with local authority(ies) to establish and develop new academies	
o)	Developing effective partnerships with other local schools outside the chain	
p)	Other	

If you have ticked 'Other' please briefly describe the other challenge(s)

25. If (in questions 5 and 6 above) you have indicated that you see your chain growing, what do you see as the main potential advantages of expansion for your chain? (Please rank each item below on a scale of 1-4: 1 = no advantage at all; 2 = of some advantage; 3 = quite a significant advantage; 4 = very important advantage)

a)	Extends the chain's impact in terms of raising standards of education for more young people	
b)	Provides a stronger brand to attract parents and applications for admission	
c)	Increases the range and flexibility of curriculum opportunities – particularly post-16	
d)	Enables the chain to have greater influence on broader education policy	
e)	Provides more opportunities for staff deployment/promotion within the chain	
f)	Increases the scope for sharing learning, subject specialisms, school improvement expertise and CPD	
g)	Creates a broader base for developing middle and senior leaders	
h)	Increases economies of scale in the running of central services and provides greater purchasing power	
i)	Enables central costs to be shared across a larger number of schools	
j)	Enables more schools to benefit from a streamlined, fit-for-purpose governance system	
k)	Provides a bigger platform for supporting innovation	
l)	Opens up new opportunities to build new primary/secondary curriculum and transition model	
m)	Fosters a sense of collective accountability for all the pupils in an area	

26. In general (ie not just related to your chain) how significant do you assess the following risks to be in expanding chains of schools? (Please rank each item below on a scale of 1-4: 1 = no risk at all; 2 = minor risk; 3 = a significant risk; 4 = very high risk)

a)	Standardisation - academies become 'clones' of each other and the chain loses its radical cutting edge and becomes closed to new ideas	
b)	Dilution of the common ethos and values of the chain	
c)	The growth in the number of academies makes the chain impersonal – key senior and middle leaders and staff don't really know each other	
d)	Too many new schools are taken on at one time and there is insufficient leadership capacity to manage the challenge	
e)	The chain becomes too diffused to share school improvement expertise and staff and to develop shared pedagogical learning across the chain	
f)	Existing schools in the chain start to slip back as energies are focused on new joiners	
g)	The core infrastructure – the central services – becomes overstretched	
h)	The expected benefits of growth – for example, from having primary schools in the chain – are not realised	
i)	The chain reacts to having more academies by becoming more bureaucratic and more of a rules-based organisation	

j) Diseconomies of scale start to emerge - for example, it becomes much harder communicating and keeping informed and involved across all the academies in the chain	
k) Damage to the reputation of the chain as one of the (new) academies gets into difficulties or improvement proves very intractable	
l) Lack of competitive edge within the chain as over time it becomes a cosy club	
m) Key staff leave and the chain loses momentum	
n) Local schools beyond the chain cannot access resources/expertise within the chain, so students in the locality miss out	

Thank you for completing this survey.

Please return it by email to Catherine.Stepto@nationalcollege.org.uk

Annex B: Methodology followed to analyse GCSE results for chains as reported in Figures 4.1 and 4.2

Step 1 was to categorise 133 academies that were open during the 3 years of 2008/09 to 2010/11 according to whether they were standalone, one of a two-strong chain, or part of a chain of 3 or more academies. This was done based on data contained in spreadsheets published by the Department for Education.

Step 2 excluded academies that were former and current city technology colleges (CTCs) or independent schools, on the basis that these academies were mainly the school improvement base of a chain and/or were already high achieving prior to becoming an academy. We excluded from the analysis 11 former CTCs, 1 current CTC and 4 former independent schools on this basis.

Step 3 excluded academies where data were not available for all three years: 2008/09, 2009/10 and 2010/11. This reduced the number of academies included in the analysis to 104.

Step 4 analysed the percentage of students in the 104 academies attaining 5 A*-C grades at GCSE including English and mathematics, by academy for 2008/09, 2009/10 and 2010/11. For each of these years the following was then calculated:

- rate of change over the period (ie 2010/11 attainment level minus 2008/09 attainment level) for each academy
- average attainment levels for each category of academy for 2008/09, 2009/10 and 2010/11
- average rate of change over the period 2008/09 to 2010/11 for each category of academy

In order to establish the extent to which each category of academy had a similar pupil profile, two factors were analysed for 2010/11 data only:

- percentage of pupils starting the key stage in a low- or high-attainment band, based on their KS2 performance
- the percentage of KS4 pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) for each academy category

These measures were used as proxies for assessing relative prior attainment and disadvantage. The results are shown in Table B1 below.

Table B1: Assessment of relative prior attainment and disadvantage in 104 academies (2010/11 only)

Category of academy	Percentage of 2011 GCSE cohort of pupils in lowest KS2 attainment band	Percentage of 2011 GCSE cohort of pupils in highest KS2 attainment band	Percentage of GCSE cohort of pupils eligible for FSM
Standalone	28%	18%	31%
Two-strong chain	31%	16%	24%
Chain of three or more academies	29%	16%	28%

Source: DfE statistical first release 02/2012: GCSE and equivalent results in England 2010/11 (Revised)

Finally, the analysis examined average rates of improvement in GCSE results for academies between 2008/09 and 2010/11, according to how long they had been open. The rate of improvement was similar between the groups of academies: 12.1 percentage points for those opening between September 2002 and April 2007, 12.1 percentage points for those opening between September 2007 and July 2008 and 13.1 percentage points for those opening between September 2008 and January 2009.

The analysis includes the GCSE equivalences that were accepted and in operation during the period covered by the analysis. However, the changes announced by the DfE on 12th January 2012 reduce substantially the list of vocational qualifications accepted as GCSE equivalents. This means that an adjustment of methodology would be required if the analysis were repeated in future years.

Annex C: Membership of the programme board for the National College project on the growth of school and academy chains

Fiona Allen – Executive Headteacher, Corsham Primary School

Robert Cirin – Principal Research Officer, Department for Education

Richard Gilliland – Chief Executive, the Priory Federation of Academies Trust

Toby Greany – Director of Research and Development, National College for School Leadership

Jayne McCabe - Senior Manager, Academies and Chains, National College for School Leadership

Michael Pain – Senior Manager, Policy and Public Affairs, National College for School Leadership

Mark Pattison - National College lead associate for the central region

Jean Scott - policy adviser, National College

Teresa Tunnadine – Headteacher, The Compton School

Annex D: Schools, academy chains and other organisations providing assistance

Absolute Return for Kids
Academies Enterprise Trust
Academy Federation of North Bedfordshire Schools
The Aldridge Foundation
Association of Directors of Children's Services
Association of School and College Leaders
Barnfield Academy Trust
The Becket School
Blessed Robert Widmerpool Catholic Primary and Nursery School
The Brooke Weston Partnership
Cabot Learning Federation
Castle Carrock Primary School
The Catholic Education Service for the Diocese of Clifton
Cheam High School
Children's First Federation
The City of London Corporation
Comberton Academy Trust
Cornwallis Online Learning
Denbigh High School
Department for Education
Dixon City Academy Trust
The Education Village, Darlington
E-ACT
The First Federation
Foundation, Aided Schools and Academies National Association
The Grace Academy Trust
Great Corby Primary School
The Greenwood Dale Foundation Trust
Haberdashers' Aske's Federation
Havelock Academy Trust

Harris Federation of Schools
Huntingdonshire Secondary Education Partnership
The Independent Academies Association
The Kemnal Academies Trust
Landau Forte Charitable Trust
The L.E.A.D. Academy Trust
The Learning Schools Trust
Leigh Academies Trust
Lloyds Pharmacy
London Diocesan Board for Schools
The National Association of Head Teachers
Oasis Community Learning
Office of the Schools Commissioner
Ofsted
The Ormiston Academies Trust
Our Lady and St Edward Catholic Primary School
The Outwood Grange Family of Schools
Oxford Diocesan Board of Education
Park High School
The Priory Federation of Academies Trust
Richard Rose Academies
Royston Schools Academy Trust
Sandy Hill Academy
The Schools Partnership Trust
The Skinners' Company
St Edmund Campion Catholic Primary School
St Joseph's Catholic College
The St Neots Learning Partnership
Thomas Telford School
Tuxford Academy
United Learning Trust
University of Chester Academies Trust
The Village Federation
Warren Road Primary School
The West Grantham Academies Trust

Westwood Academy, Essex

William Howard Secondary School

Wilson's School

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The College gives its members the professional development and recognition they need to build their careers and support those they work with. Members are part of a community of thousands of other leaders - exchanging ideas, sharing good practice and working together to make a bigger difference for children and young people.

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