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Authored article

HMCI's monthly commentary: October 2016

From: [Ofsted](#) and [Sir Michael Wilshaw](#)
Written on: 11 October 2016
First published: 11 October 2016
Part of: [HMCI's monthly commentaries](#)

Ofsted's Chief Inspector, Sir Michael Wilshaw, comments on high performing multi-academy trusts and what they have in common.



Earlier this year, I wrote to the then Secretary of State for Education to highlight my concerns about the performance of some of the country's largest multi-academy trusts (MATs). Focused inspections of academies in 7 of these MATs had identified some serious weaknesses that were leading to poor progress and outcomes for far too many children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

As I made clear in [my letter](#), we also know that there are some very good academy trusts out there doing an effective job in raising standards and providing a high-quality education for all their pupils. To gain a better understanding of what marks them out from their weaker counterparts, I commissioned Her

Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) to take a closer look at 7 of these stronger performers. For this review, HMI visited:

- Ark Academy Trust
- ASPIRE Academy Trust
- L.E.A.D Academy Trust
- Leigh Academies Trust
- REAch2 Academy Trust
- The Diocese of Westminster Academy Trust
- The First Federation Trust

These trusts were selected from a long list of MATs that the National Schools Commissioner considers to be high performing. The sample of trusts visited by HMI was chosen to reflect a range of different sizes, age phases and contexts.

Each of the MATs in the sample is made up of at least 9 academies. Most have a track record of taking on a number of previously underperforming schools and leading them on a journey to good or even outstanding.

To inform our findings, HMI drew on existing inspection evidence and attainment data for individual academies, conducted survey questionnaires and held discussions with senior executives, school improvement leads, trustees and headteachers from each of the chosen MATs.

HMI found that these stronger trusts tended to share a set of common characteristics, including:

- an ability to recruit and retain powerful and authoritative executive leaders, with a clear vision for bringing about higher standards
- a well-planned, broad and balanced curriculum that equips pupils with a strong command of the basics of English and mathematics, as well as the confidence, ambition and team-work skills to succeed in later life
- a commitment to provide a high-quality education for all pupils, in a calm and scholarly atmosphere
- investment in professional development of teachers and the sharing of knowledge and expertise across a strong network

of constituent schools

- a high priority given to initial teacher training and leadership development to secure a pipeline of future talent
- clear frameworks of governance, accountability and delegation
- effective use of assessment information to identify, escalate and tackle problems quickly
- a cautious and considered approach to expansion

It is no surprise that for all these trusts, the key to success is the influential part being played by determined executive leaders, who are entrusted and empowered to make the right decisions to secure improvements.

In all but 1 of the 7 trusts, the chief executive's role is performed by a former headteacher, each of whom can demonstrate an impressive track record of turning around failing schools and of exercising system leadership. They have all given – and continue to give – their services to a wide group of schools, often as national leaders of education. These leaders have succeeded in instilling a culture and ethos of high expectations among staff and pupils across their network of schools. In particular, they are ambitious about transforming educational achievements for their poorest pupils, including the most able children. They are visible leaders across their trusts, some of whom do not even have permanent offices. These leaders are optimistic for their pupils' futures and refuse point-blank to accept excuses for children failing to reach their potential.

Executive leaders of Ark and the Diocese of Westminster, for example, have had success in narrowing the GCSE attainment gap between their disadvantaged pupils and others. In Ark's academies, the gap for those attaining 5 or more A* to C grades, including English and mathematics, was 12 percentage points in 2015, while in the Diocese of Westminster it was 18 percentage points. Both compare favourably with the 28 percentage point gap that still exists nationally between disadvantaged pupils and the better off.

The leadership qualities of those at the top of these stronger MATs can also be seen in the provision of a carefully planned curriculum. Each of the MATs reviewed by HMI is working hard

to place a strong focus on scholastic excellence while at the same time providing a high-quality personal, social and cultural experience for every pupil who passes through their academies.

While it is fair to say that none of these MATs is using its academy freedoms in a particularly radical way, all have designed their curriculum to make sure every pupil – and not just those whose parents can afford it – has the chance to benefit from enrichment activities, including trips abroad, arts events, learning a musical instrument, visiting galleries and museums, and other similar cultural experiences. For example, REACh2 has developed an '11 before 11' programme to ensure that all pupils undertake 11 enriching experiences before they leave for secondary school.

Some of these MATs are also managing to buck the overall national trend by ensuring that pupils better suited to a technical or vocational pathway into employment are catered for well. The inclusion of a university technical college (UTC) as part of Leigh Academies Trust, for example, is allowing the MAT leaders to tailor the curriculum to match the talents and future ambitions of different pupils.

Another notable feature of the MATs visited for our review is the effort that goes into easing the transition for pupils moving between, as well as beyond, schools in the trust. Leaders place a high premium on establishing a consistent set of values, routines and expectations for behaviour across all their constituent academies. Where there are both primary and secondary schools within the MAT, effective links have been forged between the two phases to ensure a smooth transfer from Year 6 to Year 7. L.E.A.D Academy Trust has gone further, with plans to bring its secondary schools and all their feeder primary schools under the trust's umbrella. Plans are also underway to bring into the trust a number of early years providers so that leaders can bring their influence to bear on the youngest children, right at the start of their education, in the deprived communities they serve.

In all 7 MATs, senior leaders of the constituent academies see it as their duty to support the trust as a whole. While committed to

the success of their own institutions, they do not pull up the drawbridge. Those heads we spoke to work in tight, usually local networks to share best practice and act as critical friends to neighbouring academies in the same trust. They willingly offer support when others within the trust are looking for new ways of improving leadership, teaching and pupil performance. HMI did not encounter any unhelpful competition between individual heads.

The ASPIRE Academies Trust, for example, operates a model where its academies are structured in clusters of 3 or 4. Each of these clusters has an outstanding school as the lead academy and an executive headteacher responsible for improving the quality of teaching and learning across the hub. This collegiate and collaborative approach often extends beyond the MAT. A number of executive leaders from these trusts are also sharing their expertise more widely with other schools and academy chains.

All 7 MATs recognise the importance of investing in their staff's professional development to improve both teaching and leadership. The general consensus is that ongoing coaching and regular opportunities to share good practice have a much greater impact on improving knowledge and skills than ad hoc training days or sending staff off to external conferences. The opportunities that staff members are given to expand their horizons and pursue a well-defined career path across different schools within the same trust are also good for recruitment and retention. At Ark, for example, 86% of those who joined as newly qualified teachers are still teaching within the trust 5 years later, many having progressed to middle or senior leadership positions during that time.

Each MAT's model of governance has clear and well understood schemes of delegation and accountability. For example, ASPIRE and the First Federation took the decision to disband their local governing boards and replace them with regional boards overseeing clusters of schools, with clear reporting lines back to trust board level. At the strategic board level, all 7 MATS are able to draw on the expertise of a cadre of trustees or non-executive directors who use their range of skills and experience

to monitor the overall performance of the trust closely. Board members and executive leaders make effective use of data to analyse performance, assess relative strengths and weaknesses across the network, and to identify emerging trends.

Unlike some of the academy chains, which I highlighted in my advice letter to the Secretary of State earlier this year, these strong performing trusts have resisted the temptation to expand too quickly and spread themselves too thinly across a wide geographical area. There is no sense that the executive leaders are driven by a desire to build empires. Instead, their initial focus has been on securing sustainable improvement in a smaller number of academies. Most of these leaders are working to a 3 to 4-year consolidation plan before they consider applying their trust's model on a wider scale and across a more diverse range of schools.

While these trusts are diverse in their size, composition and geographical reach, it is clear to me that the common aspects identified by HMI – especially regarding the MATs' strong, authoritative, visible leadership – are key factors in determining their success for all their pupils.

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Published:

11 October 2016

From:

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