

The John Cabot Learning Federation

Case study



John Cabot Academy

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**Bristol Brunel
Academy**

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**Bristol Metropolitan
Academy**

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Principal

Adam Williams

Chair of Governors

Peter Price

Sponsors

Rolls Royce
The University of the
West of England

Introduction

The John Cabot Learning Federation in Bristol is made up of three Academies: John Cabot Academy, Bristol Brunel Academy and Bristol Metropolitan Academy.

It is a structure that brings the three Academies together, allowing them to share ideas, best practice and resources for their 3,000 children.

While the idea behind a federation is that 'weaker' schools can be 'brought up' by a stronger school (in this case, John Cabot Academy), all parties say that the partnership is equal and that the schools are learning from one another.

At the Federation's head is an executive principal, David Carter, who works directly with the principals of each Academy.

The three schools have the same Academy sponsors and share an approach to teaching and learning. But at grassroots level, they very much have their own identity, and deliver education in the way that is best for the communities they serve.

The background

In 2006, while John Cabot was still a City Technology College applying for Academy status, it started working with a nearby school, Speedwell Technology College.

David Carter says: "At the end of that year the authority for the department talked about that school becoming an Academy. We were already converting from being a CTC into an Academy and we responded to a request from the department that we became the educational sponsor of Bristol Brunel, and we formed that partnership in 2007. My role then changed to be Executive Principal over the two schools.

"In September 2009 a third school joined the partnership. It was called Bristol Metropolitan College, and has become Bristol Metropolitan Academy. At this point, the federation was set up as a single trust. All the staff are employed by the trust and they have an over-arching responsibility for the three Academies."

Mr Carter insists that all three Academies are equal. They share the same sponsors – Rolls Royce and the University of the West of England.

Mr Carter adds: "Schools can't continue to work in isolation. Most schools are trying to resolve the same sorts of challenges, so why not work together on it? The answer to that in some parts of the country is that there's competition for children and league tables that makes it very difficult to work together. In the city, it's big enough and fragmented enough for us to work together with no threat of competition because we're in the federation together."

The executive principal says that the main purpose of the Federation is to enable good practice, expertise and resources to be shared more effectively between schools.

He says: "My particular role is to bring together the Academies where appropriate for development purposes, to quality assure the experiences of the students, to develop the next group of school leaders and to be the principal income generator in order to create new investment in teaching and learning across the three Academies."

The federation has overstaffed John Cabot Academy and Bristol Brunel Academy by an additional English and maths teacher so that two days a week of a more experienced teacher can be shared across the schools.

The federation also been awarded two contracts to support National Challenge schools.

John Cabot Academy

John Cabot Academy was one of the first City Technology Colleges in the country and opened in 1993. Its specialisms are in science and technology, and a recently added specialism of inclusion, which came about following an 'Outstanding' OFSTED in May 2007. Adam Williams was appointed as principal in September 2008.

GCSE results are very good. In 2007, 83% of students gained five or more grades A*-C, with 72% gaining five A*-C grades, including maths and English. In 2008, the figures were 87% and 65% respectively.

David Carter says John Cabot Academy brings these strengths to the Federation:

- Outstanding Teaching and Learning.
- A competency based curriculum in Year 7.
- Academic mentoring for every student.
- Broad and well constructed KS4 model with fast track GCSE and AS courses.

And the school's principal Adam Williams lists just some of the innovations in teaching and learning that have propelled the school to its high results. In common with some other Academies, the school now has vertical tutoring groups, and project-based learning is increasing. Lesson times are also longer than the traditional hour. And students contribute to lesson structure.

Mr Williams says: "I've just finished changing us from a five term year with a traditional CTC eight weeks in, two weeks out structure, to different term dates next year. They're not entirely in line with the LA, but much closer to it. I literally couldn't do that if we were a local authority school. I couldn't do it as fast as I did it, I couldn't do it on my timescale."

Bristol Metropolitan Academy

Bristol Metropolitan Academy became an Academy in September 2009 with a new principal, Stephen Taylor. It replaced Bristol Metropolitan College, and inherited the new buildings that had originally been erected for the college. Bristol Metropolitan College itself had replaced the Whitefield Fishponds Community School as part of the Building Schools for the Future programme.

GCSE results are improving. In 2008, 49% of students gained five higher GCSE grades with 29% gaining both in English and maths.

David Carter says Bristol Metropolitan Academy brings these strengths to the Federation:

- Outstanding support for students who don't have English as a first language, and new arrivals.
- Creative and outward looking provision map for supporting students.
- Language college specialism with more than 12 different languages taken at GCSE.

David Carter says: "What's interesting with the Bristol Met is it's in the Fishponds area of the city, which is actually one of the more affluent wards of Bristol. But what we're not getting at Bristol Met is the children of middle class parents going there. Some are going private, or into South Gloucestershire schools, or faith schools. So this community is interesting because it's 39% minority ethnic. So as the numbers of white children going to the school have dwindled, the Afro Caribbean, Somali and Asian children have stayed in the numbers they did before, but they're becoming an increasingly large percentage of the school. About 57% of the children at the school don't have English as a first language."

Bristol Brunel Academy

Armando di Finizio – Principal

Bristol Brunel Academy opened in a brand new building in September 2007 on the site of the former Speedwell Technology College. Its specialism is Communications and it has made a transformational start to its life as an Academy. GCSE results have leapt upwards. In 2007, 30% of students gained 5 A-C grades with 19% including English and maths. Just one year later, this had improved to 62% and 35%.

Bristol Brunel Academy was also the first school in the Building Schools for the Future programme to open its doors.

It serves a disadvantaged area, and 25% of its students do not have English as a first language.

Executive Principal David Carter says Bristol Brunel Academy brings the following strengths to the Federation:

- Outstanding Inclusion programme that has resulted in no permanent or fixed term exclusions for over a year.
- Year 7 Project Based Learning which is different to the Cabot model but equally effective.

Principal Armando di Finizio says: "There was fear in the area, because I was the fifth head of the school in four years. The school had gone into special measures. It was the lowest performing school in the authority, and the highest excluding school. So it was in dire straits really. The staff felt battered – the last senior management team had been all rod, all stick. They'd had a tough time.

"We made a decision to stop excluding altogether. So as a replacement we did after school workshops for three nights, rather than doing one day's exclusion.

"We have a very kind, caring and looking after ethos. In terms of getting the kids off the streets and back into school, we're getting up to the 93% attendance mark now. And since the Academy opened, youth crime has dropped in the area.

"We have the best school in the world. Honestly, the school is fantastic. The IT is still an issue, but the rest of the school, and the buildings themselves, are fantastic. It is so open, there are no hidden corridors or dark corridors. The toilets are in view of everyone. It all helps to stop anything building up.

"I've got autonomy. It's my curriculum. I feel it's my school, you know, so I've got absolute autonomy. The federation, it's like having a chair of governors – David hates it when I say that! – or a local authority chief executive. It's taken us a good year to suss out each other's roles and we've had to discover how it works. We're there now.

"Unlike John Cabot, we don't have vertical tutor groups, and I don't know that we'll ever want to do that. We have 100 minute learning sessions. We finish every day at 2.45pm, but on a Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday we have a tutorial session, or learning family session. On Thursdays, Years 7 and 8 have enrichment while the rest of the school finishes at 2.45. It's an option for the rest of the school to do enrichment. We alternate staff for enrichment too – half the staff do it one week, half the staff do it the next. Then on Friday, they all go home at 2.45pm.

Bristol Brunel Academy

"I know Cabot have taken, or are really interested in, our reporting system and the inclusion stuff we're doing – how we've stopped exclusions. They're quite interested in the curriculum too, some of the things we're doing here.

"I love the freedoms of working in an Academy. When I worked at City Academy in Bristol [before it became an Academy], the bureaucracy was like an albatross around your neck. You couldn't move for it. When we became an Academy, it was suddenly this freedom. Suddenly we could do stuff.

"Having David there gives you that little bit more confidence, especially as it was my first headship. So I didn't know what would work and what wouldn't. I wouldn't have made the sort of innovations or I wouldn't have put them into place so quickly if I'd just been a head of an Academy on my own. Knowing that someone is there to bounce ideas around with is great. It's also knowing that there's someone there to support me if things go pear shaped, because they could. It's an inner city school and it could go pear shaped at any time, and I keep reminding myself of that."

Benefits of the Federation

Adam Williams, principal of John Cabot Academy says: "It was never about, 'Oh, we'll show them how to do a school.' Not at all. Now they're starting to see that as they see that we're learning as much from them as they are from us."

He adds: "Fundamentally, it's not fair that so many people apply to come here, and we only take 160 pupils every year. Just over 750 people applied to us this year. And that's not because we get the top results in Bristol, because we won't, there'll be one or two schools that beat us – but they won't beat us for experience. Now we get to say that there are twice as many places, because Bristol Brunel Academy, whilst completely different to us, is a fun, active student-centred place to be. And now there is the Bristol Met too."

Principal of Bristol Brunel Academy Armando di Finizio adds: "What I'm hoping we'll get from being part of a federation is a sharing of ideas, the sharing of good practice. Also, career opportunities because a federation doesn't have to advertise externally, so you can have a real succession plan. There are economies of scale as well – you don't need three of every kind of support or admin staff, for example, for each of the different schools.

"It might also bring in some extra income for us. We're a Building Schools for the Future school – in fact, we were the first – so we can't do things like letting out rooms to generate income."

And is there a negative impact on the 'strongest' school?

The Federation's Executive Principal David Carter says: "Although Brunel had a fantastic improvement this year, Cabot's value added was higher and I'm pleased about that. I'm delighted by Brunel's results, but I'm pleased that the setting up of the federation hasn't had a negative impact on Cabot. If anything, it's the opposite."

Adam Williams: "Our relationship with Bristol Brunel has changed now, and it's right that it should have. They had to have improved, and they now have to be aspiring towards the same standards as us – and actually, they're not that far off.

"It helps us not to be complacent too, not to be thinking that our results are good and that we can rest on our laurels. We can't. We have to be improving too."

Why Federations are different to multiple Academy sponsors

David Carter says: “If you’re a multiple Academy sponsor with 15 Academies dotted around the country, then you’re going to have a central headquarters out of which to run your Academies. No matter how well you set that up, that must be arm’s length because if you’re running a school in Southampton, and you’re based in London or wherever, they might as well be the department as well as your employer.

“What we’ve tried to do here is to say OK, let’s re-localise this because if Academies are local schools for local communities, then the Federation should do the same thing. So we’ve got three schools that are the closest together in city. They’re in two postcodes, so it’s dead easy to move between the three. If we expand and there is another Academy, it won’t be in Bristol. So at that point, I’ll have to think about how that will work.

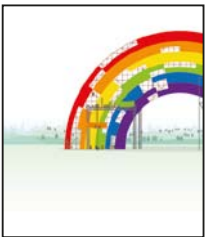
“The other thing that makes us different to the really big organisations is that we’ve built this from the classroom up. We’re looking at this very much from the point of view of the classroom teacher and the experience the kids get. A simple model would be, let’s get the three heads of geography together, let’s look at what they’re doing well, let’s look at where they need support. The thing is to get these people working together more. Geography’s just an example, you can pick any subject, but every school writes schemes of work for geography and I’ll bet you they’re all the same.

“So why does every school need to spend hours and hours writing the same schemes of work and the same lesson plans? Why don’t we just have each school divide them up and I’ll write the one on physical geography, and I’ll send those across for you to use.”

And what do the children think?

Currently, the federation is in its early days, and none of the principals is under any illusion that the children think a great deal about it.

“We’ll share facilities and teachers,” says David Carter, “And there will be sports events. The main thing is that the children will benefit without even having to know that there’s a Federation in place.”



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