

# THE WAY FORWARD

## THE MISSION CRITICAL ROLE OF THE MULTI-ACADEMY TRUST



### **A conversation with Alex Russell, Chief Executive, Bourne Education Trust**

Extract from a report commissioned by:



Powerful Accounting Software

# Introduction

A revolution has taken place which will determine the very future of society in this country. And outside of the sector in question, it has largely passed under the radar.

The original intention in having state education re-organised out of local authority control with schools setting up or joining multi-academy trusts reporting directly to the Department of Education was to deliver an up-lift.

Trusts are able to decide whether to follow the national curriculum and can set their own term dates – with the responsibility for budgets which are in the multi-millions.

But while government talks about ‘Opportunity for all – strong schools with great teachers’, trusts are having to address rapidly rising costs, reduced revenue, unfunded staff wage increases, yet no corresponding change in their educational and financial performance targets.

That is on top of a complexity of management requirements – both tangible and psychological – which would make company owners and directors gasp.

In a major report commissioned by iplicit, the cloud accounting software company, to be prepared and published by DECISION magazine later this year, the chief executives and chief financial officers of multi-academy trusts will be highlighting the issues, sharing their thoughts on the way forward.

This is one of the interviews to be included.



# Opportunity to make an impact

**A conversation with Alex Russell OBE (for services to education), Chief Executive, Bourne Education Trust**

After starting his career with six years at what was then Price Waterhouse, Alex Russell realised the ethos of Thatcher's Britain didn't really sit comfortably with him.

So he qualified as a teacher, specialising in history, and took a post at what he describes as a difficult comprehensive before joining a high performing girls school. That enabled him to come to the conclusion that his skillset and motivation was addressing the challenge of schools in areas of deprivation.

He went on to spend fourteen years as a headteacher, taking his second school in special measures to good in seven months. In 2012 he was asked to take on an additional school which was in special measures, a procedure which required converting to academy status. Subsequently, what is now Bourne Education Trust has taken nine schools out of special measures in eight years, and Russell, their chief executive, has received an OBE for services to education.





*Alex Russell*

“I think the concept of the multi-academy trust created an opportunity for people who were in the right place at the right time to really make an impact,” he says. “I’m a believer in state education. Our mission is to transform schools so they are at the epicentre of their communities and deliver the best education possible to the children.

“When a school is placed in special measures, it results not just in teachers and the children losing belief, but their families and



the local community. A characteristic of a school in difficulty is that every door which can be locked is locked because of the fear of growing vandalism, even if it isn't happening. That means trust between school and students is disintegrating.

“Another characteristic is that staff don't feel they are supported if they are faced with a recalcitrant child or an aggressive parent.

“When a school reaches that position, it is a failure of leadership, and in this scenario, leadership has to be seen to be present every day. By that I don't mean the head teacher popping their head around a classroom door and looking in, but engaging with children, being at the gates in the morning to welcome them into school.

“Leadership conditions behaviours quickly. If a teacher sees a uniform infringement, rather than barking out an order to someone to do their top button up, I'd make a hand gesture to my own collar and do it with a smile.

“Don't make a big issue about something which doesn't need it. The concept of having behaviour tsars feels very oppressive to me. I would argue the emphasis needs to be on making schools happy places for people to perform.”

According to Russell, to effect change, the first thing that has to happen is to give people clarity about what is going to be done to turn things around, and how it is going to take place.



“The first thing I have always disbanded when a school joins our multi-academy trust,” he explains, “is the internal isolation area, if they have one, for excluded children, which is usually a faceless room where they are given mindless work to copy out, all of which is meant to be a deterrent.

“My argument is that we have to remember who is the adult in the classroom, so if a teacher comes to me and says, a particular pupil’s behaviour is unacceptable and they want them out, I ask if they have really sat down and spoken to them about it. The adult has to take the responsibility to set the tone, otherwise the child sees the adult as ineffectual and weak.

“I’m not being idealistic. If you ask me the question does this always work, of course not, but deterrence can’t be the first run on a ladder to re-building a school.”

A particular concern of Russell is that “we are sleepwalking into the biggest leadership challenge for the multi-academy trust of the future without being prepared for it.”

“We are talking about organisations which in our case has tens of millions of revenue, 1300 staff and 12,500 pupils,” he explains. “Now let’s think about how promotion in education works. An ambitious talented teacher would become head of department, then deputy head, before becoming head of a school. A characteristic which now needs to be factored in and considered for further progression in a multi-academy environment is business acumen.





“It wasn’t essential in education leadership before when the business elements were largely the responsibility of a local education authority. But I cannot see how a medium-size business, which is what many multi-academy trusts are, can function without its leaders having real business acumen, so I think more has to be done to supplement national teaching qualifications to bring in that element.

“I sent our team on courses such as accounting for non-accountants because the multi-academy trust model means we are in the business of education.

“With a multi-academy trust, functions such as finance, IT, facilities management can be centralised, so a headteacher isn’t going to get business experience on the job as it were before taking a leadership role in the multi-academy trust itself.”

Having enough teachers in post to step onto the career ladder is a challenge in itself. As Russell explains: “A stand-alone school is going to find it harder to make itself attractive enough to recruit new teachers if a school down the road which is part of a multi-academy trust is able to demonstrate a career path which includes combining primary, secondary, and specialised needs experience.

“I remember at Price Waterhouse a staff partner sat me down and said if I have real ambition and play my cards right, there would be secondment opportunities in other businesses which would broaden my knowledge.

“We need to take that mindset and approach to education recruitment, to make it more dynamic. In our trust, we have a vibrant secondment programme, enabling a teacher to move for example from a secondary to a primary school or vice-versa.

“And rather than have someone who wants promotion, or a change, and is frustrated because it is impossible where they are, it’s better to be able to meet their requirement by placing them at another school within the multi-academy trust. We had two long-serving headteachers who swapped schools, which gave them a new lease of life and enabled us to retain two talented people.

“It’s about taking the shackles off. We were struggling to find a food technology teacher but one of our PE teachers was really involved in nutrition so we repositioned food technology into







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*One of the Bourne recruitment messages*

a new sport, health, nutrition facility, transforming the subject into well-being.”

Will we see more mergers and acquisitions activity in state education, to use the business vernacular?

“There will be smaller trusts which don’t want to give up their independence, but their hand will be forced because of financial and recruitment pressures,” suggests Russell. “I think we could see that over the next five to ten years; a multi-academy trust with thirty-five schools will be the norm.

“We are conscious about not growing too quickly. A forward thinking multi-academy trust will have a pipeline mapped out and will know the timescale it would outline to a school which



wants to join. I know of a trust which took on nine schools in one year, which must have been close to the equivalent of overtrading.

“I would suggest that a multi-academy trust needs to demonstrate economies of scale and a sufficient central resource to be a value to a school or another trust which is looking for a home. A concern is that some will be left behind, such as small rural schools which have no real prospect of increasing student numbers.

“We have been asked whether we would express interest in a failing trust which was some two hundred miles away. How can a system allow that scenario to happen? It is ridiculous that a CEO of a trust should feel the need to pitch for business miles away. If you sit down and look at trusts which aren't performing as they should be in terms of mission and purpose, geographical spread can be a reason.

“In terms of governance, each of our schools will have its own governing committee with the trust board being the equivalent of a company's board. The trust board agenda is relatively little about education, apart from where risk is the subject.

“Its focus is on finance, the estates, growth, the big ticket business items. Why? Because by design and make up a business board should have no loyalty to one school over another, so there is real clarity of decision-making relating to the business issues which have to be addressed and monitored.”



Which brings Russell to the subject of the impact of artificial intelligence in education, which he sees as a game changer.

“Artificial intelligence will transform what teachers are capable of,” he says, “enabling them to apply their teaching skills to different subjects with a degree of authenticity. Already we have a head of maths at a school who was previously head of modern languages.

“There can be a degree of snobbery about specialisation, but no teacher walks into a primary school and says I am just dedicated to history as a subject.

“At the very top end of the key stage levels of course specialist knowledge has to be there, but I would argue most subjects can be taught by a non-specialist if they are a brilliant teacher, with AI being the game changer in lesson preparation.”

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## About iplicit

Providing a cloud-based finance and management software solution that allows multi-academy trusts to focus on what really matters. Tailored for those frustrated by on-premise legacy software, iplicit provides greater flexibility and enhanced levels of reporting, integrating with other cloud applications for a seamless migration path from a user's existing system, enabling organisations to 'step up' to next generation finance software without losing the functionality they currently enjoy. iplicit received the Accounting Excellence award for mid-market and enterprise software of the year in 2020, and the top product for enterprise accounting/ERP in the Accounting Web software awards, 2021.

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## About DECISION magazine

First published in 1988, DECISION magazine reflects the business lifestyle, the trials and tribulations, the hopes and aspirations of directors and managing partners responsible for businesses with a turnover of £5million and above.

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