

# THE WAY FORWARD

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



### **A conversation with Paul James, Chief Executive, River Learning 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.



# Culture sustained by appointment

**A conversation with Paul James, Chief Executive  
River Learning Trust**

“I am one of the generation of multi-academy trust founder chief executives who came to the post from being the head of one of the schools it was set up to serve,” explains Paul James, who qualified as a teacher in the mid-1990s.

He became head of a large secondary school with 2000 pupils (graded outstanding by Ofsted on his watch), but around 2011/2012 it was facing a decision by government to reduce sixth form funding, which would have resulted in a £<half>million shortfall.

“They say timing is everything,” he muses. “This came just at the moment when schools were beginning to opt out of local authority control and academy status was starting, but while their narrative was about independence from local politics, becoming an academy for us was an imperative because it came with a significant uplift in funding of £450,000.





*Paul James*

“Then, when a primary school a mile and a half away went into special measures, it needed a sponsor school and their headteacher asked if we would do it.

“As a single school we had set up the academy with multi-academy trust articles which would allow for future development, although we didn’t realise the transition would happen so quickly. Then it became clear that existing as two separate schools meant we weren’t leveraging the benefits, so I started to talk to other local schools and one secondary and two other primary schools joined us.”



James found himself not just head of a school, but de facto chief executive of what is now River Learning Trust.

“But after a while I sensed the beginning of tension in my school that I was having to devote more time to multi-academy trust matters,” he recalls, “so I said to the board I shouldn’t carry on doing both roles. The post was advertised internally so we could sustain our culture, and I was the only candidate.

“Throughout my career, I have tended to be drawn to opportunities as they have arisen. I was never one to plan to be a headteacher by a specific time, let alone a chief executive.”

“Working in education is deeply fulfilling,” says James, “to be able to influence the lives of young people. And because of the size of our trust we find we are involved in conversations with national bodies, engaging in policy thinking which I don’t think would have happened when I was headteacher of a single school.”

Psychologically the job as chief executive is different from his previous role. “Before I used to have the daily sense of satisfaction which came from delivering lessons and a positive interaction with the students. Now much of the work I am doing might not result in fruition for six months, a year, or even two,” he explains.

“In a high performing organisation a CEO will have just three core things to get right – people, process, and culture. Leadership recognises that nobody is perfect, and in education we work in an



under resourced system. I see my leadership role at our multi-academy trust as being predominantly about people and culture and less on process, which does mean we have to have good people in place to make sure there are appropriate processes too.

“The risk of not having enough process is obvious, but the damage caused by over-process can be less immediately obvious. It demotivates and can extinguish positive thinking and innovation. One of my purposes as CEO is to enable each leader to bring their own humanity and be empowered in their role.

“The key skill in leadership is recognising you can’t know everything, and a leader needs to have the ability to listen carefully, and ask good questions to help their understanding of an issue and of the person concerned.”

“That should lead to a collaborative approach being the norm,” suggests James. “We appointed what we call support and challenge partners, who are often retired head teachers, who come into a school maybe once a month, maybe more depending on need, to help the leadership with problem-solving, and providing accountability about what has been achieved with the agreed improvement plan based on data and other performance measures to see that the school is taking the right actions. The partner can also identify additional support the school requires or be part of it.”

Could the elephant in the room be that heads would resent that import? “Some might not have wanted that conversation which



explores tricky issues,” says James candidly, “but the purpose of a multi-academy trust is to harness genuine collaborative thinking to improve what we are doing.

“Educating children is so important; we have to want to find even better ways to achieve it, to give them a great experience, so if you have got the opportunity for a conversation which is supportive of that, why wouldn’t you want it? And when a problem gets difficult, it can become harder to sort out by yourself. That’s the point of working together.

“With a multi-academy trust, another facet of collaboration is the ability of teachers to move between schools and to take different roles. It’s an exciting time. So I believe in the importance of geographical coherence for a multi-academy trust, because then colleagues can build relationships and collaborate more easily, and we can enable pupils to move from one of the trust’s schools to another as they go through the key stages of their education.

“If a school or smaller trust is looking to join us, we have to ask ourselves whether it will bring more capacity to us or if there the risk of us losing capacity because it needs significant improvement. We always look at the impact of growth on our current schools.

“Trust status is not about saving lots of money – it doesn’t because there isn’t enough in the system and, for example, inflation often seems to wipe out any procurement cost benefit, although better models will emerge for support services so there



could be more savings in the future. The driving force has to be making education better. As a concept, the multi-academy trust can change the narrative about education.”

Within, James accepts, the prevailing parameters of financial viability. “With just below eighty per cent of our income being spent on staff, a pay or pension increase not fully covered by government funding means there is more pressure,” he asserts.

“Recruitment is a national problem. The country met only around fifty per cent of the target for new secondary school teachers in the last year, and was below target for primary as well. The bottom line isn’t just that we lag behind in pay and conditions if we are making international comparisons. Having to cover tasks which were provided by government-funded wider services such as mental health and attendance support has made the day-to-day job more difficult for teachers.

“When there isn’t the time and services no longer exist to help a vulnerable child outside of the classroom, as a teacher you are facing that day in, day out, and it’s more challenging to stay motivated.

“Nationally there is also an increase in complaints by parents, most of which are multi-faceted and can relate to services not provided by the school – but the school is the only point of front-line services contact that the parent might have, and it becomes the focus of their anger and frustration.







“Post-pandemic, a survey has revealed that nearly three in ten parents don’t see every day attendance as being essential for their children. That means the social contract between schools and parents is being broken.”

James says he finds it “incredible” there is not sufficient strategic planned investment by government for early years education when research is clear that a good start makes a real difference for children’s learning as they progress through their education.

“We do spend as a nation more than others on special needs education,” he points out, “but that is used as a reason for saying more funding isn’t available rather than asking the question ‘what is driving the need for massive expenditure in that area’? The cost can be £<half>1 million over seven years for one child.

“I don’t understand why that cycle can’t be broken by investing more upstream in primary education and before – otherwise we are just continually perpetuating the problem.



“Some politicians talk about raising standards in the context of robust accountability rather than considering the complexity of how to actually improve our schools. It can be redolent of an old-fashioned approach of defining value; it’s not how society should measure education. Our business isn’t a product or service offering – the outcome of what we do determines the future of young people and society.”

“Teaching,” says James, “is one of the best jobs in the world. It should be deeply rewarding, and it is incumbent on school heads, multi-academy trust chief executives, and government to perpetuate that. But we all tend to talk about how hard the job is rather than the many positives. Everyone knows a teacher and can often hear a negative narrative, which does little to help recruitment.”

“And let’s take the single word judgments from Ofsted as a for instance. I want to be clear about this: we need a regulator who will say what is happening at a school, and if that school is in need of change. The way that is done could be different. Simply labelling the school ‘special measures’ for example – how does that make a positive difference in recruiting staff to make it a better place? The high stakes nature of single word judgments don’t seem to be serving the education system well at the moment.”

[riverlearningtrust.org](http://riverlearningtrust.org)



## 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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