

THE WAY FORWARD

THE MISSION CRITICAL ROLE OF THE MULTI-ACADEMY TRUST



**A conversation with
David Gurney, Chief Executive
Cockburn Multi-Academy 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.

Freedom under the microscope

**A conversation with David Gurney, Chief Executive
Cockburn Multi-Academy Trust**

“For me the biggest step up from local authority control to multi-academy trust was putting together and managing a business framework in addition to the education structure. Previously the local authority provided the business support and literally suddenly, that was all on my shoulders.

“So what a CEO of a multi-academy trust has to do is build a team of experts around them and the chief financial officer is a key appointment when your budget increases tenfold in three years.

“It was a steep learning curve. We had to move from answering to a governing body from the local community to a board of trustees which would have the mindset and role of non-execs at a company.

“I’m not saying we weren’t accountable before, but it was predominantly related to educational matters. Now it was about sustainable budgeting and other business imperatives, and a





David Gurney

multi-academy trust needs a board which will both support and challenge.

“One example of the step change from the traditional board of governors is that the trustees brought to our attention the need for an investment policy to be in place to maximise the return on any budget surplus which in turn could be invested back into education. A discussion about risk profile relating to that is not one I would have had before.

“Previously a school would have been given a budget from the local authority. Now a multi-academy trust sets the budget for

its schools. That gives us more freedom of course but we're more under the microscope, with direct links to the Department for Education and the Education and Skills Funding Agency.

"The economics for having multi-academy trusts are obvious. With five schools in a multi-academy trust there is no need to have five catering managers, so that should result in more money going into the classroom. A multi-academy trust also has responsibility for procuring utilities. I'm trying to be diplomatic but we have discovered we've got a sharper pencil when it comes to negotiation.

"Initially there wasn't a lot of thought about how a multi-academy trust should be set up, because there wasn't a lot of lead-time from government, and I don't think a perfect model has yet emerged.

"If you put five multi-academy trusts side-by-side, they would each have different characteristics, and we might have to reserve judgement at the moment whether that is a good or bad thing.

"We have had discussions internally about expanding our geographical area, about the due diligence which would help ensure it would be right for us. If we can see we would have a positive impact on a school, we should have a discussion. Focusing on our existing locality makes sense as does providing the journey from nursery, primary, to high school so it is a seamless transition for a child from one to the next.

“That can really happen within a multi-academy trust because it is within our remit to be able to align the curriculum. There is no point in a primary school introducing children to French but when they go up to high school they can only study Spanish.

“All of our schools are within less than four miles of each other, and I would question the value of trust leadership having to spend time travelling all over the country.

“If I just think about our area, where there are ninety primary schools, there is still potential for our multi-academy trust to grow, but if you take on an inadequate school, your sources are going to be further stretched. My philosophy is that if the Department for Education says it wants us to grow we have to look seriously at what opportunities are out there.

“We aren’t going to tie ourselves to a strategy which dictates that in three years’ time we will have ‘x’ number of schools. If a local school up the road as it were wants to join then due diligence has to take into account whether it would be financially viable for us, otherwise the risk is spiralling into financial deficit. A multi-academy trust also has to make sure it has the leadership capacity. We have turned down schools because they haven’t been right for us at that particular moment.

“And I think as time goes on, there is a growing fear that becoming part of a multi-academy trust is going to be based on more of a takeover model rather than providing support with the relationship with the child at the centre.



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TRANSFORMATION TO EXCELLENCE

“I am concerned that the education system today is not just about teaching and business management. Add in issues relating to social services, immigration, mental health, immense concerns we never had to deal with before. So for example, in a high school we will have a therapeutic counsellor for our students who need help, because if they get support they will continue to attend school and at the end of the day our job is that they leave as well rounded citizens.

“The budget for our support and guidance staff, including attendance officers is higher than for individual subjects such as maths and English.

“Another concern is recruitment. The government missed its target of bringing in newly qualified teachers because this is not seen as a sufficiently attractive career. It’s not a job but a vocation but I’m concerned about the resilience required. Four years at university and a graduate joins our profession at £28,000 a year. Compare that to becoming an accountant or solicitor, where progression up the career ladder is quicker as well.



“I would like to see a fundamental reform of our examination system to make it more vocational. It would be beneficial if it was not based on the ability to regurgitate in two hours what can be remembered from two years of being taught in the classroom. What is more important is what has been learned.

“And in this digital age there needs to be more emphasis on technology in the curriculum. Children need to leave us with the necessary skills and creativity and that’s harder for us to achieve with the current examination regime, even though as a multi-academy trust we don’t have to follow the national curriculum.

“What I would also like to see is the reform of OFSTED to a system which is about continual development, being more supportive instead of potentially doing more damage to a school which needs help. At the moment a school can lurch from OFSTED saying it is outstanding to ‘requiring improvement’ when in fact since the previous inspection it might be having to deal with additional social issues. The impact of that assessment on the confidence of parents and the recruitment of teachers is significant. There has to be a system of accountability, but how does it help being punitive?

“Schools are performing better since OFSTED was set up, but not because of OFSTED. It’s more the result of the freedoms is provided by trust status.”

About David Gurney:

A drama teacher who was particularly drawn to inner city communities “where there is an imperative to make a difference, quickly gaining promotion to head teacher in 2008. “At that time it wasn’t a particularly successful school with an excuse culture, and my biggest frustration was that parents were bussing their children to other schools in the leafy suburbs,” he recalls.

“In two years we stabilised and improved performance and started to debate whether we should become a multi-academy trust. We concluded that if we wanted to influence the education landscape, we had to be part of the journey.”

“I would liken the role of a multi-academy trust chief executive as one which is becoming akin to that of a football club manager,” says Gurney. “You’re only as good as your recent results.”

www.cockburnmat.org

About iplicit

Providing a true cloud-based finance management solution that allows multi-academy trusts to focus on what really matters, now and in the future. iplicit was devised over four years, and later tailored for the specific needs of education and charity customers in partnership with MAT CFOs and sector specialists, providing a compelling alternative to the legacy systems that many schools and trusts currently use but have outgrown. iplicit for Education has received multiple accolades, including MAT-Tech Company of the Year (2024) at the National MAT Awards.

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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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