

THE WAY FORWARD

THE MISSION CRITICAL ROLE OF THE MULTI-ACADEMY TRUST



A conversation with Jack Mayhew, Chief Executive, Learning Partners 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.



That desire to really make a difference

A conversation with Jack Mayhew, Chief Executive of Learning Partners Academy Trust

Since the time he first set foot in primary school as a pupil, Jack Mayhew, chief executive of Learning Partners Academy Trust has never left education.

From university he went straight into teaching, becoming a head of department, and then deputy head at a different large secondary school. That was where his headteacher at the time said a local junior school needed support and volunteered Mayhew, which resulted in him being appointed as its head.

He went on to become headteacher at a secondary school, which became part of a multi-academy trust with Mayhew at the helm. In 2021 he was appointed chief executive when it merged with another MAT to become Learning Partners Academy Trust.

“Why was I drawn to the trust concept? I became a teacher because I wanted to make a difference. Ultimately, as a trust, I felt we could put our best foot forward and be proactive rather





Jack Mayhew

than having to meet the requirements of the local authority as our priority,” he explains.

“Local authorities could be slow and turgid in responding to a school’s requirement and being a multi-academy trust bypassed that inertia. And the concept sort of fell into the traditional thinking of the Conservative government at the time about reducing regulation.”

That said, governance had to be ratcheted up now that it was a multi-academy trust rather than a local education authority which was responsible for receiving funds which could run into tens of millions of pounds.

“Governance is in the hands of very talented people who are giving up their time free of charge to serve as trustees of a multi-academy trust,” asserts Mayhew. “Is that the right model for a £60million turnover organisation? Would paid non-execs do a



better job than those who have been successful in their chosen careers and now want to give something back to society?

“What I am hoping is that as the number and size of multi-academy trusts grow, the quality of the volunteer trustees required will be maintained.

“The skillset of the trust board is completely different from a local school’s board of governors. Of course I’m not casting aspersions but the traditional school board of governors was more like a parent-teachers association by comparison. A multi-academy trust board has to operate along the lines of its public limited company counterpart.”

“But a multi-academy trust can’t lose its view of the communities it serves,” says Mayhew. “There has to be a local connection, a parental voice, a role which individual school boards can fulfil. It’s one of the challenges of growth for a multi-academy trust, balancing local identity, but delivering on a larger scale.

“Otherwise there will be more of a move towards standardisation because for a larger multi-academy trust, managing an increasing number of schools would be like herding cats, so leadership of a multi-academy trust will have to be explicit about the non-negotiables because there has to be consistency of safeguarding, curriculum, and expectations.

“Tensions can become apparent if this isn’t addressed, especially when a multi-academy trust is growing rapidly.





“Standardisation though should have its limits. I think larger trusts are grappling with trying to manage resources without restricting the creativity of teachers who are used to designing and preparing their own lessons. Otherwise teachers become content presenters, which wasn’t at the core of why they went into the profession and could remove motivation.

“It would also mean that paradoxically, in a multi-academy trust teachers would have less freedom than when their school was under local authority control.

“The other point of course is that the ethos of the multi-academy trust was not greater centralisation, of standardisation rather than flexibility. An original strength of the multi-academy trust concept was the opportunity to reshape education, not a drive to create a different type of uniformity.”

“I’m also concerned,” says Mayhew, “that schools and indeed education have lost their definition. We need to look at what schools are having to provide beyond their educational role. Our resources are being spread too thinly because we are filling in for other cash-strapped public bodies in order to provide support for mental health as an example.

“Why have we absorbed a social services role? Because we want to help. Our first job is to keep children safe and then to educate them. With increasing poverty and social challenges, ‘safe’ now extends to looking at whether they are being properly fed. We can’t simply signpost parents to find help, because the services aren’t there anymore.

“But schools aren’t here to provide an extension to the National Health Service or to be the social support providers. They are places to enable young people to learn. Teachers though are having to get more involved in mental health issues because of the explosion of awareness and a need to address the increase in distressed behaviours is pulling schools into that area.

“This isn’t whingeing, but to improve educational standards we need to define our road ahead, because there is a limit to the time and resources available to us just to deliver our prime purpose.

“Bigger multi-academy trusts will bring in dedicated people just to interface with outside service providers, but that still doesn’t address the overall issues of resource and time.”



Demographics can also have a part to play. “A school is guaranteed money based on the number of pupils, so there is reliable income as long as the numbers doesn’t drop,” Mayhew explains. “But there are less five-year-olds in the south-east for example than five years ago, so there is going to be competitive pressure between multi-academy trusts in particular locations.

“The growth in the number of multi-academy trusts will inevitably lead to more consolidation and I can foresee they will take a more regionalised form, with perhaps there being just five or six in the south-east for example. The difference is that there will be more transparency in how a multi-academy trust is run than if schools are under local education authority control.”

But there’s a more pressing, annual issue. “It is very difficult to have long-term planning when you only have funding discussions about the forthcoming academic year ahead,” muses Mayhew.

“What would improve matters is if government provided a five-year settlement agreement with an amount above inflation agreed, otherwise multi-academy trusts end up wasting time and energy reacting to political change in education, which results in us running from pillar to post.

“Dare I say it, but there needs to be cross-party agreement on defining the country’s priorities for education, which would result in education being taken out of direct political control.”

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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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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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