

THE WAY FORWARD

THE MISSION CRITICAL ROLE OF THE MULTI-ACADEMY TRUST



A conversation with Janet Sheriff, Chief Executive, Collaborative 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.



Driven by desire to work together

A conversation with Janet Sheriff OBE (for services to education), chief executive, Collaborative Learning Trust, executive headteacher, Prince Henry's Grammar School

“The trust concept came about because of the inefficiencies in the education system which tended to stem from a local authority focus on the traditional way of doing things rather than being prepared to look at new ideas – also the influence of politics in making decisions in terms of support (or lack of it) for particular schools, and a sense that in education, our hands were being tied because of the need to follow political whim.

“Some schools had to ‘academise’ because they had been under-performing academically, while schools marked by OFSTED as good or outstanding did so because they had strong leadership and management in place and believed they could achieve even more as a trust.

“At the outset, it was about the ‘academisation’ of an individual school. I don’t think people were thinking about developing





Janet Sheriff

multi-academy trusts at that time, but now school leaders appreciate they are stronger together. Also the government wants every school to join a multi-academy trust or to set one up by 2030, so every school and stand alone trust is going to have to do something over the next few years.

“There are examples of schools which have got together as a multi-academy trust which functions almost in name only as its purpose is to protect the schools from having to do anything



differently. But we decided to set up a multi-academy trust because we were driven by a vision that collectively, we could do things differently and better by working together, which is why we chose the name Collaborative Learning Trust; we learn from each other.

“That means our schools have to be within a particular location to enable genuine collaboration, although we believe there needs to be a diversity of schools in different contexts, otherwise a multi-academy trust can become insular. What a diverse multi-academy trust should provide is an opportunity for students to experience the multi-cultural society we live in.

“What is important is that a multi-academy trust can provide a depth and range of central services, which a stand-alone school or trust wouldn’t be able to facilitate; a mixture of secondary and primary schools brings more additional resource than primary schools alone.

“There is bound to be a degree of uncertainty while we are all working in a mixed economy of multi-academy trusts, single academy trusts, and community schools (those still funded by local authorities), and each year evolution will bring new challenges I am sure. One which is always with us, and every other public service, is funding.

“But in education, the lack of any certainty about the level of funding one year to the next is significant. Trusts were informed by government on the final day of term in July last year that they



would have to implement an increase in teachers' salaries of between five and eight per cent – in less than two months' time; two to five per cent above what we had been told earlier to budget for. Salaries represent seventy-five to eighty percent of our expenditure so this was a considerable issue which government said they wouldn't be able to help us with financially.

“They did find some additional money later in the academic year, but by that stage we had been forced to re-budget and replan, and this was followed by the double whammy of the escalating price of energy on top of the general cost of living increases.

“What ‘academisation’ has brought about is a real step up in governance. Our trustees have the ultimate accountability, but responsibilities such as monitoring a school’s performance and improvement plan is delegated to a local governing committee for each school in our trust. That local committee will have parents and others from the community, but composition of the trust board is driven by skill sets such as risk management, finance, HR, and estate management, and of course education.

“As well as appropriate skills, it’s necessary for the trustees to have alignment with our values and vision, not a connection with a particular school. If an individual school had to meet the governance requirements, it might struggle to find enough suitably qualified trustees they could bring on board.

“Which brings us to another, related, issue. When a vacancy for a headteacher at a primary school only attracts one applicant, I





COLLABORATIVE LEARNING TRUST

Working Together to Secure Success

think it sends a message to government that more needs to be done about recruitment and retention. The amount of contact (classroom) time teachers have needs to be reviewed in order to create a more manageable workload. In addition to planning and delivering lessons, teachers do a considerable amount of invaluable pastoral work with pupils. The sheer scale of the work in term time is constantly intense and teachers also have to find time for non-contact work such as lesson preparation and marking.

“Their starting salary is more competitive now, but a young teacher will find they are having to work into the evening, and that’s not a sustainable lifestyle for them. Longer holidays were enough to make the profession more attractive but that’s not cutting it any more because of the intensity of the term-time workload.

“This isn’t being negative. It’s simply a recognition of a need to address the issue. The motivation for teachers comes from the absolute joy in making a difference to young people’s lives. I couldn’t imagine doing anything else.”



About Janet Sheriff:

“I knew I wanted to be a teacher from the age of eleven, which came about from being inspired at school. My parents both left education in their early teens and my family had no history of going onto higher education, and after my degree in geography and gaining my teaching qualification, my first teaching post was in Kenya followed by Leeds.

“I didn’t harbour any ambition to be a headteacher. The sense that it could be possible came from gaining experience and confidence, the realisation that being a leader gave scope to make things work better and to positively affect the lives of more children.

“I began to move through the career gears to become an associate head and then headship at Prince Henry’s Grammar School, which is non-selective but has kept its original name, before becoming their executive head teacher and chief executive of the Collaborative Learning Trust.

“The trust currently has five schools (as of March 2023 with two more joining this academic year), and just over 3000 pupils.”

collaborativelearningtrust.com



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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