

THE WAY FORWARD

THE MISSION CRITICAL ROLE OF THE MULTI-ACADEMY TRUST



A conversation with Mark Wilson, Chief Executive, Wellspring 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.



The strategic vision learning curve

**A conversation with Mark Wilson, Chief Executive
Wellspring Academy Trust**

“The gates were effectively thrown wide open with the Academies Act of 2010 enabling schools to sit in trusts instead of being answerable to their local authority, with head teachers becoming chief executives.

“In essence, state education in this country was being ‘privatised’ into the not-for-profit sector.

“It was almost a vertical learning curve. My own professional disposition when I was a head teacher was that the role was about strategy, thinking about the long-term and having a vision how to put it into practice. So I saw the reforms from a strategist’s point of view, an opportunity to curate better educational management. At that time of course, it was a bit of a free for all. There were those with delusions of grandeur who saw trusts as a means of building an educational ‘Vegas’ in scale, and others who set up trusts defensively as a mechanism to circle the wagons.





Mark Wilson

“I have a concern that in the public services sector, many who hold what in industry would be c-suite positions are efficient managers but not necessarily leaders – because to be a leader you have to think strategically, not to have your prime focus on daily operations. Leaders need to look upstream, not engaging themselves in fishing things out of the river but looking further along to identify the possible cause and addressing it.

“My experience tells me that most schools, particularly those in challenging circumstances, however that is defined, are on a journey that will have its ups and downs but their fortunes have been dependent on who is leading them at a given time. What

we are seeing though is an increase in what you could describe as ‘purpose maturing’ in the sector. By that I mean values and behaviours and a sense of purpose are now vested in the organisation rather than delivered because of the personality of an individual who happens to be leading it at a particular time.

“A trust board needs to be sophisticated because we are talking about them having to oversee millions of pounds of public money – and that’s another reason why a multi-academy trust can’t be the cult of a dominant personality with a board which is simply compliant because of that. Is there enough risk mitigation in those circumstances? The challenge of course is that board positions are voluntary.

“The 2010 reforms were about raising standards and anyone who thought differently was painted as the enemy of promise. Not with a single breath have I been an enemy of promise but there is quite a philosophical divide emerging around the crucial question of how to evaluate education. I think society is nuanced, which means education has to be nuanced, and some of the measures the sector sets its stall by are incredibly blunt and can never truly tell the story.

“So I do not share the view that the simplistic measurement processes we have in place, and which haven’t changed, are fit for purpose. You can’t divorce an individual school from its locational context, and it’s hard to capture that nuance if you don’t apply a more sophisticated mechanism. We have to redefine what an effective school looks like. For instance, is it weather



tight, which to anyone outside of education would sound like a ridiculous no-brainer of a question. Of course the buildings must be. Often they aren't. Latest research suggests that 70% of school buildings in the UK are not fit for purpose and in 74%, leaks were a problem.

“The taxpayer should be interested in whether school buildings are actually fit for purpose and maintained, that children and their parents are happy with the education being provided, and that the next generation is being prepared for life in the location in which they live. That's a more nuanced version of what school standards should include, not just academic attainment. We need a better definition of what effectiveness looks like.

“The ongoing challenge is that a trust's funding is determined through the prism of the here and now of their educational attainment, the consequence of their Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) report and SATS (Standard Assessment Tests).

“Fundamentally we should be looking at what I call a quantum of resource, to take into account contributory factors relating to facilities and location, and to ensure a percentage of funding has to go on improving and maintaining the infrastructure standards so the increasing dilapidation of school buildings doesn't become a bigger problem for management in the future.

“There can't be a complete focus on the academic front line in splendid isolation. But is this a product of our own making,





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because an OFSTED report or SATS results are an easier measure for parents and politicians to comprehend?

“There have to be a re-casting of OFSTED in my view because it is no longer providing the value it should from the £150million it costs a year. I would want OFSTED to address the actual strategy of a multi-academy trust, whether they are looking sufficiently at the long-term, their financial good health, the trust’s plan for developing the curriculum, and the wellbeing of students and staff. The remit would to look at a school much more holistically.

“I think four and a half percent of GDP being spent on education is about as much as any government will say it can afford, so it will have to be about changing the narrow OFSTED induced focus which is distorting priorities on where it is spent.



“Much of my thinking is that this is public money and how do we best provide the resource to support schools to have a smoother journey as well as de-risking the trajectory of growth of a multi-academy trust.

“We have a central support team of seventy in HR, finance, estates, and other essential services to ensure the trust makes sound, informed, future-proof decisions across all of our academies. Going back in time, the local authority could have narrated a similar infrastructure, but overseeing the management of schools was put in the hands of governing bodies who weren’t experts in any of this, and that resulted in an erosion of the infrastructure. Keep in mind the 2010 reforms weren’t accompanied by the amount of money which would have been necessary to scale it back up.

“And in a world where technology is ubiquitous, IT hasn’t delivered real transformation in education. A fundamental change was brought about by the pandemic which forced academies to acknowledge the opportunities which were at our fingertips, and lockdowns forced us to utilise a digital infrastructure.

“Since the pandemic a massive challenge has been around attendance but that is still measured by a student’s physical entry to the building even though technology enables us to take a more flexible and ultimately effective approach. We can be more relaxed about providing remote learning so that over time a student could be drawn back into school for perhaps a day a week to start with, then maybe two, and so on. Otherwise we’re



fighting the same battle about attendance every day with no difference in the outcome.

“It comes back to a trust’s sense of purpose, which is essential to define because people work best if they have a commitment beyond simply receiving a pay packet. I’ve always talked about the need to have a mission and that an organisation has to have a character which is evident from its culture, shaped by its culture. For us, it has to be about being inclusive which means that every youngster on a school roll is crucial to us.

“Let’s look at pupil exclusions in that context. Some trusts will couch them as a demonstration they are being tough on behaviour. We take the view that all of the children are our responsibility and the metric we are particularly proud of is the number zero – for no exclusions. That’s because our organisational culture says whatever challenge is presented, we will always find the best placement for someone rather than resort to exclusion.

“As to the future of Wellspring, which we describe as a community rather than a trust: Following your north star is a continuous journey and we welcome fellow travellers to come on board. Having a cultural fit is fundamental.

“Growth will continue as individual schools, indeed some multi-academy trusts themselves, realise splendid isolation is a risky option, so there will be much more consolidation.”



About Mark Wilson:

Five years teaching in the classroom, then a teacher adviser covering fifty schools, becoming deputy head at two schools, then a head teacher before becoming executive headteacher for three schools. He joined Wellspring Academy Trust first as a headteacher before being appointed chief executive.

“I saw potential in what was a start-up essentially in a sector which had to address change but where the rationale stayed the same – making a positive difference to people’s lives,” he explains.

“To supplement my skillset I engaged with a professional business coach, which I probably started after I really needed it, and I also squeezed in an MBA at University College, London as part of my learning.

“The trajectory to scaling Wellspring from one school to twenty-nine I would describe as efficiently uneven, with fallow periods let’s say when little was happening around growth and all of our energy was focused on the internals of the organisation to make sure all the cogs in the machine were well oiled and fit for purpose before inviting new components to be added to it.”

wellspringacademytrust.co.uk



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.

124 City Road, London EC1V 2NX
County Gates House, 300 Poole Road, Bournemouth BH12 1AZ

0207 729 3260
info@iplicit.com
iplicit.com

Unit F7 Riverview Business Park, Nangor Road, Dublin 12, Ireland
info@iplicitireland.com
(+353) 1 592 0850

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.

07737 308371
mail@decisionmagazine.co.uk
www.decisionmagazine.co.uk

