

Effective school partnerships

“There is a strong correlation between collaborative cultures and system success. We believe in continuous improvement through principled strategic partnerships; as government steps back, schools will need to operate in such partnerships if they are to build capacity and address system-wide challenges.”

Extract from ASCL’s *Blueprint for a Self-Improving System*

First principles

- 1 Partnerships between schools should be entered into willingly in all but the most exceptional circumstances.
- 2 Effective school-to-school support can take a number of forms, and no one form should be mandated.
- 3 All schools should have the opportunity to join a strong, sustainable multi-academy trust (MAT) if they so wish.
- 4 Decisions about schools joining or leaving trusts should be taken in an open and transparent manner.

Analysis of the current system

The current dual system, with its mix of maintained schools and academies, is likely to continue for some time. The government has moved away from its proposal, put forward in the 2016 white paper *Educational Excellence Everywhere*, to require all schools to become academies by 2022. Instead, most schools are able to decide for themselves whether to remain as local authority maintained schools, or convert to academy status.

Schools judged inadequate

The exceptions to this rule are maintained schools judged inadequate by Ofsted. In this situation, their Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC) has a legal duty to issue an academy order requiring the school to become a sponsored academy. The RSC will identify the most suitable trust to sponsor the school and broker the relationship.

In exceptional circumstances, the RSC may revoke an academy order before it is implemented, allowing the school to continue to exist as a maintained school. In order to do this, they would need to be convinced that the school has made significant improvements since the order was issued, and that those improvements are likely to be sustained.



‘Orphan schools’

Some schools that wish to, or are required to join a MAT can find it difficult to find a trust which will accept them. Schools could be unattractive to a MAT for a wide variety of reasons. These include:

- educational under-performance
- financial under-performance
- weak leadership and/or governance
- size
- complex legal and/or commercial issues, such as around land ownership or PFI contracts
- buildings and estates which are dilapidated or difficult to maintain
- an isolated location, whether in pure geographical terms or in terms of the existing schools in the MAT

This situation can be particularly problematic for schools that are issued with an academy order. These schools, by definition among those in most need of support, often end up left ‘in limbo’ while a suitable MAT for them is identified, sometimes for a considerable period of time.

‘Re-brokerage’

In addition, as the academy system matures, more academies are likely to want, or need, to move between trusts. These reasons include the following:

1 A single academy wishes to join a MAT.

This situation should be relatively straightforward, and is generally encouraged by the RSCs as a way of consolidating the trusts in their area into larger groups. The MAT in question needs to seek the consent of the RSC to bring the academy into its trust. The RSC can, of course, withhold their consent if they do not feel this change is in the best interests of both parties.

2 A single academy wishes to form a new MAT.

How warm the RSC is to this will depend on a number of factors, including the local landscape, the ambition of the school to support others, and its perceived capacity to do so. In many cases, schools will be encouraged to join existing trusts rather than set up new ones.

3 An academy is underperforming (including being judged inadequate by Ofsted) in its current MAT.

‘Re-brokering’ the school into a different MAT is usually seen as the last resort in this situation. In most cases, the RSC would prefer to work with the MAT to enable it to support the school more effectively. If this does not appear to be possible, the RSC will identify a preferred alternative sponsor and invite them to consider taking the school into their trust. The new MAT will be given time to do due diligence on the school, and to indicate whether or not they are willing to take it on, before the RSC makes the final decision.

If the decision is to move the school, the RSC will terminate the funding agreement between the school and the original trust, and instigate a new funding agreement between the school and the new trust.

4 An entire MAT decides (or is required) to close down, leaving its schools without an overarching governance structure.

The DfE has set up a unit to manage such cases, recognising that the standard re-brokerage process may not be sufficient to deal with large numbers of schools all needing to move at the same time, and that the DfE may need to play a bigger role in this than in a 'standard' re-brokerage.

In this situation, a school that is performing well (in the judgement of the RSC) is given the opportunity to input into which alternative trust it will join, undertaking its own due diligence process. Where a school is underperforming, the decision rests with the department.

Effective school partnerships in a self-improving system – policy proposals

1 The RSC's legal duty to issue an academy order with respect to schools judged inadequate by Ofsted should be revoked.

For many schools, becoming an academy and joining a MAT is a positive step, enabling them to both give and receive support. We also applaud the government's desire to ensure that struggling schools are supported to improve rapidly and sustainably.

However, we do not believe that becoming a sponsored academy should be the only option available to schools in this position. There is, as yet, no firm evidence to suggest that this is the best way to enable schools to improve. Furthermore, the lack of suitable sponsors in some areas can mean the academy brokerage process can take many months, leaving schools in limbo and lacking the support they need.

2 Instead, RSCs should be permitted to consider and implement a range of options to support schools judged inadequate, as they can for schools in other circumstances.


These options should include sponsored academisation, but also other actions such as brokering support from another school or teaching school alliance, or allowing the school to enter into a service level agreement with a MAT. Fostering such relationships may lead to the school choosing to enter into a formal partnership at a later date.

3 MATs should be effectively supported, both financially and otherwise, to take on and improve challenging schools.

Many potentially beneficial partnerships never come to fruition because trusts do not believe they have the capacity to support a particular school, or that doing so may impact negatively on other schools in the trust. For a self-improving system to work, the government must be prepared to provide trusts with the support they need to successfully take on schools in challenging circumstances.

4 The government should commission, fund and share research into MATs which successfully support 'unattractive' schools, and how they achieve this.

We are still at the early stages of an academised system. Evidence suggests that MATs vary at least as much as local authorities in their ability to support and improve schools. The government must commit to working with academics and school and college leaders to explore as fully as possible how trusts that successfully support and improve schools, particularly 'unattractive' schools, do so, and to sharing this knowledge as widely as possible.

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- 5 The government should further develop the new accountability framework for MATs to take more sophisticated account of the impact of ‘unattractive’ schools on a trust’s performance.**

This should include ‘scorecards’ for MATs that include key performance data of their schools over time.

- 6 Any school should be meaningfully consulted before being brokered (or re-brokered) into a trust.**

This includes maintained schools judged inadequate by Ofsted, and schools being moved between trusts.

- 7 Decisions made about schools joining or moving between trusts should be made in an open and transparent manner.**

The criteria employed by RSCs to make decisions about schools should be clear and consistently applied. The minutes of headteacher board meetings should be published in a timely manner, with redactions being the exception rather than the norm.