

How do multi-academy trusts (MATs) create a shared ethos and culture across their schools? GL Assessment's Chief Executive **Greg Watson** argues that the key is to think centrally but work collaboratively.

# Central vision

"Crossing the ocean doesn't automatically make you a hero," a wartime guide warned US troops stationed in Britain for the first time, and if it's always impolite to criticise your host "it is militarily stupid to insult your allies".

Such sentiments may not be a million miles from those felt by leaders of a MAT. They arrive as allies and partners to join the battle to improve outcomes for children. And they know, if outcomes are to improve, that it is their colleagues on the frontline who will have to deliver them. Yet nothing can disguise the fact that it is an unequal partnership. In the majority of cases, the MAT is not there because it is wanted but because it is needed.

It all makes for a delicate situation, and it is easy to see why most MATs prefer initially to tread softly when they take over

a school. But when does a light touch become too feeble, or rigid direction become self-defeating?

## Find the right balance

Finding the right balance is not easy. Nevertheless, in the quest for improved outcomes, every MAT has at some point to answer the question, how far should we mandate change and how much autonomy should we allow individual schools?

Initially, most MATs impose the relatively easy things – a new mission statement, revamped branding, common IT platforms, centralised HR and finance functions. So far, so uncontroversial. Rethinking the role of local governance can be a little more problematic – but as it's the inevitable legal consequence of a school's incorporation into a MAT, it usually happens sooner rather than later.

Changing uniforms is a different matter. On the one hand, if behaviour has historically been an issue, a new uniform policy can signal a determination that the old ways will no longer be tolerated. On the other hand, parents can resent the expense and it can seem an overly drastic departure from the past.

Unsurprisingly, many MATs choose to let individual schools decide. "Our schools have different uniforms but we do have a shared set of trust values," explains Chris Dale, Director of Teaching and Learning at the Samuel Ward Academy Trust. What's important for them is "a level of interdependence, where schools work together, and with the trust, to support and challenge one another".

That mutual support and sharing of expertise also tends to be uncontroversial. Heads rarely

have the resources in safeguarding, educational research or special educational needs and disability (SEND) that are available to a trust, and most readily see the benefit. Conversely, most MATs usually conclude that it's wisest to leave liaison with the local community largely in the hands of the head. The trust will not usually be in a position to know parents, local businesses, local schools or the council as easily or as well as the headteacher. He or she will always be the local face of the school and few MATs can or want to usurp that role.

It is when decisions have to be taken about teaching and learning where the tension between mandate and autonomy becomes most acute. The head in any school is responsible for teaching, learning and progress. But heads are also accountable to the trust for their outcomes. And those outcomes need to be scrutinised. To

understand what is going on in a school, MATs need to benchmark progress in more detail more often and to be able to make comparisons easily with their other schools.

## Think centrally, work collaboratively

As assessment is intrinsically linked to teaching and learning some MATs may be tempted to leave the big assessment decisions up to individual schools. They may allow schools to use different terminology to categorise learners, for instance, or assessment times. This is almost always a mistake. It may be less contentious but it will seriously compromise the value of the data – students tested in the autumn, for instance, cannot be usefully compared to those tested in the summer.

All too often, MATs that have given schools a wide degree

of assessment flexibility in the first year have regretted it by the second year because the challenge of providing meaningful interpretation is too great. Reaching that conclusion, however, is only the first step – how MATs implement their desired assessment is even more important.

The key is to think centrally but work collaboratively. Changing teaching practice is always difficult but it can pay to be upfront. "We want to encourage healthy competition and sharing of good practice between schools in our MAT," says Chris, "and this can best be done through using the same assessment methods". He admits that "taking teachers with you on this journey can be a challenge", but if you show them what works "they are open to and interested in evidence-informed practice".

Oliver Burwood, Academies Group Executive Principal of the ▶▶



**MATS CAN AVOID MANY PITFALLS...IF THEY INTRODUCE ASSESSMENTS EARLY, INVOLVE STAFF, NOMINATE A SENIOR TRUST-WIDE LEAD AND ENSURE THEY HAVE STRONG ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT.**

► Diocese of Norwich Education and Academies Trust, agrees that if MATs want to change teaching practice, staff have to be involved in devising the solution. His trust demanded a rigorous, quality assessment to standardise practice; Oliver says that “this was non-negotiable for us as a MAT”. “But we wanted the decision to belong to the teachers who would be implementing it in the classroom,” so assessment leads from each academy identified which test had the most strengths and fewest weaknesses and recommended adoption accordingly.

MATs can avoid many pitfalls, he believes, if they introduce assessments early, involve staff, nominate a senior trust-wide lead and ensure they have strong administrative support.

Similarly, Nigel Ward, Chair of the Northern Schools Trust, emphasises the importance of creating a shared ethos and culture across a trust. When this happens, he says,

some of the arguments about who decides the strategy, its texture and ownership fade in importance.

“MAT structures offer a range of opportunities to create teaching and learning strategies that benefit all students. The relationship between MATs and individual schools doesn’t have to be a facsimile of the historic relationship between LAs [local authorities] and schools.”

He also points out that agreeing a common assessment may be essential but not sufficient: “We’ve reached the conclusion that the standardisation of the intervention is as important as the standardisation of the assessment. You get these wonderfully detailed standardised assessments but unless you’re meticulous about the interventions you use, you won’t achieve maximum impact. The less time that is used to create informative data means more time to make the teaching and learning as creative and accessible as possible.”

### Be honest and upfront

Julie McCulloch, Interim Director of Policy at ASCL, says it also pays to remember why the school and the trust are in a relationship in the first place. “The point of joining a trust can get lost in these discussions. Trusts are supposed to be vehicles for school improvement, not a cosy home for a school that feels it isn’t getting a lot of support from its local authority. It would be beneficial for both parties if each were honest and up front about what was involved, and went into partnership in the expectation that things will be different.”

The main objective of every MAT is surely to drive school improvement and thus produce better outcomes for its students. So however difficult it is to mandate change when it comes to teaching and learning in general and assessment in particular, it can’t be right to avoid the challenge if trusts suspect that students are not receiving the education the trust expects and their students deserve. **ASCL**



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