Leading Academy Trusts - Why Some Fail, But Most Don't

By Sir David Carter, with Laura McInerney (2020)
Summary by Jonathan Wheeldon (2022)

In a nutshell

The former National School Commissioner shares his experiences and his ongoing belief in the merits of the multi-academy trust (MAT) model. He also explains the pitfalls of the model for those who don't properly understand and fully embrace its principles and its operational assumptions.

The book title states that most MATs don't fail, but there is also a strong sense that most don't succeed as well as the author would hope, hence the need for the book.

It is a valuable and authoritative book for MAT leaders and for Boards: a useful reference point against which they can appraise the stated aims of their Trusts, and manage the risks of not achieving those aims.

Book style and structure

Surprisingly, there are no formal references to other academic or professional books and papers, and this underlines the informal and quasi-autobiographical style of the book.

There is much use of bulleted sections listing key success and failure criteria under a number of different headings. These have the tone of management literature, but the content feels authentic. The opinions are backed up by anecdotes from experience and by case studies from Trust leaders who encountered and resolved the problems described by the author.

I have tried to synthesise some of the overlapping and repeated aspects of these causes of success and failure.

The argument for academy trusts

The roots of the current academy system are attributed to the Labour government White Paper, *Schools: Achieving Success* (2001) which outlined proposals to deregulate the system from local authority control. It gave schools more freedom and increased their ability to innovate. This '*unleashed a series of structural innovations that led to the more flexible, creative and ultimately supportive system we have today*'.

Structural change can create the context for improvement, but it is not the improvement strategy in itself. Partnerships and other forms of collaboration only work when both sides are adding capacity *and* receiving support. The book is largely about explaining how collaborations can work best, and how to avoid the factors that mean '*they sometimes spectacularly fall apart*'.

The importance of accountability

> '*You are asking them [headteachers] to give up their position as the supreme leader of the school, and accept the chief executive as a boss. Many of them won't want to do that.*'

Responding to the suggestions of critics that MAT corporate managers lack accountability, the author argues that the MAT system promotes greater accountability, though this clearly presumes that the Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs) do their job effectively.

This issue of structural accountability only gets a light touch, but the troubled relationship between the RSCs and Ofsted in holding MATs to account does get a mention. The author is clearly of the view that Ofsted can only really evaluate individual schools, so MAT accountability should be left to the RSCs.

One theme which recurs throughout the book is that Trusts do not work hard enough to explain to parents what a multi-academy trust is. This lack of clarity can create confusion and frustration for everyone.

The five things which make a successful MAT

(incorporating the 'failure' signals which MAT leaders and Boards cannot afford to ignore)

1. **The trust knows and lives up to its values.**

This is easier said than done. Statements of values and beliefs often try, blandly and naively, to satisfy all possible objectives of education. They are often unclear and/or inauthentic and are not differentiated from lots of other schools and Trusts.

> '*In every case where I saw school leadership go badly wrong, it was because there had been no clear sense of communal values*'.

Values are hierarchical. Schools have constrained resources and cannot meet (equally) all of the demands society puts upon them. Both in writing and as consistently enacted, values should therefore give some indication of what the Trust cares most about when competing demands have to be prioritised. E.g. are there times when 'championing the needs of the vulnerable' will be subsumed or trumped by another value? The balance between academic outcomes and broader pupil outcomes tends to be another area where values need to be clear.

2. **The Trust's school improvement model is responsive to the needs of each individual school.**

Schools are either improving or declining and, irrespective of the OFSTED judgement, every school could be said to require improvement. There ought to be a school improvement programme, working across all schools in the Trust, that adds more value than any of the schools can achieve on their own.

School improvement resources need to be applied where the need is greatest, resisting the temptation to apply resources equally across all schools.

The warning signs here are typically either a 'hands off' improvement model, which says 'let the school sort it out', or the provision of a fixed central menu of improvement support which is not tailored to the individual school.

The greatest benefit of the academy trust system is that it harnesses the leadership and improvement skills of the workforce across a range of schools and puts their collective efforts into creating great solutions for all schools.

School improvement needs to be defined with reference to the needs of local communities. Schools often fail to serve their communities. The main example given is that pupil exclusions become too easy.

As the Education Policy Institute has noted, as schools improve they tend to admit more middle-class children from further afield. Trusts and maintained schools should work together to find an alternative provision to support all of the vulnerable children in a community rather than just 'rotate them until they become invisible'.

3. **The Trust operates as a single organisation where the workforce is the faculty of education, and the schools are campuses that deliver great learning.**

There must be connectivity between in-school teams and central teams, focused on improving standards *irrespective* of where they work.

This is not just on educational matters but is equally important on administrative matters. The author uses a metaphor of central teams as *the heartbeat, pushing out blood into the limbs which then go on and ensure the body can eat, survive and thrive*.

The warning signs that this aspect of a MAT is failing occur where and when the loyalty which staff feel towards the school they work in each day, is very obviously not matched by the same sense of belonging to the Trust family.

4. **Governance is transparent and must be understood from the academy up and the board down.**

The understanding of governance must go beyond the Scheme of Delegation. It should hold clear what is, for some, an uncomfortable truth: i.e that in the MAT model, a local governing body (LGB) that oversees one school is not a governing body in the way that they were under Local Authorities.

> *For many this has been a hard reality to accept. [..] There is no way to sugarcoat this and it has to be understood if it is to be a successful part of a trust governance model. [..] schools lose their individual legal status when they become subsumed into a MAT. [..] A school can no more leave its academy trust than a local branch of Tesco can decide to cast off its boss and suddenly become independent again.*'

Typically much of the support and challenge that was formerly provided by LGBs is provided by the MAT through central resources. Governance is a holistic concept which incorporates line management accountability of headteachers, along with professional quality assurance processes and independent validation.

Other governance-related warning signs highlighted by the author include:

- a lack of awareness about how the executive leaders in the Trust are held to account for their actions and decisions,
- alarmingly high levels of optimism bias in executive presentations to the trustees. A MAT Board that takes everything at face value and never probes beyond what the executive team tells them is an ineffective Board,
- lack of transparency about costs. '*More eyes on budgets means more brains thinking about ways to improve spending*'.

5. **The Trust must bring clear, tangible and inspiring benefits to children, families and carers and staff.**

Failure to communicate positive messages to the community about the Trust is a common weakness. Parents need to feel that something special is occurring *because* the school is in an academy trust.

Leaders need to make sure they are constantly communicating the benefits of being in the Trust, e.g.

- improved standards,

- respected teachers who stay longer
- improvements in resources
- inter-school competitions,
- and the chance for children from different academies to take part in art performances.

If the only time the name of the Trust registers with parents is when something goes wrong, even if it is a different school, then parents will get the impression that the school is good, but the Trust is problematic.

Two common strategic errors

1. **Autonomy**

It is a common misconception that autonomy is a strategic tool for school improvement. Freedom can allow people to do good things, but it can also mean mistakes are allowed to carry on for far too long.

A more sophisticated way to think about autonomy is to think of schools as being either led **loosely** or led **tightly** by their MAT, as the Trust grows in confidence and the school becomes more stable, it can migrate from tight to loose. School leaders earn their autonomy as a result of improved standards.

Unfortunately, too many Trust leaders start the other way round. They believe that every school should begin with autonomy and only be constrained if things go wrong. The problem with retrofitting the loose-to-tight model is that it causes resentment among school leaders who believed they were being trusted to set the vision and standards for their schools. Shifting to a tighter model can then feel like a punishment.

Of course there is a risk that tighter structures on strong schools from the outset may stifle creativity and innovation. To mitigate this risk, the Trust should insist on two strategic priorities for its strongest schools

- they maintain and **improve their standards**
- they **provide additional improv in ement capacity to support the other schools** in the Trust.

These priorities should include incubating new ways of developing curriculum, assessment and pedagogy.

> *'This is a highly motivating argument for good schools joining Trusts, and I have seen many leaders and teachers inspired by this opportunity.'*

2. **Governance**

> *Governance is the biggest risk to multi-academy trusts.*

One common problematic assumption is where Trusts believe that schools work better when everyone gets to keep their own identity and there is flat decision-making. The Trust is in effect an 'umbrella' brand and everyone does their own thing.

> *'I have seen too many Trust leaders believe that governance is best served by having trustees who individually know and attempt to safeguard the interests of each school in the Trust, to the detriment of their responsibility to govern the whole charity'.*

Another problematic assumption is limiting the scope of governance to corporate matters. If there are too many people who are focused on the corporate responsibilities of the Trust and nobody understands how effective the school improvement strategy is, then the governing body will 'flounder and fail' in its duty.

> *'Governing the organisation and governing school improvement are the **two anchors** of great governance'.*

The journey from headship to system leadership

This section is about the personal development journey of leaders and has quite a few bulleted lists.

The author believes there are four core aptitudes in the skills-set of effective system leaders (MAT CEOs and RSCs) which involves understanding: change; people; resources; and capacity.

System leaders should be able to

- Lead and communicate at scale
- Align the Trust so it becomes more than the sum of its parts
- Meet the challenge of local diversity
- Influence leaders without telling them what to do
- Deploy operational and emotional intelligence
- Build great teams
- Build the confidence of parents and carers
- Build a sustainable culture of collaborative practice

The chapter concludes with the question of how the education system (and by implication the Trust Board) should judge the effectiveness of a MAT CEO. The questions listed are mostly a recap on all that has been said up to this point, with an emphasis on the provision of clear **evidence** of:

- Improved performance
- Better learning experiences for children
- What the experience is like for children with learning difficulties
- Parental understanding of the Trust
- Alignment of, and school engagement with Trust educational strategies
- Staff satisfaction and talent development
- Clarity of LGB responsibilities (and their execution)
- Financial risk awareness
- CEO performance evaluation criteria
- CEO networking, personal development and succession planning

School improvement - what is it?

'*A great school is one that adults want to work in and parents want their child to attend.*'

Parents do care about exam results and inspection grades but these things are just a proxy to assure them them about the things they mostly they want to know:

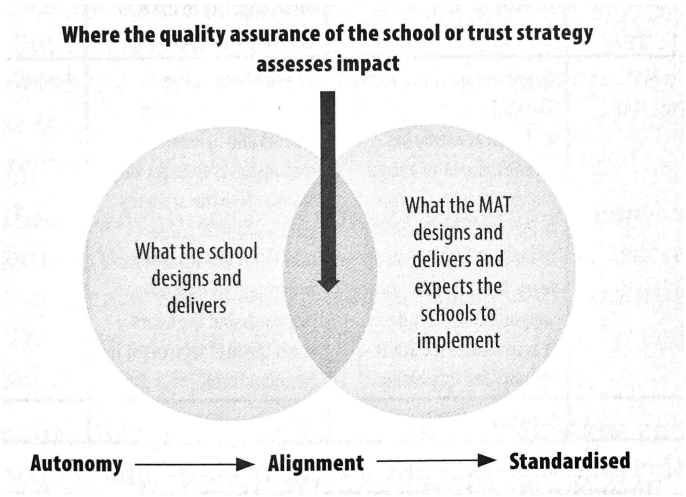
- that their child is safe and will be taken care of during the day,
- that their child is happy and enjoying school.
- that their child's talent will be nurtured and the quality of the learning experience will secure a pathway to the next stage of development

The author presents a formula for school improvement:

Strategy + Capacity + Pace = Improvement

Who owns the strategy for school improvement?

Where there is a culture to give a high degree of autonomy to each school, a consistently applied strategy for improvement is unlikely to occur. Some degree of alignment and standardisation is necessary (p.99):



A key principle to be agreed and understood is the division of responsibilities for school improvement between the Trust and each individual school. Broadly speaking there are two approaches:

a) If it rests with the school, the Trust plays a quality assurance role

b) If the Trust takes responsibility for the improvement programme (e.g. by deploying capacity into the school) then the school has a role that combines implementation with quality assurance of the support it is receiving.

Both approaches can work, but each will fail if there is no rigour in the execution of the roles.

The distinction above is then combined with a determination of whether support is driven by:

c) the needs of the academy or
d) what the MAT can offer.

The dimensions above lead to four different approaches to defining autonomy, alignment and standardisation:

1. Bespoke
2. Keeping the strong schools strong
3. Everyone gets the same
4. Leave them alone

Whichever approach is taken, school improvement can usefully be presented as a trajectory or a cycle with various stages:

- stabilise
- repair
- improve
- sustain

It is essential to know where each school currently is on this cycle.

Capacity

It is suggested that there are four optional sources of capacity:

1. Redeploy strongest teachers where most needed
2. Teaching school alliances
3. Strategic improvement roles in the central organisational structure
4. Fund an oversupply of teacher capacity in the school(s) where it is most needed

A distinction is made between **capacity-givers**, who need to be agile, and **capacity-takers**, who need to have the humility to accept help. This is described as **system generosity**.

Pace

Pace and momentum are critical. School improvement is a marathon not a sprint. Leaders often celebrate their achievements too quickly before the sustainability of those solutions is proven. One of the arguments presented for standardisation is that it improves pace and momentum, though this clearly needs to be balanced with the bespoke needs of each school and the risk of suppressing creativity and individuality.

> *We need leaders to work at speed to get on with delivering change and improvement, and standardisation drives that pace.*

The author notes that a drive for standardisation sometimes comes from the staff in schools and not always from the Trust executive or Board who may lack confidence to standardise.

After describing eight different improvement trajectories, the chapter concludes with 5 core strands underpinning any improvement plan that is likely to make a difference:

1. Be clear about **the way you want to improve.**

2. Agree and decide (with school leaders) on **the model of alignment** that is going to work.
3. **Know the trajectories of** improvement that most closely reflect where **each school** is when the cycle is being developed and reviewed.
4. **Communicate** the cycle so that everyone understands the **expectations and timescale.**
5. Be clear about **where the capacity is going to come from**.

Why should anyone work for your trust?

'Being a great employer does not happen by accident or because you tell people you are one!'

The author makes a point of stating how much he enjoyed writing this chapter, which picks up on the **capacity** element of the formula in the previous chapter. Capacity really means people, and is a combination of their motivation, values, capability and confidence.

The first case study is from Windsor Academy Trust and lays out what a holistic pipeline of development excellence looks like: from recruiting 6th-formers into teaching, through partnerships with ITT providers, induction programmes, pedagogy champions partnered with the Chartered College of Teaching, progressive pathways of leadership development, varied development pathways for all staff, and sabbaticals. One specific piece of author advice relating to 'sabbaticals' is that they should not only be thought of as 12 month events. Trusts could use some of their reserves to fund 15-20 'research fortnights' for staff.

Trusts must ask themselves if they are the best employers in their area and **be able to demonstrate evidence** of that. This can be done by gaining intelligence through staff surveys, roundtables and meaningful exit interviews. Trusts can differentiate themselves in a number of ways such as the scope of:

- flexible working hours and work-life balance solutions
- varied training and development pathways
- staff contribution to the Trust's strategy

These things should be addressed strategically at Trust level.

The author advocates for building **structured and meaningful pathways for teachers that span the first ten years of their careers**. Being authentic in this pursuit and having clear demonstrable evidence of its success is ultimately what will underpin any claim to being a great employer.

There is sensible advice throughout the chapter about workload and wellbeing, little of which breaks new ground on topics which are much documented in the sector[1].

[1] For further insights on teacher recruitment and retention, see my summary of Mary Bousted's book Support not Surveillance - How to Resolve the Teacher Retention Crisis (2022)

Governance

> *In almost every case of trust failure, because it was a weak governance and confused or opaque accountability.*

In some ways this is the most important chapter as it addresses head-on the knotty problem of the relationship between the Trust Board and role of governance resources at individual school level.

A MAT Board has three priorities when building strategy with the CEO and executive team:

1. Building a **sense of the trust as a single organisation** rather than a cluster of standalone schools.
2. Building a **cohesive communication strategy** that explains what the Trust is, how it is set up and what is aiming to do?
3. Building an **affordable and sustainable financial strategy** for the Trust. Boards are typically not well informed about the cost of improvement strategies.

Local governance resources

> *Why name a subcommittee in such a way when they no longer fulfil the role of governors in the traditional sense?*

The author is referring to the use (within MATs) of the term **local governing bodies** (LGBs). He believes that the DfE's continued description of local subcommittees as LGBs is 'really unhelpful'. He prefers the term local **Academy Council** as the title makes clear that they are by nature *advisory*, and have neither the powers nor the legal, financial and performance responsibilities of the Trust board.

In some cases Trusts choose to remove local governing resources altogether. Whilst they are entitled to do this, the author urges caution. Boards should focus on what unique insights a **school-centric body** can provide, i.e. **local, contextual and experiential insights** that even the most hands-on and operational Trust board could never gather. '*You cannot have a credible vision that talks about supporting and developing school communities if you do not give them a voice and effectively remove them from the discussion.*'

Once an Academy Council is in place, the Board can then use it to fulfil those aspects of governance which can most effectively be delegated. In practice this is very difficult and the author acknowledges that the role of Council member is not easily defined. It can be an attractive role, but if it is fudged misunderstandings and resentment can occur.

Six areas of locally delegated responsibility are listed:

1. assessing the quality of education. This is the top priority. Where Trusts centrally have good quantitative measure, Academy Councils should focus on experiential and **qualitative factors**.

2. assessing the impact of the **staff** on outcomes for children and their experience as professional educators, e.g. what does it feel like to work at the school and what feedback would you give to the Trust?
3. assessing the quality of engagement with **parents.** The Academy Council should have a two-way ambassadorial role. It must avoid falling into the trap of describing the Trust in the third person e.g. as 'the powers that be', thereby projecting to parents and communities an 'us and them' culture where the Trust is 'the bad guy'.
4. holding the academy leadership to account. This is possibly the trickiest area to manage. Typically the school Head/Principal will be formally accountable to the CEO or other Trust executive, but the performance evaluation process should find some way to incorporate feedback from the Academy Council.
5. holding the academy to account for **delivering the budget outcomes that were agreed** by the Trust board.
6. ensuring that the academy **contributes to the capacity of the trust** and is willing to offer and receive support from the other schools in the Trust.

The chapter concludes with six questions that every MAT Board should be able to answer:

1. Can **every trustee and member of a local Academy Council state the Nolan principles** and what they mean for governance in the Trust? (i.e. selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership).
2. Can the Board articulate to the wider community precisely **what the ambition is for the children in the Trust**?
3. **How diverse** is your Board of trustees?
4. Does everyone working in the Trust **understand what the structure is and what its single charitable object is?** (i.e 'to advance education for public benefit').
5. Can the **trustees** articulate the **vision and values** of the Trust?
6. If you invited a cross-section of **parents** from across the Trust's schools to meet the Board, **would they know the answers to the questions above?**

The Top 10 Risks facing MATs

The final chapter is about **risk** and is in some ways a recap on the previous chapters, i.e. the risks presented relate to the non-achievement of things recommended throughout the book.

The author's 'top 10 are based on his experience of the most persistent weakness which endanger the health of MATs:

1. The **appetite for growth** and for adding more schools **exceeds the capacity of the organisation** to support its existing schools let alone any new ones.
2. **School improvement is not part of a wider Trust strategy** and it is left up to each individual school to determine its own needs and solutions.
3. There is a **lack of clarity about what responsibilities have been delegated** to local academy boards.
4. The Trust employs **staff** who work in each school but their **terms and conditions are different** to those who do a similar role in the organisation.
5. The Trust has **difficulty accessing the benefits of being a single organisation** because the operating model is still school focused and not reflective of a single charitable organisation.
6. **The operating model of the Trust lacks cohesion**, impeding the agility of the Trust to respond quickly to challenge or crisis.
7. The **financial strategy of the organisation is unstable** and decisions approved by the Board expose the Trust to increase costs that were not planned for.
8. The Trust has **no clear understanding about how much it costs to improve the schools** it is accountable for.
9. **Core purpose, values and expectations are not clear** to staff, families and the communities it serves.
10. The Trust presents itself as **a business rather than an educational charity** that cares about the children it serves.

Final word - Trusts and leadership in a time of uncertainty

The book was published in 2020, so it just captures the beginning of the first COVID lockdown. It therefore concludes on the important social and moral role of Trust leaders to help staff and children cope with such uncertain times. It touches briefly on topics of: recovery of lost learning; online teaching and learning; flexible working; and changing relationships with parents.

Appendices

Appendix I provides advice to new MAT CEOs for their first 100 days in office.

Appendix II is about the reach and influence of educational and Trust leaders on the education system. It is a reminder of collective moral responsibility to contribute to improvements at local, regional and national level.