

Multi-academy trusts: discussing Ofsted's research on their role and accountability

Introduction

As an ever-greater number of schools have converted to become academies, multi-academy trusts (MATs) have become a central part of the education system:

- half of all pupils in England attend an academy
- over a third of schools are now academies
- over two-thirds of secondaries and around a quarter of primaries
- over three-quarters of academies are part of a MAT

However, the role of a MAT is not always well understood. A number of common misconceptions persist.

It's clear that MATs have taken on a number of the functions previously performed by local authorities (LAs), but it is an over-simplification to see them as merely the new middle tier, replacing the LA for academies.

For starters, their legal role is quite different. It is the MAT itself that is the legal entity, and not the schools that are its constituents. This means that the MAT has responsibility for the governance of its schools, although MATs may delegate specific powers to local governing bodies (LGBs). This makes MATs far more pivotal to their academies than LAs are to maintained schools.

It also makes it particularly important for us as an inspectorate to understand what being part of a MAT means to the schools we inspect. This has become all the more important as individual MATs have grown, sometimes rapidly, over the past few years.

This expansion has been encouraged by government in order to build capacity for school improvement in the self-improving system and to get the greater efficiencies that are possible in a larger MAT.

For MATs themselves, the efficiency argument is important. But their size and structure also allow them to do interesting work around curriculum, continual professional development (CPD) and teacher training on a larger scale.

What we looked at in our research

In our multi-academy trust this research project, we visited:

We looked at larger MATs of 5 schools or more. In these MATs, the opportunities for the trust to be a force for improvement in its schools is greatest.

From an inspection point of view, it is in these that we are most likely to see the MAT having a distinct impact on its individual schools.

Potential is, however, not the same as actual impact. The challenge for these MATs is to move on from thinking about growth to fulfilling the potential they have as the main agents of school improvement.

What we found

Our study produced some encouraging findings about the role of MATs in the system.

School leaders feel that MATs generally provide effective back-office support and economies of scale. Scale is also important in providing opportunities for CPD and career development.

There was a feeling that MATs provided an appropriate level of challenge and support. Leaders also appreciated the opportunities for mutual learning across schools.

We also found evidence that many MATS are starting to live up to their potential in developing quality of education in their schools.

The best MATs are driven by a strong and shared central ethos that informs what schools in the MAT do. This does not mean that the MAT necessarily dictates what schools do. Indeed, the more a MAT is able to embed a shared ethos, the less necessary this level of prescription is likely to be. Many MATs have high-level policies on curriculum, teaching and learning, and behaviour. Typically, MAT-wide CPD reinforces ethos and policies.

MAT guidance and networks of middle and senior leaders give schools further support.

Providing this level of guidance and support seems to be essential for MATs to realise their potential in the school-led system. Merely providing back-office functions does not allow schools to fully benefit from being part of a MAT. Having this central role for the MAT will inevitably lead to some loss of decision-making freedom for the individual schools.

However, as many of our interviewees said, this is a price worth paying for better support on the things that matter. The best MATs are particularly strong on developing their workforce, offering opportunities for promotion, learning and leadership across staff levels. Academic research suggests that this can improve retention rates.

The MATs in our study held their schools to account, mostly in a rigorous fashion, although the emphasis on data in some could potentially distort educational practice and unnecessarily increase teacher workload.

One thing that appears to be a blind spot across the system, however, is self-evaluation of the MATs themselves. Few MATs in our study went significantly beyond looking at data on the performance of the individual schools in the MAT. This makes it hard to judge whether the MAT is having a positive impact on the quality of education in its schools.

This is clearly an area for development within MATs.

Accountability and inspection practice

The lack of self-evaluation in MATs also raises questions about Ofsted's role in the system.

Within a multi-level framework in which schools are constituents of the MAT, accountability has a number of different purposes and audiences.

Accountability needs to inform:

- government, so that it can take action to ensure universal high-quality provision
- providers, and in this case in particular MATs as the legal entity responsible
- parents, so that they can effectively exercise choice

To inform government, accountability should sit at the funded and legally responsible level, in this case the MAT.

To inform MATs themselves, there is a need for information on both the functioning of the MAT, and of its individual schools. Parents primarily need to know about the quality of their particular local schools, because we know school quality varies within MATs.

Inspection practice needs to reflect this multiplicity of purpose.

While we have introduced a system of summary evaluations of MATs, the scope of these remains limited. A lack of self-evaluation at MAT level is mirrored by limited accountability of the MAT in the national system.

As the MAT is the legal entity responsible for the education of the pupils in its schools, it seems peculiar that they are not the focus of inspection in areas such as governance, quality of education and efficiency and

effectiveness of use of resources.

Next steps

This is, in the end, a decision that lies with the Department for Education (DfE). But we would suggest that if the DfE is going to maintain its view that we should not inspect MATs, it would be helpful if it published a quality framework for MATs to self-assess against that focuses on the impact of MATs on the quality of education.

This could then support MATs in addressing some of the weaknesses in self-evaluation we observed and inform our summary evaluations.

We will make sure our inspectors take the role of the MAT into account when inspecting one of its schools. Inspectors will be asking school leaders about the role of the MAT they are part of, so they can fully understand the context of the school.

Our focus on the ways in which MATS can benefit their schools should not be taken as an invitation to be inward-looking.

No MAT is an island. MATs should work productively with LAs and with other schools and MATs in their local area.

They should participate in local coordinating mechanisms around statutory duties, such as safeguarding. They should work with others to ensure that all pupils in their area receive a high-quality education and appropriate provision, not least the most vulnerable pupils and those subject to exclusion.

Conclusion

Overall, these findings lead us towards optimism about the way the system is evolving. We found a lot of evidence of good practice, support and challenge in the MATs in our study.

However, as we know from this as well as other studies, the variance in practice that we saw is reflected in very varied outcomes between MATs. This suggests that a lot of potential is going unrealised.

Making full use of the support and challenge that can be offered centrally through the MAT, making sure MATs work constructively within their locality, and providing robust accountability for MATS will, we feel, go a long way towards ensuring that this potential is met.