

Proposals for the 2022 schools white paper

Paper 2: Creating a strong school system in which every school is part of a trust with strong leadership and governance

Introduction

1. The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) represents over 21,500 education system leaders, heads, principals, deputies, vice-principals, assistant heads, business managers and other senior staff of state-funded and independent schools, colleges and trusts throughout the UK. ASCL members are responsible for the education of more than four million young people in more than 90 per cent of the secondary and tertiary phases, and in an increasing proportion of the primary phase.
2. In September 2021, ASCL published [A Great Education for Every Child](#)¹ – our blueprint for a fairer education system. The blueprint sets out a long-term vision for how we can ensure our education system helps our most disadvantaged children and young people to succeed, and makes a series of recommendations to that end.
3. We welcome the government's plan to produce a schools white paper in early 2022, and the focus on ensuring every child and young person can succeed. We would strongly encourage policymakers to consider the proposals in our blueprint as they begin to draw up the white paper.
4. We are also producing a series of short thinkpieces, which build on and expand some of the recommendations in the blueprint, and are intended to directly address the issues covered in the white paper.
5. This is the second of those thinkpieces. It sets out ASCL's thoughts on how the school system could be further refined to ensure all schools have strong leadership and governance, within the context of the government's ambition for all schools to be part of trusts.
6. We hope this paper will prove useful to policymakers and civil servants working on the schools white paper and related reforms.

ASCL's position on system reform

There should be opportunities and support for all schools and colleges to be part of a strong, sustainable group, in which every school or college both gives and receives support.

The government should recognise that, while many of these groups will be multi-academy trusts, there continues to be a role for other forms of strong legal partnership, with shared

¹ [The-ASCL-Blueprint-A-Great-Education-for-Every-Child.pdf](#)

governance, such as 'hard' federations of maintained schools. Schools should be encouraged to form effective partnerships which suit their needs and contexts, with struggling schools strongly encouraged to join these partnerships in order to receive the support they need to improve.

Specialist and alternative provision should be an integral part of local partnerships. Independent schools should be enabled and encouraged to join or work closely with these partnerships.

A Great Education for Every Child: The ASCL Blueprint for a Fairer Education System – Recommendation 17

7. As is clear from the statement above, ASCL does not believe that the only effective form of school partnership is the multi-academy trust (MAT). There are many examples of schools working closely and effectively with other schools under different arrangements, providing mutual support and challenge.
8. We recognise, however, that partnerships based on shared governance have stronger levers with which to enact change. We also recognise the government's desire to complete its reform of the school system, to move from the current dual system of academies and maintained schools towards a single system, and for that system to be based on all schools being part of strong trusts.
9. The proposals in this paper therefore start from this premise. They are intended to suggest ways in which the government could achieve this aim in a way which brings stakeholders with it, reduces disruption, and, most importantly, leads to a system in which all schools are supported and challenged to provide an excellent education to every child.
10. This paper also assumes that the government does not intend to repeat the mistake in the 2016 white paper 'Educational Excellence Everywhere' of attempting to direct all schools to become academies or to join MATs within a particular timescale. This would, in our view, have the same effect as it did in 2016, of creating animosity and distrust, and undermining faith in the system the government is attempting to build. It is essential that the government works closely with those working in and governing our schools and colleges to draw on their knowledge and experience, and to co-create a strong, sustainable future which all stakeholders will willingly embrace.

Barriers to this aim

11. The rate at which maintained schools have become academies, and single academies have joined or formed MATs, has slowed. The distraction of the pandemic will have played a role in this, but more fundamental issues are also at play.
12. Discussions with ASCL members suggest that these issues include:
 - a. The lack of a clear, evidence-based narrative around the benefits of joining a MAT.
 - b. A lack of clear incentives for successful schools to academise and/or join a MAT.
 - c. An unwillingness, particularly among the leaders and governors of high-performing maintained schools and Single Academy Trusts (SATs), to cede some of their autonomy as a result of joining a MAT.

- d. Concerns that schools will lose some of their uniqueness if they join a MAT; that they will become 'clones'.
 - e. A misunderstanding among some communities about what an academy or a MAT is, and a resulting reticence about their school becoming an academy and joining a MAT.
 - f. The additional complexities involved in creating 'mixed MATs' containing both faith and non-faith schools.
 - g. Concerns about the affordability of 'top slices' for schools joining some MATs.
 - h. The financial risks for trusts in taking on schools likely to need significant capital spend (including many small rural primary schools which are often in older buildings), those with high levels of debt, and those with declining or unstable pupil numbers.
 - i. Examples of unethical behaviour in a small number of MATs, the collapse of some, and the well-publicised ramifications for the schools in those trusts.
 - j. A lack of clarity around the long-term role of local authorities (LAs) in a fully academised system – and more broadly what the 'middle tier' will look like and what this means for individual schools.
 - k. Conversion processes which remain unwieldy, time-consuming and expensive.
13. These barriers are extensive, varied and not easy to overcome. If the government wishes to see all schools in strong trusts, and for them to enter into these partnerships willingly, it needs to fully understand these issues, and find ways to dismantle these barriers. It will also need to be pragmatic about how quickly it can move to its desired 'end state', and willing to consider different ways of achieving this.

Overcoming these barriers

14. The barriers above fall into six broad categories:
- i. Insufficient incentives to change a school's current status, and insufficiently compelling evidence about why this would benefit the school community.
 - ii. Fear of losing autonomy and 'becoming a clone'.
 - iii. Ethical concerns, whether ideological or as a result of high-profile cases, about MATs.
 - iv. Practical challenges, including cumbersome conversion processes and the additional complexities around faith schools.
 - v. Financial concerns, including the cost of 'top slices' and potential risks around capital expenditure, debts and falling rolls.
 - vi. Uncertainty about the long-term shape of the 'middle tier', including the role of LAs.
15. Different stakeholders will place different importance on each of these barriers. Key stakeholders include leaders and governors in maintained schools, leaders and trustees in SATs, and the wider communities in both types of school. It is also important to understand who currently supports, challenges and influences these stakeholders, and to work directly with those bodies to understand and address their concerns.

Creating a strong system for the future

16. It is essential that the government works with stakeholders to co-create a clear 'end state' for the system, to set out a way forward which addresses the barriers outlined above and to paint a clear and compelling vision for the future. ASCL's view is that this system, and the journey towards it, needs to involve the following:

- Ongoing high-quality, impartial research into the benefits and (importantly for transparency) the potential challenges of being part of a MAT, compared with being a SAT or a maintained school – both for individual schools and for the system as a whole. This should include the role that trusts can play in the pipeline of future leaders by developing staff, providing a supported route into leadership and growing the next generation of trust leaders.
- Ongoing high-quality, impartial research into what makes individual MATs more or less effective – including considerations of size, geography, types of school involved, leadership and governance structures, and schemes of delegation.
- Time, encouragement and support for leaders and governance boards to work together in a local area to consider the right structure(s) for their area, and to build a system that will be both effective and bring all stakeholders with them – with an emphasis on collaboration.
- A recognition from the government that this is a journey. Policymakers need to listen to the views of leaders and governance boards, and work with them to co-create a clear, evidence-informed 'end state'. Consideration needs to be given to enabling the creation of more, smaller trusts than the government might ideally prefer, if local areas can present a convincing case for this being the most effective approach in their context.
- Clarity around what the 'middle tier' will look like, including the role of LAs. LAs are a key part of the education infrastructure, and have played an important role over many decades. LAs need both to be part of the decision-making process as the new system emerges, and to retain an appropriate role in that new system. That role, in our view, should include responsibilities around place planning, ensuring the needs of vulnerable pupils are met, and supporting attendance.
- Clarity around how trusts will be regulated. There should be a single regulatory framework, with trusts held to account for different elements of their performance by appropriate bodies under this framework. This should include a carefully considered approach to inspection at trust level, robust financial regulation, and appropriate oversight of capacity, growth and pupil outcomes. Time needs to be taken to create this regulatory framework, to consider which aspects of regulation are best undertaken by different bodies, and which aspects of accountability should sit at trust level and which at individual school level. It's important that regulation and accountability encourage schools and trusts to collaborate rather than compete.
- Simplified and streamlined processes for joining, forming or merging trusts – including those potentially including faith schools. This should include clear and appropriate mechanisms for recognising and addressing any financial concerns trusts may have about bringing in schools with current or likely future additional costs, including those related to buildings and pupil numbers.

Conclusion

17. The way in which the system is structured is crucial to ensuring that all schools are supported and challenged to provide a world class education to children and young people.
18. There have been a number of false starts in the government's desire for all schools to be in strong trusts. The 2022 white paper is an important opportunity to revisit the evidence, reassurance and support schools need in order to take this step, to set out a clear and compelling vision, and to ensure all stakeholders feel part of that vision and able to shape it for their own communities.
19. We hope that this short paper is a useful contribution to the development of the white paper. We would be pleased to discuss anything here in more detail.