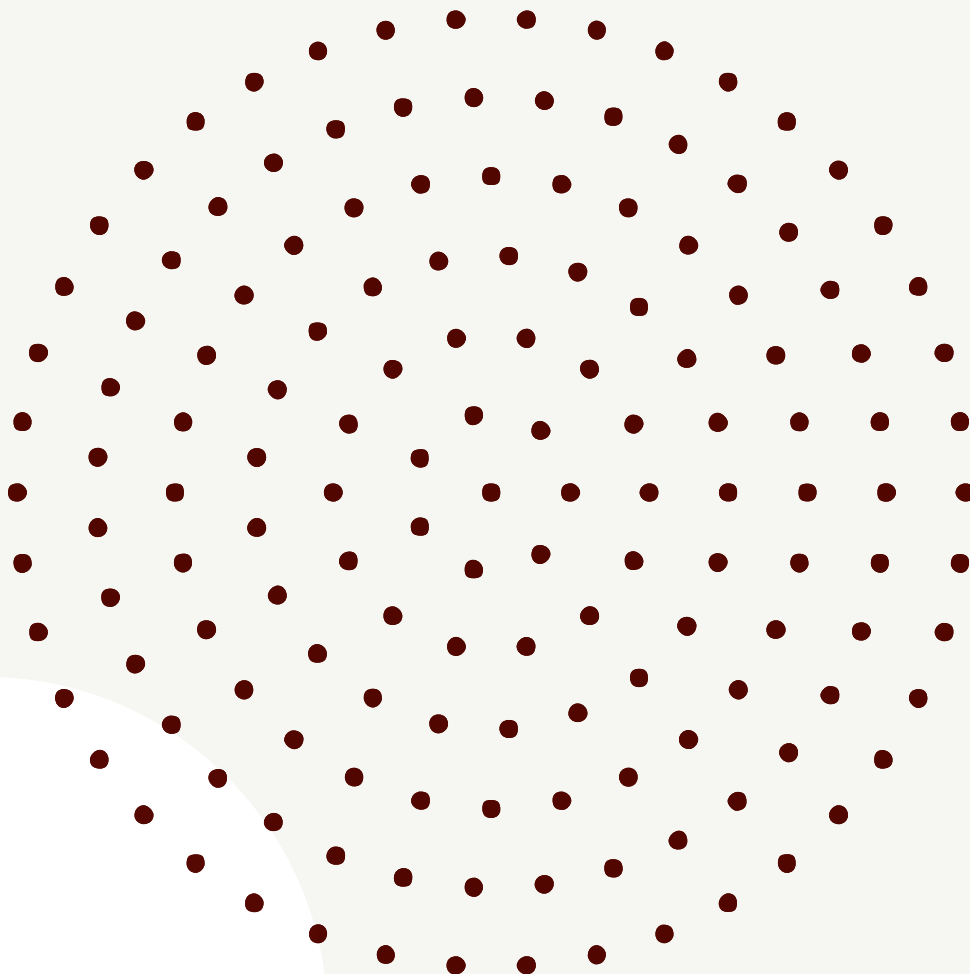


Creating a Cohesive Trust

Strategies for working together
as one organisation, rather
than many schools



About Arbor

Arbor helps schools and MATs of all sizes work more easily and collaboratively, with intuitive tools designed to make a difference

Arbor MIS

Arbor MIS gives schools the tools they need to work better today and be ready for tomorrow. Used by 3,000 schools and 300 Trusts across the country, it's the fastest growing MIS today.

Arbor MIS for MATs and Groups

See the bigger picture with the only true MIS for MATs. More than just a dashboard, Arbor MIS for MATs is custom-built for better collaboration across your Trust, with tools that make working together easier at every level.

Contents

- 2 Introduction: What does it take to create a cohesive Trust?
James Weatherill, Co-Founder and CEO, Arbor Education
- 10 Straplines don't cut it: How to make meaningful cultural change within your Trust
Danny Armitage, Director of Business and Operations at Together Learning Trust
- 12 How far is too far? Where I stand in the distance debate when it comes to Trusts
Laura Gregory, Director of Education at Bellevue Place Education Trust
- 16 Total honesty: What it is, how it works, and why it's essential to our Trust culture
Owen McColgan, Chief Executive of The Howard Academy Trust
- 22 The case for prioritising pedagogy over whole-Trust culture
Samantha Cosgrove, Director for School Improvement at the Birmingham Diocesan Multi-Academy Trust
- 26 Looking at culture through a new lens: And other reasons to carry a magnifying glass
Rebecca Leek, Chief Executive at South Essex Alliance MAT
- 30 Join the debate

Introduction:

What does it take to create a cohesive Trust?



The debate around autonomy vs. alignment for schools in Trusts has been animated over the past few years, with some MATs giving their schools independence over their policies and others preferring a more centralised approach.

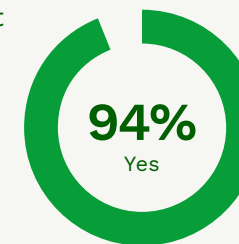
If we accept that Trusts will always differ on how centralised to be, perhaps the more interesting question becomes: **how do you create a Trust which works really well together as one organisation, regardless of where you sit on that scale?** What are the factors which create a successful, shared culture in a MAT? And how do you foster a shared sense of belonging in a post-Covid world?

In short: how do you make sure the academies in your Trust benefit from being part of a greater whole?

The importance of creating a shared culture in a MAT

To get a sense of the national picture, in February 2022 we surveyed 164 Trust leaders from around the country. 94% of respondents agreed it's important all schools in a MAT feel part of the same culture. But nearly 1 in 5 respondents said that their Trust did not have one cohesive culture which all schools feel part of, with many respondents emphasising that this was an ongoing journey for their MAT.

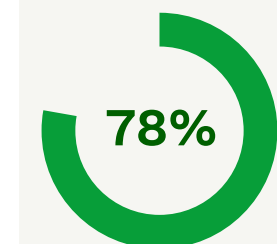
Is it important that all schools in a MAT feel part of the same culture?



Does your Trust have one cohesive culture which all schools feel a part of?

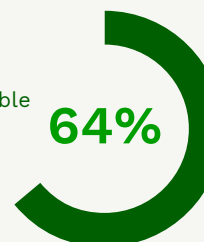


What do you think makes schools feel part of one cohesive culture?



Having a shared vision and values

Having clear, visible and joined-up leadership



64%



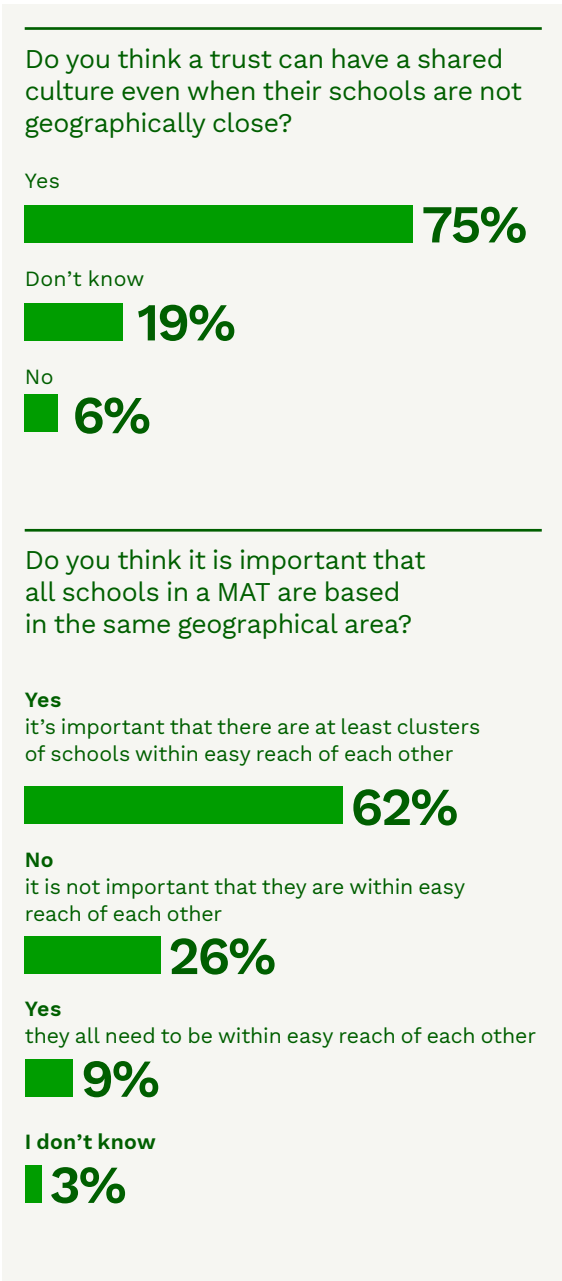
Having shared opportunities for staff across the Trust

One respondent put this down to “each school [being] reluctant to take on ideas and processes the other schools use”, whilst another explained that “we have not had time to build a common ethos beyond our founders’ vision which was entrepreneurial.” For some MAT leaders, a shared culture is simply “a difficult thing to achieve when you are a big, mixed-phase MAT across different authorities.”

One respondent explained that “shared vision and joined up leadership are a precursor to successfully implementing any other measures.” This speaks to a wider trend, where respondents seemed to value structural, Trust-level factors over teaching and learning or pupil-driven factors, such as having a standardised curriculum, sharing the same visual identity (e.g. uniforms) and having shared opportunities for pupils across the Trust.

The role of geography: Do schools need to be close together?

To dig deeper, we wanted to explore two practical factors that affect having a shared culture in detail. Our survey found that 71% of MAT leaders want at least clusters of their schools to be near each other for practical reasons, with the general consensus being that “nothing beats meeting in person and the incidental conversations over a cup of coffee and developing and solidifying professional relationships!”

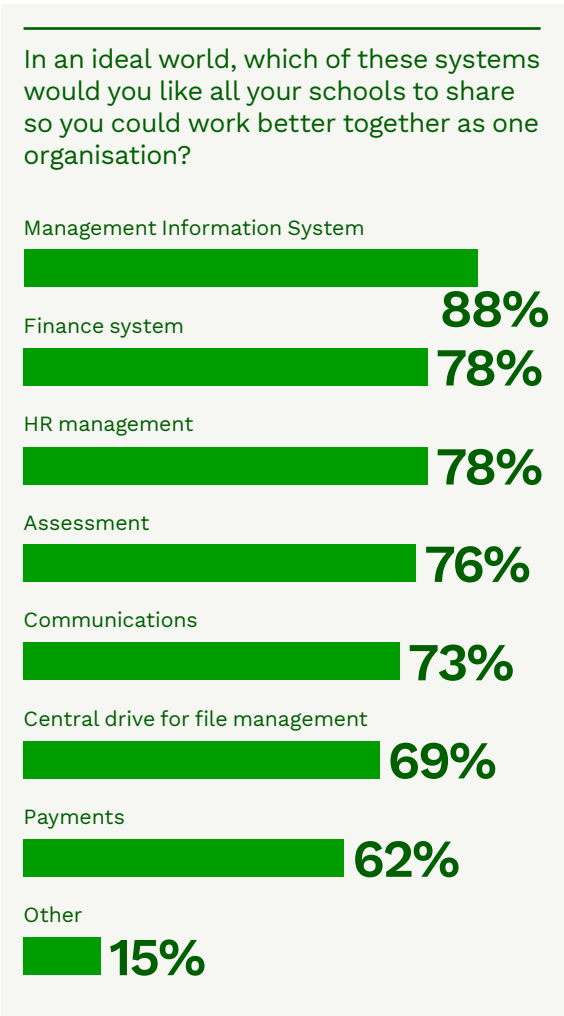


However, 75% of participants actually agreed that culture can be sustained even when schools within a Trust are not geographically close, which was generally justified by the notion that, “technology can link schools that are not geographically close.” This marks a definite shift in attitude, as pre-Covid MAT leaders were much more likely to state that having a smaller geographical footprint helped to maintain a tight culture.

In fact, nearly 1 in 3 participants felt that having the same systems was one of the most important factors when thinking about how to work together as one organisation, as summarised by one respondent who added, “divergent technology platforms create a barrier for communications and make it much more challenging to operate as a single organisation.” 88% of our participants agreed that, in an ideal world, all of their schools would share the same Management Information System in order to work better together.

Hear from five MAT leaders


To look further into what it takes to create a cohesive Trust, we asked five leaders from different Trusts to contribute their views in this book. We open and close our book with different perspectives, from Together Learning Trust and South Essex Alliance MAT, on what culture truly means and why it’s important. You’ll also hear from Bellevue Place Education Trust about whether MATs should be borderless, find out how The Howard Academy Trust is encouraging an honest culture across their Trust and read the debate from Birmingham Diocesan Multi-Academy Trust about why pedagogy should be prioritised over whole-Trust culture.



As Arbor’s CEO, I’m particularly interested in helping Trusts work together as one organisation — not many schools - to make life easier for both staff and students. My hope is that this book gives other MAT leaders and staff an insight into how colleagues are making meaningful and sustained cultural changes at their Trusts, and provides some interesting food for thought.

I was also fascinated to see the broad range of opinions on this subject. At the end of this book, you’ll find comments and perspectives from the MAT leaders who took part in our survey. We’d love to see where you stand in this discussion — head over to Arbor’s social channels and join the debate using the hashtag [#CohesiveMATs](#)

All the best,



James Weatherill
Co-Founder and CEO, Arbor Education

Got a question about how Arbor’s MAT MIS could work at your Trust? Feel free to drop me a line at james@arbor-education.com, or give our team a call on [0208 050 1028](tel:02080501028). I’d love to hear any thoughts, comments or questions you have after reading this book!

Straplines don't cut it: How to make meaningful cultural change within your Trust



Danny Armitage
Director of Business and Operations at Together Learning Trust

Factfile

Number of pupils:

3,500

Number of schools:

3 primaries
2 secondaries

Location:

West Yorkshire

It's not something that just happens, it can't just be revisited once a year during an Inset day or cemented through a fancy strapline. Culture is something we must live and breathe every day, together.

We frequently hear about the importance of culture in creating and sustaining successful organisations. But what is culture and why is it so important? In simple terms, culture is a shared set of beliefs and values established by leaders, effectively communicated and reinforced through action, which shape the mindset and behaviours of stakeholders. Done well, culture provides us all with an identity (the what) and a united and unified sense of belonging and purpose (the why). It's not something that just happens, it can't just be revisited once a year during an Inset day or cemented through a fancy strapline. Culture is something we must live and breathe every day, together.

Culture eats strategy for breakfast?

If, like me, you've sat through presentations about culture, I would be staggered if you hadn't seen that line appear in a PowerPoint somewhere. I understand its thought-provoking inclusion, asking people to think about the importance of organisational culture above all else - however, in my opinion, culture and strategy are inextricably linked. Culture must be driven through action, not just words. As such, clear strategy and systems are central to creating a successful, impactful culture.

Leaders must take responsibility for defining the culture and ultimately the behaviours we want. These should be rooted in a strong moral purpose and acknowledge that our role as education leaders is to serve the best interests of the children, families and communities entrusted to us. It is vital to clearly define what we want our organisations to look and feel like, but equally important to define 'why.' It's this purpose that will create buy-in.

Putting it all together through a framework

Within our Trust we have our GEL Framework which underpins all we do, to **Grow**, **Excel** and **Learn** together. This common theme and language is at the heart of our decision-making processes, from our quality assurance processes to our positive behaviour strategies.

Central to our GEL framework is a commitment to 'staff first'. This must not be interpreted as 'students second' — far from it. What we mean is that we want the very best people working in our schools, who embrace and embody our desire to GEL together, who are well-trained and who have the systems, structures and self-belief to be exceptional.

Straplines don't cut it: How to make meaningful cultural change within your Trust

94%
of MAT leaders
think it's
important that
all schools in
a MAT feel part
of the same
culture

We prioritise the development of our people, obsessing about the value of human capital and making positive relationships central to all we do. And that leads into our ‘why’ — if we have staff consistently performing at the top of their game, in an environment that supports growth and excellence, then our students will get the very best deal. By putting our people first and supporting them to be brilliant, we can then collectively deliver on our mission to provide magical learning experiences for the young people in our care.

The importance of a shared vision in embedding culture

Communicating our beliefs and vision effectively is particularly important when attempting to create and embed a culture across an organisation like a MAT. The unique context of each individual school within the MAT means we must be clear and concise about what we believe matters. Often, MAT leaders are supporting schools across different age ranges in different areas and in different circumstances, so it's vital to clearly define what our culture is and then provide the framework (through strategy, systems and behaviours) to create buy-in. High performance and successful outcomes

are usually achieved when employees see purpose in what they are doing, understanding their role in the collective effort.

One of the most famous examples is the story of John F. Kennedy meeting a janitor during a visit to the NASA Space Centre in 1962. JFK asked the janitor what he was doing. The janitor responded by saying ‘helping put a man on the moon Mr President’. Whilst the janitor may have been towards the bottom of any organisational chart, he understood he was playing a part in something bigger. This exemplifies a culture where everyone knows their purpose, are proud of their contribution and are encouraged and equipped to be their best in pursuit of a common goal.

That said, there are huge challenges in establishing and embedding organisational culture across a number of different schools. As a former Assistant Head, I have experience of creating a shift in culture at school level. Working within that environment you have direct control over both the communication of key messages but also (crucially) the day to day ability to demonstrate and model the behaviours and actions which bring about positive change.

At an executive level, it is not possible to be on the ground in every school all the time; this is where MAT leaders need to think carefully about a more systematic approach that equips and empowers like-minded school leaders to drive organisational culture within their schools. As a Trust, this is an ongoing process. It's not something we've cracked universally — nor is it something we should or would take our eye off.

What's working at Together Learning Trust

There are however some key things that are proving successful. Firstly, our CEO is extremely clear on his vision and ensures as the central and executive teams we know what is expected of us. Knowing exactly what ‘the boss’ wants and how collectively we get there is often underestimated in terms of its direct impact on positive outcomes. Secondly, we make sure that our communication strategy is recognised as fundamental when taking any decision or action at an executive level. We have a superb Comms team who are constantly working alongside us and our school leaders to seek out ways to reinforce our key messages and the positive impact our culture and ultimately

our actions are having. This steady communication of success and impact not only encourages further collaboration but also ensures we routinely revisit our common purpose (the why)... because collectively we are making a difference through what we believe and what we do. It is essential to keep a positive two-way dialogue between the central function of the MAT and the schools themselves, ensuring the in-it-together spirit is not replaced by us and them. We GEL together, we stand together and we succeed together based on our shared beliefs and actions... and as a result we create tangible positive impact!

The second and perhaps most important point is that as always, your people are key. Effective communication at Trust level only has an impact if the message and action on the ground is consistent and that can only happen if leaders at all levels are on the same page. We were able to give Headteachers and school leaders in our founding schools the opportunity to contribute to our vision of what our organisational culture would look like. This in turn ensures a much more consistent delivery of those messages and the associated actions within our schools

When we bring in change, it's not mandated from the top-down; it's based on research and best practice — for example, when we see something working well or we see a strength that we want to embed across the cluster.

because there is shared understanding and collective agreement on what we stand for. In future, when new schools join us, they will do so knowing who we are (the what), whilst also being able to see the positive impact that our culture creates (the why). Moreover, by employing great, like-minded people, you are much more likely to see the Trust vision realised at school level consistently. Equally, when we have great people we need to keep them, empower them and allow them to grow. Having a strong talent management programme that identifies and develops the best people is important in retaining those key individuals who not only deliver excellence consistently but who share and champion our mission.

Nearly
2/3
of MAT leaders think that joined-up leadership is one of the most important factors when making schools feel part of a cohesive culture.

Centralisation vs autonomy: Finding a balance
Finally, I couldn't address the topic of culture without touching on the idea of autonomy within a MAT. Whilst our Trust encourages school leaders to own their schools and allows autonomy of many systems and structures, it is inevitable and I believe right that the strategy which underpins this is set centrally, so that we can all work to deliver our shared goals in an environment which consistently promotes excellence in all we do. I believe that the tipping point for organisational culture comes from the actions of leaders. Within a MAT, I believe it's vital that all leaders have a shared vision and purpose. It is perfectly reasonable and understandable that local decisions and actions will be taken by school leaders, those who know their people and communities, which in turn bring about the best outcomes for their context. However for us to share the same overarching aims and beliefs, MAT leaders must drive this.

Executive leaders need to provide the framework under which their schools can operate successfully. Different Trusts provide different levels of autonomy, but what is important is that the strategy, systems and structures come together under one overarching

Different Trusts provide different levels of autonomy, but what is important is that the strategy, systems and structures come together under one overarching set of beliefs.

set of beliefs. For example, within our Trust we have recently finished work on a Trust Positive Behaviour Policy. The policy is not prescriptive in terms of systems and staffing which schools must use. However, our policy does provide the framework which details what we want our schools to look and feel like and why.

Culture... what we do and why we do it is the bedrock of creating purposeful and successful organisations.

As a leader it should be seen as both a privilege and a responsibility to have the opportunity to develop and implement organisational culture. When done successfully we can create an environment whereby whether you are a Governor, a Year 6 teacher or a Year 9 pupil within the MAT, you understand how to contribute to our collective goals and why doing so is important. This in turn means that despite the contextual differences, each school within the MAT has an overarching set of shared beliefs and values which create that sense of belonging and equips our people to make positive contributions at both school and Trust level. It is a process that requires strong and relentless leadership, effective use of communication streams, brilliant people at all levels and the strategies and structures to allow those people to deliver.

Danny joined Together Learning Trust (TLT) in September 2021 as Director of Business and Operations. Prior to joining TLT, Danny worked as an Assistant Headteacher in a large community comprehensive school. In his time as a school Senior Leader, Danny has led on a range of areas, including: Pastoral Care, Behaviour Management, Health and Safety, Risk Management, Facilities Management, Primary Transition (KS2-KS3), Stakeholder Engagement, Community Cohesion, and Support Staff Performance Management. In his current role, Danny has a wide and varying remit which allows him to provide strategic operations support across all our schools, ensuring back-office functions are efficient and effective, whilst also providing bespoke support to match the individual needs of TLT schools.

How far is too far? Where I stand in the distance debate when it comes to Trusts



Laura Gregory
Director of Education
at Bellevue Place
Education Trust

Factfile

Number of pupils:

2,919

Number of schools:

9 primaries

Location:

**London and
Berkshire**

What we all must do is underpin our journeys as Trusts with an understanding that every child should benefit from the Trust structure and feel like they're part of a Trust.

At Bellevue Place Education Trust (BPET), our nine schools are spread out over eight different local authorities. Eight of our schools are either in converted buildings or brand new school buildings, one school is in a converted juvenile courthouse. We were also the first Trust to have a partnership with a supermarket chain — Lidl, as one of our schools sits alongside and above a supermarket, as both were being built within the community at the same time.

In other words, our Trust is quite unique, as well as being geographically dispersed. We have a growing cluster of schools in Berkshire, but even though the majority of our schools are in London, it can easily take an hour to sometimes travel between them.

I am sure like us, any Trust's immediate priority after the pandemic is stabilisation, especially as our sector is trying to work with record-high absence rates from staff as well as pupils and general ongoing uncertainty. Many Trusts, including our own, are at the same time looking to grow and expand their community. However, what we all must do is underpin our journeys as Trusts with an understanding that every child should benefit from the Trust structure and feel like they're part of a Trust.

The same should apply whether you're set on growing, don't see it as a priority, or working around the ethos that you shouldn't grow for growth's sake. When a school is in need, whether that's a significant challenge or just a small training problem, it's our leaders and people that I call on to support that school. They're very aware that they're part of a bigger organisation, but at the same time, we know that our staff work best where they are happiest. This is where the geography question comes into play.

Of course, Covid revealed that there are still many ways to come together even when you're not geographically close. We are fortunate that we can meet virtually, but at BPET, we still encourage in-person visits. We've taken measures to make sure that this focus on in-person doesn't put a strain on our staff — like starting later when we meet in person, paying for travel and accommodation (if required), and having training in twilight hours to make sure we don't take people out of the classroom. These little things are making a difference, and were instigated after a survey I ran with the staff to see how we could make it easier to connect. We will always have a hybrid opportunity available, but we actively encourage our Headteachers and staff to meet face-to-face. This isn't to say we've got the balance just

How far is too far? Where I stand in the distance debate when it comes to Trusts

right yet, but it gives us flexibility and we can see attendance getting higher as a result of the hybrid offering.

Because in-person meetings and support are still important to our Trust, location is a factor when we're taking on a new school. So much so that we'd be hesitant to take on a school which is further than 30 minutes away from one of our existing schools, so that they don't miss out on the benefits of being part of our organisation. This is because of several factors. We want to create a real community of schools, and develop a hub structure. We also want to be able to offer in-person support, such as specialist teachers, without having a negative impact on the wellbeing of our existing staff. It's a fantastic opportunity to provide support to a school, but not if it means our staff have to have lengthy visits away from their families and their base school.

The same applies on a pupil level. We actively encourage visits to each other's schools to help contribute to that mindset that we are one organisation. We've had multiple sports competitions, where year groups come together from our different schools and compete. We've extended this to an intra-Trust chess tournament 'The Queens Gambit', and an upcoming BPET debate competition for the Year 5s and 6s across all of our schools. We're also looking for all our upper primary school children to go on a residential trip together. Although it's critical, having a shared culture isn't just about making sure each student benefits from great teaching. It's about a sense of community and doing things together. For staff, we have an annual conference and end of year celebration, as well as termly networking groups, e.g. for subject leaders, to share best practice.

Other organisations may have a completely different take, and perhaps to them, the future of MATs is borderless. That isn't to say that Trusts whose schools are spread across the country can't share a culture, it just means that at BPET, the centrality of community in our culture is too important to compromise to geographic distance. For us and our Board of Trustees, having a border is important.

At the same time, we have a firm belief at BPET that schools should retain their own identities alongside that of the Trust's vision 'Learn, Enjoy, Succeed'. It's not mutually exclusive. Our schools each have bespoke curriculums, not only to do with meeting the needs of the communities they serve, but simply at the heart of what they believe is important. One of our schools, for instance, has a financial curriculum. I recently visited a year 6 lesson where they were learning about inheritance tax (which they were shocked and disgruntled by!) while a year 5 class was focused on how to save money, budget and develop an understanding of loan APRs. Another of our schools always has swimming delivered in every year group from Reception to Year 6 annually. If it's important to the school and community, then they should keep it — as long as it's developing the whole child and they are making great progress academically and socially.

Our schools also have the autonomy to decide how they should deliver their bespoke curriculum. None of our Headteachers want to see robots teaching the same lesson. Two teachers may teach the same class in a very different way, and that system works, as long as they see engagement and progress from the pupils.

62% of MAT leaders think it's important that at least some schools within a MAT are geographically close

The centrality of community in our culture is too important to compromise to geographic distance.

75% of MAT leaders think you can still have a shared culture even when schools are not geographically close

BPET provides support and challenge through the attainment and progress data recorded for each school on Arbor. This enables us to identify trends for support, strength to push out across the organisation and areas where more attention or spend need to be diverted to. We have a Standards Committee Meeting each term, to delve into each school's data, which is made up of the school's SLT, myself and either the CEO or a Board Trustee. We also take this data to the Board, who review it themselves and provide challenge to me, and then I take back any next steps or questions to the school with a plan of action. As well as this, we have Local Advisory Boards (LABs), which help us to review our standards of teaching and learning across each school.

We have some form of a review every term in each of our schools (extending beyond teaching and learning, e.g. safeguarding and regulation and compliance), which is identified in our School Improvement Strategy. We again, discuss the strengths, challenges and then share best practice to overcome the challenges. This is testament to the fact that sharing a culture and sharing standards and goals doesn't and shouldn't take away from the autonomy of each school to follow the path that they think works best for them. It again

comes down to making sure that each student benefits from that Trust structure and vision. For us and our culture at BPET, that also speaks to the sense of community we are building through in-person events and support. It's this sense of belonging that we will not compromise for the sake of dispersed growth.

Laura Gregory joined BPET as the Director of Education in September 2019. Her role is to support the educational standards in all BPET schools along with overseeing the annual School Improvement Review Cycle, offering and designing CPD programmes for staff and facilitating strong collaboration across BPET's schools. Prior to this, Laura was Principal of a large Outstanding primary academy in Hertfordshire — one of the first designated Teaching Schools in England, within a Trust. While in this role, Laura became an additional OfSTED Inspector for primary and early years and gained the Professional Qualification for School Inspectors (PQSI), before leaving to be a School Improvement Adviser for Buckinghamshire Local Authority (LA). Laura is also a Fellow of the Chartered College for Teachers, a leadership coach for Ambition Institute and a MAT reviewer for Challenge Partners.

Total honesty: What it is, how it works, and why it's essential to our Trust culture



Owen McColgan
Chief Executive of The
Howard Academy Trust

Factfile

Number of pupils:

3,000

Number of schools:

**4 primaries
1 secondary
1 UTC**

Location:

Medway area

Before the pandemic started, all our schools had very different challenges and strengths — whether around curriculum or simply making sure that every child left school with a good reading level. The impact of Covid means that our central focus now falls under a wider umbrella of positive wellbeing for both staff and students. We are working to achieve this in two different ways. The first is by avoiding rash decision-making, instead using considered data to support everything we do. The second is to curate a culture of total honesty and open communication.

Tackling wellbeing head-on post-Covid

We've introduced some quick wins that directly speak to our collective wellbeing. Most of our schools have introduced wellbeing afternoons to give staff some time back and we've put in things like mental health first aid across all of our schools. But we want to go deeper in order to create sustainable and meaningful change. We commissioned an external staff survey on wellbeing and workload using a third party, which allowed us to see if our trust aligned with what people were feeling at a national level. On the first day back to in-person school, I met with the staff from all of our academies and outlined what we were doing about our people strategy, which is driven by four

values: recruit, retain, develop and reward. I let our staff know that going forward, staff voice would play a big role in our Trust strategy and that engagement was encouraged from every single person. This taps into that idea of honesty and transparency, which was why my leading point to the staff was that we are unable to address problems if we don't know they exist. And if you're thinking about it, another member of staff is likely to be thinking the same. We want to unearth all of our problems and address them head-on.

To bring this all together, we created Academy Councils. These councils meet three times a year to talk about the on the ground issues in our academies. We made sure these Councils were made up of a representative sample of staff, from the back-office and teaching roles, through to leadership positions. The Councils offer a chance for us to look at what we have already achieved, but also facilitate an open, two-way dialogue and discover what people are truly thinking.

Re-defining our Trust vision and values

Tying into this, we did a piece of work with staff in April about resetting the vision and values of the Trust, because staff could not outline what the previous version of our values truly was. We had been very clear from the offset that academies could and should retain

Total honesty: What it is, how it works,
and why it’s essential to our Trust culture

78%

of MAT leaders said that having a shared vision and values is one of the most important factors when making schools feel part of a cohesive culture

their old identities as far as they wanted to. Having a Trust ‘brand’ is important, but it’s equally critical that Trusts recognise that their academies can also be very different from one another. For example, one of our primary schools’ vision statements was ‘aiming high, shining bright.’ Or, in our secondary school, the students work on something called LORIC values, which is an accreditation the students get by exhibiting the following principles: leadership, organisation, resilience, independence and communication. It makes them well-rounded students and sits at the centre of their school-life. It simply wouldn’t work or make sense for me to overwrite those value-led programmes, because they work, and they work well. That being said, we still wanted to curate that sense of overarching belonging.

April 2021 felt like the perfect time to start moving forward again on our shared values and culture that needed to be embedded and lived out in our academies. We kickstarted this by holding an online session with 60 colleagues from across the Trust, once again representing staff from all levels. We tried to pick out the main themes from our existing values, what we liked and what we didn’t like, and went into breakout rooms to discuss in more depth. The result was really useful, not

least because the staff enjoyed knowing that their opinions were valued and that the vision we created actually meant something to them.

We then took their feedback, broke it down a little bit further, and asked for another sample of volunteers. It was from here that we came up with our new vision, which is ‘working together to build a community of successful learners.’ It’s about working together. It’s about collaboration. We also liked that it catered to the idea that success could mean different things for all our 3000 students. We have a wide variety of learners within our Trust community. It’s not all about exam results. For some children, it’s about making it into school, and being able to attend if they’ve got mental health issues, or getting that support that they need. We underpinned this with our four core values: inclusivity, dignity, respect, and ambition. Those are the only two things across our Trust that we expect people to truly tap into.

If you go on any of our schools’ websites now, you’ll see under their vision and value section that they will have their own and then they’ll have the Trust’s. It’s the same principle. We also issue a termly Trust newsletter to parents and staff. Our Trust-branded newsletter

In theory, I can do my job
from anywhere, so why not
do it from different schools?

brings together the wonderful good news stories and successes from within our academy community, which has had over 4,000 readers this term. We would be naive to think that parents only care about the school that their child goes to because, for instance, our secondary is a direct feeder school for our primaries, and so parents are definitely invested in the wider community of the Trust. These little reminders continue to spread the message of our shared values, but help to let everybody else know what is going on in the other schools, as well as centrally. We’ve also got an internal newsletter, which has all the great stories from our academies that are applicable to staff. Finding concrete ways of communicating our values was the important first step. What was really positive for us to see in the staff survey was that the clarity around our vision and values came up as a solid green.

Making sure the benefit is widespread

Our next step is to make sure everyone is feeling the benefit of being part of a Trust. That project is underway and we continue to provide training for Arbor to our staff since moving to one system. We want people to actually feel that being part of this Trust provides opportunities for them and that they are part of the same organisation. The success of culture can be difficult to

put a metric against, but my main aim is to keep a finger on the pulse of how people are feeling, so that we can continue to make decisions that aren’t rash, and are instead tapping into what will really make a difference to our overall wellbeing.

This will be partially achieved through our annual staff survey. I am hoping that the feedback around collaboration and benefits of having a shared learning community continues to grow stronger. The second method is having a presence on the ground. Visiting academies does not have to have a particular purpose behind the visit. This is a big misconception that we are coming into school to look at something and one that I am working on addressing. The purpose is to walk around, listen to the children, talk to staff, and be able to thank them for the great things that they’re doing. I always try to know about the projects that individuals are working on, so that I can have a real conversation about it when I visit, thank staff for the work that they are doing and let them see that their leaders are telling me and my team about the great work they are doing.

We will be using Academy Councils to ask questions, but we’re finding other ways of bringing people together, such as asking how we can reduce workload by identifying overlap in schools.

Total honesty: What it is, how it works,
and why it's essential to our Trust culture

Another initiative is our first Trust Conference, taking place in July. Our keynote speech will be around how Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) is important for the experiences of children in the classroom and how we can support this, for example, by using the correct pronouns for students. A key strategic objective across the Trust is our focus on EDI, and this certainly falls into that umbrella of a shared sense of positive wellbeing. We have set up an EDI Forum, which has representatives from each academy talking about how we can be more diverse and inclusive as a Trust. As an employer we want to facilitate an honest discussion, and create a culture where staff can put forward their view and tell us how they genuinely feel. That's where the idea of total honesty comes from — it's not just within leadership but across every level of our schools.

At the Trust conference in July, all staff will hopefully see that the trust community is providing something for them, whether it be network groups that they can get together every six weeks or forums that speak for them. This is even more important as we grow, to make sure your presence is felt for the right reasons in all of your schools. Coming into this position I quickly realised how much time is spent simply

thinking and then taking this forward into constructing our strategy. Whilst it's great getting stuck in yourself, it's important as a leader to recognise the fantastic people that work in your organisation and keep those layers of plates spinning. Having a presence, and showing that you care about the shared goals of our individual academies but also as a Trust, is critical. In theory, I can do my job from anywhere, so why not do it from different schools?

The importance of honest leadership
We want our Trust to have an honest and open culture which we are working hard to create, in line with wellbeing. One thing I stand by is not promising the world to a school or staff member, if it's not something you will actually deliver on. For example, if we were to onboard a new school, we'd be upfront about how most of our back-office functions are centralised, which can be challenging when you have people sitting in the room who feel like their job is under threat. But that's what makes it so important. You have to say how you work and outline exactly what your culture is. This is underpinned by the vision and values that we want lived out in our organisation to make sure we provide the best possible education for our children. Having an honest culture and letting people know where they stand is important. It's not about being

Having an honest culture and letting people know where they stand is important. It's not about being cut-throat, instead it's making sure that everybody knows what is expected and if support is required, how we can provide that.

cut-throat, instead it's making sure that everybody knows what is expected and if support is required, how we can provide that.

In my previous role which involved a lot of HR work, you get to see where people situations go wrong. That's why we so concretely believe in the honesty model, ensuring we are kind at the same time. Its aim is to encourage a supportive and transparent culture, and also makes sure that goals can be both aligned and achievable at a trust level. Our wellbeing initiative is tightly interlinked with this, as by listening to every member of staff and presenting back realistic steps of action, we can move forward in the right direction as one organisation. That's when people work and feel at their best.

Owen McColgan has been the Chief Executive of The Howard Academy Trust since January 2020. He's the youngest Chief Executive in the education sector in the UK, having worked his way from being a Business Studies Teacher, up to Assistant Head, through to a Finance and HR Director within the Trust, alongside his qualification as an accountant.

19%
of MAT leaders
feel that their
Trust does not
have a cohesive
culture which
all their schools
feel a part of

The case for prioritising pedagogy over whole-trust culture



Samantha Cosgrove
Director for School Improvement at the Birmingham Diocesan Multi-Academy Trust

All views are her own and not necessarily those of the Trust.

Factfile

Number of pupils:

5,000

Number of schools:

18 primaries
1 secondary

Location:

Birmingham

It may sound cliché, but the one non-negotiable in our Trust is that the children get a good education. A significant majority of our 19 schools have been schools in difficulties, and so our priority is to use the support of the Trust to turn this around.

When you get a group of Headteachers together, it's very rare that you don't have a shared understanding of this one non-negotiable. Whether you have the expertise to deliver that is a totally different question. It's easier to talk about the theory of pedagogy than communicate it to your team and bring it into action. We've spent the last three and a half years really trying to get the professional development for teachers right and getting our Headteachers to talk about and understand pedagogy.

Getting started with an effective teaching and learning strategy

Of course, we have cross-Trust groups to bring this together. But when there are 19 voices with different priorities, it can be hard to cut through the noise and make sure each voice is listened to. To tackle this, we broke the group down into a School Improvement Steering Group. We have four regionally-located hubs in our Trust at the moment, though we're looking to change this. One person from each hub comes along to the Steering Group, where we discuss best

practice and ways to move forward and support one another.

We also created a digital teaching and learning toolkit that we shared with all the Headteachers, which they use alongside their own tomes of inspirational, educational books. The toolkit was created when we brought all of our Heads together and broke the practice of teaching and learning into strands, focusing on: climate for learning, planning well-structured lessons, teaching well-structured lessons, assessment, professionalism and EYFS. This breaks down into sub-strands, so if you have a teacher who, for example, is struggling with their climate for learning, they can click on the topic and it'll direct them to research material and guidance videos, with both Teach Like a Champion and Ambition Institute's ECF resources. All of this is centred on instructional coaching, which in turn allows our teachers to understand that success comes bit by bit, not all at once.

Tying pedagogy together with professional development/CPD

Alongside this, we introduced a professional development document, where teachers self-audit against teaching standards. It gives detailed examples of what we expect to see in the classroom. It's all very well telling a teacher to use high-order questioning,

but if they're not sure what it means, then that guidance is completely useless. This document is there to counteract that blocker. To make this a less threatening task, we stand by our belief that pay is not related to performance. Having this self-auditing practice in place has helped us to spot staff members who are doing particularly well. We then ask those staff members to support others who are more challenged in that area, which means we have a cycle of internal sustainability.

If you haven't got the culture for learning and collaborating right, it doesn't matter how good your teaching learning strategy is, it's not going to work. If a Headteacher understands how to implement a quality teaching and learning strategy, they will also understand the role culture can play in supporting this. We have a lot of collaborative groups across the Trust, where we share that good practice and the latest philosophies. We talk about the big picture, but also what Trusts are facing on a day-to-day basis. The key is being solution-focused, but also making sure that everybody within their area is updated with the latest research and pedagogy initiatives.

Bringing new schools into this culture

It's important to integrate this culture when you take onboard a new school, especially where a strong part of our belief system is taking on schools in challenging circumstances. We'll often take on a school as it gets a new Headteacher, which has been helpful to us in developing them as leaders. We also make sure to speak to not just the new Heads, but all levels of staff. Part of my role is to provide a comprehensive induction package, as well as a comprehensive offer of CPD for our NQT + 1s and those at all stages of their career. That's how you get the buy-in.

One of the things we've noticed is that pushback from leadership often comes from Heads who feel their position is threatened by coming into a MAT. A large part of our culture is therefore showing these leaders that we want to help move their school forward, but also help develop and grow them as individual leaders. Our Trust philosophy is that Heads have the licensed autonomy. The Trust is there to guide and direct. Once we show that we are there to collaborate, the buy-in is greater.

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It's absolutely appropriate for schools to provide the curriculum and the education that is right for their context.

This framework of understanding pedagogy is therefore crucial, as it brings together the staff from across our Trust and provides them with a structure from which to guide what goes on in the classroom. These are the steps we are taking to make sure that our one non-negotiable remains at the forefront of our strategy. That being said, the vehicle used for this focus on pedagogy can be different to each school's context, because we have very different schools with a very mixed demographic. We have some in Warwickshire, we have some in the middle of Birmingham, we have some in South Birmingham, and some in Solihull. It would therefore be absolutely appropriate for schools to provide the curriculum and the education that is right for their context. However, if we found that that wasn't working, then there's a different conversation to be had.

Is it important that every student feels part of a Trust?

Culture is inevitably important, because it can bring people together. I used to lead a smaller Trust of three schools, where we were able to pull all of our students together and achieve things like a Trust-wide Olympic Games. Looking at our current situation, with 19 schools and 5,000 students of ages

two (and eventually) to 19, this feels like a far bigger undertaking. For me, it is important that each of our students feels part of their school. Trust-wide culture is important, but it's not my personal driving force, especially where you have schools in difficulties.

It comes back to that one non-negotiable; only once this is guaranteed can you prioritise culture as a whole. Instead, it has to take a backseat of support whilst teaching and learning standards take precedent. Our focus is on aligning our staff through a shared understanding of pedagogy, and making sure that our students' education is benefitting from the Trust structure, as opposed to simply the Trust culture.

Samantha has worked in education for over 30 years, starting her career as an unqualified teaching assistant. She loved working in education so much that she then trained as a teacher — the rest, as they say, is history. Her driving force is making sure that pupils receive the very best, a passion which she is able to live out through her role as Director for School Improvement.

Looking at culture through a new lens: And other reasons to carry a magnifying glass



Rebecca Leek
Chief Executive at South Essex Alliance MAT

Factfile

Number of pupils:

774

Number of schools:

3 primaries

Location:

South Essex

What we do not want to create in any organisation, or clusters of sub-organisations, is sameness.

I am cautious about the word coherency. Words mean different things to different people (something I'll come on to later) and some people might take coherency to mean consistency, or uniformity, and both those concepts make me nervous. As soon as we go down the route of creating clones and monocultures we enter very dangerous territory. What we do not want to create in any organisation, or clusters of sub-organisations, is sameness. As soon as we wheedle out the differences between us we reduce our ability to innovate, to include and enable, and, in the world of schools, we limit the opportunities we have to offer children an experience of diversity. The big wide world is diverse and we are doing a disservice to children by providing them with a narrow diet. The permaculturist in me knows that valuing diversity is a key principle to health and happiness; it is this that supports life and brings the most riches.

The etymology of coherency helps us. It literally means 'to cling together'. I like to think of it as the glue that pulls all the different constituent parts together into a functioning polyculture.

In this sense of the word, I really value coherency. People need to know in which direction they are rowing, and to what rhythm. Quite honestly, if people

are pulling in different directions, then the boat isn't going anywhere fast. It will still move, just like an orchestra can stumble to the end of a piece without a conductor. But it will make far better progress with the coherency provided by a steady hand on the tiller, by the person deciding when it is best to go fast and slow — together.

The challenge of communication

Good communication is absolutely essential in creating coherency. It is also challenging. I like to think that it's something I'm not too bad at, but recently I was reminded of how it is essentially impossible to get right. I experienced that frustrating moment when you think you have explained everything, in different ways, with different means, and you realise that you could essentially have been speaking a different language. I had run a project linked to wellbeing. I had presented an overview in an online webinar, sent out updates in Trust and Headteacher mailings, included a one page aide memoire, and added things in the monthly newsletter. I'd also talked about it as I visited schools, with individuals and groups. Despite all of this, when a questionnaire went out to staff, some people had somehow got the wrong end of the stick.

I really value coherency. People need to know in which direction they are rowing, and to what rhythm. Quite honestly, if people are pulling in different directions, then the boat isn't going anywhere fast.

I don't think anyone had done anything wrong. In fact, I think it is inevitable. I keep a magnifying glass in my work bag to remind me that different people have different windows onto the world, and there is no way you can hit the mark with everyone. I see and hear all my communications and I have the privilege of knowing what I mean (there's the rub!). There will be someone who did not attend a session, who did not read, who did not want to or have time to reflect, who heard different meanings in some of the words. Consider what I said at the beginning about coherency. We come to words with our own understanding of them and it can be quite hard to shift this, however explicit we are.

Despite its fickle nature though, communication is your main means of building a shared culture and keeping the ship sailing in the direction that you want it to go. Internal communications, with all its multifaceted channels, is your most effective tool to create coherency and ultimately build strength from your organisation's constituent parts.

How to increase the chances of your key messages getting through

Sydney Harris, a 20th century American journalist, said that, 'Information is giving out, communication is getting through.' I am sorry to tell you but blocks of text simply will not cut it. I appreciate that this is a plain block of text that I am writing, at this moment, early on a Wednesday morning. However, once it is in its final form, it will be formatted, it may have some key quotes highlighted separately, and a biography or preamble to frame it. Relying on a monolith of text will only get you a very short distance. The words will simply not go in. They may reach a minority who actually read through text carefully and don't mind if it all looks the same every time. But just because you have written something down does not mean it will get through.

So when you are working on delivering a new message or are introducing new core principles or values — consider how many different ways you can communicate them within the internal channels at your disposal. Some mechanisms to tease out important messages and threads are the titles of emails. It may sound obvious but if you get the subject heading right you will already have shed light on the main thrust of what you want people to take away.

88% of MAT leaders said that in an ideal world, all of their schools would use the same MIS to help them work better as one organisation

I also like to pre-empt things and create a staged approach. By this I mean I might refer to something in advance in brief with a 'coming soon' kind of summary. It might appear on an agenda with a note to say it is coming up at the next meeting. This means that when the full text finally lands, colleagues have had a couple of chances to hear the keywords in advance. It will help the main, more complex message land.

Remember too that there are a wide range of channels available to you. This includes letters, posters, emails, briefings, tweets, website pages, voice recordings and informal, ad hoc conversations. Every interaction is an opportunity to get a message across. I have included tweets in the list above because I am a strong believer in external communications also being internal communications. The letters that you send to parents are often (and I say should be) read by staff too. You have the perfect opportunity to say things in a slightly different way to parents and this will increase your chances of things being understood by different stakeholders.

The importance of reiteration

Finally, communication, when you are doing it, is dangerously deceptive. Consider the scenario when someone says that they have marketed something by including it once in a tweet. They have not marketed it at all. As Bernard Shaw put it, "The single biggest problem with communication is the illusion that it has taken place." Repetition really is the key to success, and repetition in different ways. One of the core values in our Trust is diversity — and I really want everyone to understand what I mean by that. So I will repeat it and interweave it

as much as I can. It was in the parent newsletter last month and guess what — I have reiterated it at the start of this piece too (which is me using external communications as a means of internal communications).

Remember, to get a message delivered, to pull your organisation together, you have to send it out in as many different ways as you possibly can, and as often as you can. Did I tell you recently how much I value diversity?

Rebecca Leek is the Chief Exec at South Essex Alliance MAT. The mission at the Trust is to ensure each and every child is lit up with learning. Before becoming Chief Exec at South Essex Alliance MAT, Rebecca was the Executive Headteacher at Cliff Lane Primary in Ipswich and Director of Strategy with ASSET Education, a Trust of 14 primary schools in Suffolk. Rebecca was previously a regional primary lead with EACT, with oversight for three primaries in Brent and South Bucks, following a period as a System Leader for SEND and Behaviour.

Over 1/2 of MAT leaders think that having frequent contact with the Central team is one of the most important factors when trying to create a cohesive culture

Join the debate

Here are some opinions from other respondents to our survey. We’ve also added questions to pose to your team to open up a discussion about culture in your MAT.

Get involved in the debate by using the hashtag [#CohesiveMATs](#) on Twitter and LinkedIn, and tag us ([@ArborEdu](#) or [Arbor Education](#)).

- Is it important that all schools in your MAT feel part of the same culture?

For: “The key is in the word itself — TRUST. If you are part of the same organisation, the same ‘family’ driving towards the same goals, it is essential that all stakeholders feel a part of the same culture.”

Against: “Ultimately, a uniform culture across a larger Trust seems to require a huge cost in time and energy and it’s not clear to me that this automatically makes the education in the classrooms better.”
- Should schools within your MAT be allowed to retain some of their own identity?

For: “Support is a must, but Trusts should not dictate to individual schools, which may have completely different demographics or identities, how they should proceed on a day to day basis.”

Against: “Our leaders are Trust Leaders first, and School leaders second. A Principal cares as much for a student on the other side of the Trust as they do for a student in their own school.”
- Should all schools in your MAT have the same systems in order to work better together?

For: “Systems and processes are key to working stronger together. If you cannot agree on basic processes then collaboration falls at the first hurdle.”

Against: “It’s not about the operational systems and procedures — this is done for cost efficiencies. Culture is all about the children and how they are learning — all the children in our MAT are given the same learning opportunities.”

Methodology

Our survey was sent to 1,002 MAT leaders in Trusts using a survey tool called Gainsight. 164 participants took part in the anonymous survey (16% of those contacted), with 95 respondents completing the survey in full (58% of those who took part), and the rest answering some of the questions but not all. Participants were given from the 2nd February 2022 to the 21st February 2022 to take part.

The survey included an invitation to contribute further to our content piece. We invited those who said they would be interested to speak with us and add a written piece to our book.

Keep an eye out for our next release, where we will be including more insights from our survey and another collection of articles about how to work together as one organisation, not many.

The majority of our respondents were:

CEOs	18%
CFOs	17%
COOs	12%

The majority of our respondents worked in Trusts with:

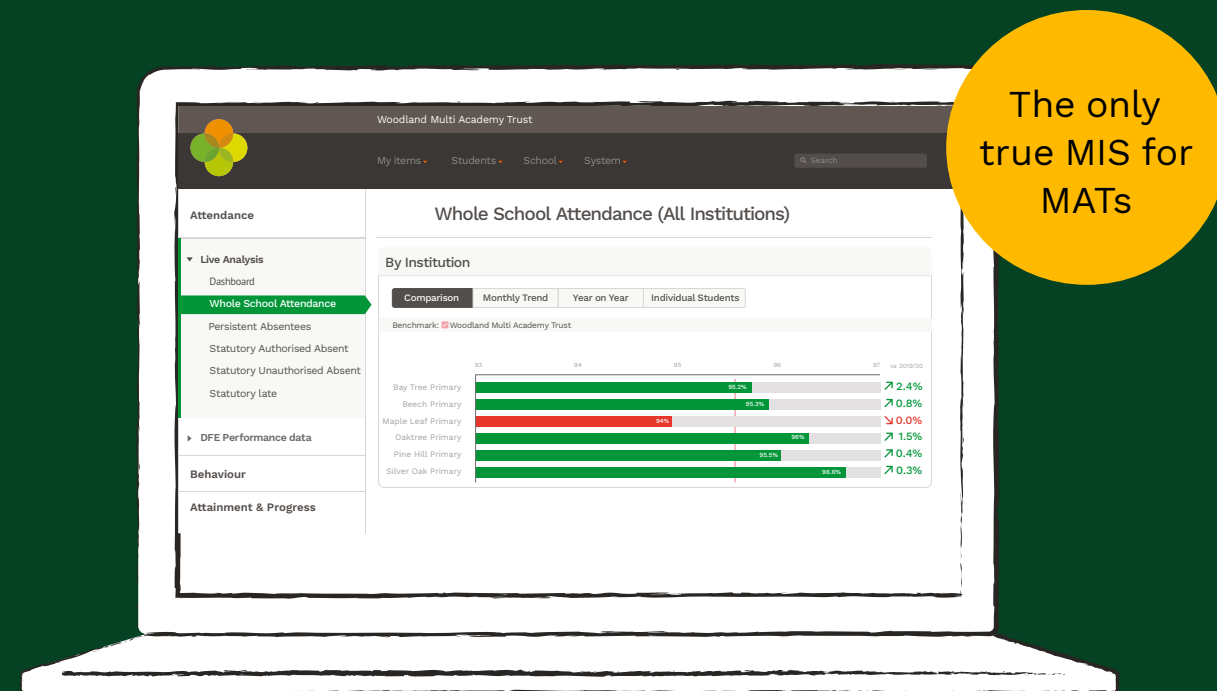
1-5 schools	48%
6-10 schools	25%
11-15 schools	7%
16-20 schools	12%
21-30 schools	6%
31-40 schools	1%
41+ schools	1%

Most of these Trusts were:

Primary only	42%
Mixed-phase	41%
Secondary only	9%
Special schools only	7%

- Can you have a shared culture even if your schools are geographically dispersed? If so, how can you make sure of this?
- For:** “A good culture in any educational organisation should allow for regional variation. With advances in technology and communication there are fewer reasons why partner schools need to be physically closely located.”
- For:** “The culture comes from the leadership and collaboration of colleagues. This can be virtually or in person, geography should not impact this.”
- In the middle:** “Geography should not be a boundary, although it should be acknowledged as an attribute.”
- Against:** “Schools cannot work effectively and collaboratively in isolation. Collaboration is essential for effective leadership.”
- Should MATs have a standardised approach to teaching and learning in order to achieve a more cohesive culture?
- For:** “The MAT culture should be to improve the outcomes for students. To achieve this, doing the same assessments and curriculum is essential to be able to assess attainment and progress.”
- In the middle:** “We champion a core set of principles linked to teaching and learning and curriculum design rather than prescribing specific approaches or schemes.”
- Against:** “It is not about a curriculum or teaching and learning — that is an easy way to control not develop! It is about shared identity and making sure teachers have the opportunity to spend as much time on doing what is right for their children as possible.”
- Is staff buy-in and staff opportunity at the heart of a successful MAT?
- For:** “To avoid the “them and us” syndrome where staff think others in different settings have it better, we emphasise the main reason we are all here — to improve learning and outcomes for children.”
- For:** “Opportunities for colleagues to collaborate enables us to reflect on our own practice, elevate each other’s practice, and challenge each other to uphold the Trust values.”

Choose a better way to work with Arbor MIS for MATs



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We'd love to
hear from you
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