

# Creating a Cohesive Trust Part 2

Making sure all schools  
benefit from being in a MAT

# About Arbor

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# Introduction:

## How can trust leaders make sure all their schools benefit?



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](mailto:james@arbor-education.com), or give our team a call on 0208 050 1028. I'd love to hear any thoughts, comments or questions you have after reading this book!

In our last book for MAT leaders, we explored whether trusts could and should create a shared culture. This is now more relevant than ever, spurred on by the government's assertion that all schools should belong to 'strong' MATs by 2030. We wanted to take another look at what having a strong and cohesive MAT really means and as part of this, how every school could benefit from being in a trust.

### **Provide synergy and support, over sameness**

In February 2022, we conducted a survey of 164 MAT leaders and discovered that nearly 1 in 5 respondents did not feel that their trust had a cohesive culture which all their schools felt part of.

When we asked participants about the factors they felt best contributed to a shared culture, our survey also revealed that MAT leaders were not drawn to surface-level factors, such as having the same uniform or a standardised curriculum. Instead, respondents were more focused on having shared opportunities for staff and students, and shared vision and values. This seems to direct us towards what having a cohesive trust truly means: sharing, not sameness.

Indeed, someone commented: "I wonder what the point in being a trust would be if there was no sense of a shared culture. This does not mean each school is the same and that individual schools

cannot have unique approaches and sub-cultures themselves. This is a good thing. But there needs to be a shared culture for the schools to actually benefit from being within a trust. Otherwise we are all pulling in different directions."

### **Hear from five MAT leaders**

To look further into what it takes to create a cohesive trust, we invited five different MAT leaders to write about what they thought helped build cohesion and resilience in their trusts.

Our book opens with the importance of communication at Learning For Life Education Trust, and the resulting cross-trust oracy programme. You'll then hear why Wellspring Academy Trust has committed to 125-year plans for all their schools, and how The Learning For Life Partnership shares best practice both within and beyond their own schools. The fourth piece in this book explores how and why the Olympus Academy Trust shares courses between its schools and how this benefits its students. Our book closes with a look into moral leadership at Prince Albert Community Trust and how this has helped transform a number of vulnerable schools.

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. I hope you not only enjoy reading the book, but also that you gain some inspiration on how to make sure that every school, and every student, is benefiting from everything your trust has to offer.

All the best,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James Weatherill".

**James Weatherill**  
Co-Founder and CEO, Arbor Education

# Human connection and communication: Why we prioritised oracy after the pandemic



**Joanne Sanchez-Thompson**  
CEO at Learning for Life  
Education Trust

## Factfile

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Number of pupils:

1,025

Number of schools:

2 junior  
2 infant

Location:

Northamptonshire

We believe in working on similar improvements so that we're all working together on a common thread, without having to do it exactly the same way.

At Learning For Life Education Trust, our belief is that to succeed, we must all succeed. If one of our schools fails, we all fail. This encompasses not only our schools, but each of our students, regardless of demographic or background. Culture is therefore massively important to us as an organisation, because we firmly believe in our onward journey being a group effort.

It's always hard to pinpoint one priority, especially where you have multiple schools, but recalibrating after the pandemic is our leading force (we aren't keen on the word catch-up as we don't know what we are catching up to), and other trusts are undoubtedly the same. The immediate challenge here is making sure that each student is physically in school enough to benefit, but also finding the best ways to train and develop staff so that they are equipped to address the gaps that have emerged in the children's knowledge and understanding.

This is where we have really come together and tapped into the shared culture which is so important to us. Like many trusts, we have lots of cross-school groups where we figure out what we can do to help each other and share best practice. But a key one for us at the moment is a whole-trust oracy project.

This has stemmed from our understanding that children who can speak and articulate their thinking effectively will achieve more across the curriculum and in their personal lives. This includes the nationally assessed subjects of writing, reading and mathematics. As a system, we can focus so much on those outputs, but overlook the basic skills that create a foundation for success - communication and language. This is all the more important given that some children haven't had as much chance as others to do much talking at home as a result of the pandemic. They haven't articulated what they feel, what they're thinking or haven't had the space to share ideas. We decided to make this a big focus for the next academic year.

We have planned strategically for this development. Our in-school leaders of the project have received high-quality training through working with another trust. They are now working and planning together to ensure that we have set the stage and have the right building blocks in place for our whole-trust launch in September.

Communication is where this all ties together. We believe in working on similar improvements so that we're all working together on a common thread, without having to do it exactly the same way. Our strapline as a trust is, 'stronger together', and has been from the very start.

Human connection and communication:  
Why we prioritised oracy after the pandemic

Whether that be two people working together or 200, working together is a stronger driver to success than working alone.

We have lots of trust groups which meet at least six times a year. This includes an assessment group, an attendance group, a safeguarding group, an early years group - the list goes on. I'm able to keep in touch with all of those groups because I'm not based in one particular school. We use Sharepoint in Office 365 which facilitates communication because I can see all of those plates spinning virtually. We keep communication strong and constant. Talking is a good thing.

And as much as it's great when these groups can meet in person, we've also benefited from having some meetings take a hybrid form. We have had writing moderation sessions over Zoom, for example. If, and where, technology can support communication, rather than replace it, we embrace it.

Our groups aren't just for school staff. We have our Chromebook Group, for instance, where all of our Year 5s and 6s have a Chromebook. We've invested very heavily in our technology for the children. Our focus is making sure that we are using this technology to improve communication and outcomes, but not replacing the fact that we still need to talk and write and read without looking

at the screen. Technology is valuable in that it can save you time which you can invest elsewhere, but so is face-to-face interaction. When we were looking at our SEND reviews, for instance, we wanted to make sure they were in person. Our SENCO group has developed a SEND review process so that each of our staff members in those areas can visit other schools and learn from what provision is being used elsewhere.

We are very much about human relationships, and ultimately that's what culture is. But these aren't just between a CEO and the rest of the trust. This is something that comes up a lot as we seek to grow; we want to make sure that when a CEO or a headteacher leaves, the culture of the trust continues to work in the way that we envisaged it. Schools don't want to join a culture that changes when its sole figurehead leaves. Instead, a true and sustainable culture comes when the network of relationships within the trust is strong, and each relationship is informed by a culture of communication and collaboration. That's what makes for good teaching and learning relationships. That's what makes for good school leadership relationships. And that's what makes for a successful trust, in our view. These are the structures that lay the groundwork for a sustainable future as an organisation.

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A true and sustainable culture comes when the network of relationships within the trust is strong, and each relationship is informed by a culture of communication and collaboration.

Part of this is having faith and accountability in one another's roles, which comes from an understanding of where each staff member stands and where their responsibilities lie. No teacher or school leader should be worrying about the infrastructure of the building, for example. They should have trust in the central team to do that for them and instead be able to focus on their core purpose of teaching and learning.

Bringing governance into that conversation is equally important. We have our local governance chairs who meet together virtually to discuss how their committees are working. For instance, we not only have a group for safeguarding leads, but safeguarding governor leads. Again, it's about extending that communication to make sure you are all working together as one trust and knowing who is responsible for what.

When trusts come together for the first time, there can often be confusion around this. You can write it all down in a scheme of delegation, but actually that's just a piece of paper. Instead, people truly need to understand what the local governance committee does, what the board does, which all comes over time. It's about gradually building those channels of communication, and learning from your mistakes!

Again, this extends beyond the internal workings of a trust. Making sure parents are involved is crucial; this was highlighted during the pandemic. Having and securing those lines of communication can be pivotal to each child's education. By

fostering those relationships, parents can be more involved in the trust and support it from the sidelines. Equally, as a trust, we want to make sure parents feel supported. This was never more important than when remote learning came into play and the responsibilities we had as a trust were temporarily shifted onto the parents - having those established lines of communication was critical.

Trust culture is ultimately what you make it. To us, culture is about talking and communicating and sharing and challenging each other in the best possible way, so that we can move forward and succeed as one organisation - Stronger Together.

Joanne has been Executive Headteacher and Chief Executive Officer of the trust since September 2016, working with many committed and talented staff across the trust's schools. She has a very wide range of experiences working in education over the past 30 years, having worked in eight different schools in the UK and the US and taught every age group from Reception to sixth form. She has been Headteacher of two schools, worked as a local authority school improvement partner and as an independent education consultant, and has the privilege of visiting schools on inspection. She was a school governor in three schools before joining the trust and is also a trustee of both a Single Academy Trust and a Multi Academy Trust in West Northamptonshire.



# Cathedral Thinking: Why greatness takes generations to build, and how leaders can create visionary plans for their schools



**Mark Wilson**  
CEO at Wellspring  
Academy Trust

## Factfile

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Number of pupils:

6,000

Number of schools:

28 schools

Location:

North and East  
of England

I sometimes describe us as an armada with a fleet of ships that are sailing to the same destination point, but with each ship having its own captain at the helm.

Right from the outset, our overarching aim at Wellspring was to enable us to work harmoniously together to achieve our common aims and common objectives. What we want to make sure is that we're leveraging the full knowledge, potential knowledge, and capital of our entire system and making it work in the long-term. I sometimes describe us as an armada with a fleet of ships that are sailing to the same destination point, but with each ship having its own captain at the helm. What these individual captains are responsible for is then navigating the different seas that are contextual to them; we need agile sea captains and agile learning crews in order to navigate the choppy waters. And as those of us in schools all know, there are other obstacles out there too, be it high winds, sea monsters or indeed the Ofsted triangle, a mythical place where ships have been said to be lost over the years.

We've also learned that people can be close together even when there is geographic distance. Our schools are spread out over a vast geographical scale, but we choose to make this an opportunity rather than a challenge. What I want to achieve is a shared cultural environment: one of growth, one of aligned thinking, one of ongoing development, and of iterative learning in a dynamic sense, all in aim of

consistently strengthening the community. It's as part of this position that we have signed a 125 year commitment to provide education within our schools. This multi-generational commitment is an endeavour to support young people, their life chances and the community.

The challenge that leaders of MATs face is changing priorities over time, with a consistent under-emphasis on infrastructure. Returning to our sea metaphor, the horizons our ships are heading for can be variable and short-term, such as an Ofsted inspection or a results day. My work is aimed at simplifying the big and complex messages of the community, which is where our 125 year plan comes in — to try and shift the thought horizons of our schools to one shared and long-term vision. At the risk of becoming a leader by catchphrase, one of my mantras is that leadership is the distillation of simplicity from complexity. People and groups can more easily align to a message when it is a simple one.

This brings me onto cathedrals, in particular Cologne Cathedral. Its construction began in 1248 and was completed 632 years later, in 1880. When you consider the average lifespans of these eras, the time taken to create this structure becomes even more significant. I've used that notion of cathedral thinking to inform our conversation within the trust about multi-year planning. There is something admirable that over 632 years, multiple generations were able to maintain and realise one vision; there's something important in that as a message for how we curate and develop a school environment.

When thinking about Multi-Academy Trusts, we must have this mindset of cathedral thinking to really consider how our infrastructure sits behind a continuous improvement pathway. A good infrastructure demands plans, rigour, clarity and long-term thinking in

Cathedral Thinking: Why greatness takes generations to build, and how leaders can create visionary plans for their schools

order to achieve ongoing effectiveness, all of which underpin its future performance. The part of the iceberg that is above the water in this sense, is things like Ofsted judgements. As a trust, we've had 15 positive Ofsted outcomes from all of the visits we've had so far across our community. But, I prefer to focus my attention on the nine-tenths of the iceberg that lie beneath the surface. Because actually, that's the bit that keeps what we see above the surface afloat.

Looking at the even bigger picture across the country, it's both important and interesting to consider how the increase in funding that we have enjoyed from central government is actually articulated in the system. There's a focus on the frontline, for example, and the significant growth in teacher and paraprofessional workforce. Yet we have a situation in the country whereby schools and infrastructure are underinvested in.

This means we need to be more attuned to the finer details of our own trusts, especially when a new school converts and we discover what has been previously overlooked, be it a failing boiler or that the intruder and alert system hasn't been maintained. As a result, our due diligence work has become increasingly sophisticated, because it focuses more on the infrastructure than it does actually that portion of the iceberg that is above the surface. Of course, what's going on in the classrooms is important, but it's deprioritised in the sense that we're satisfied that we can deal with any of the problems that arise there.

As part of the cathedral thinking mindset, there are of course milestones along the way. At Wellspring, we are simultaneously working towards Vision 2025. Vision 2025 is a five-year plan,

trying to secure the thought horizon somewhere beyond the next Ofsted, the next resource cycle, or the next Half Term. And yet, even once Vision 2025 is realised, next September will come - this is an infinite, rather than a finite game.

As part of our autonomy agenda, we've also encouraged all of our schools to write their own Vision 2025. This means that each school can navigate its own waters whilst steering towards the same, shared harbour in 2025. What we do to help these sea captains in their uniquely challenging contexts is invest in the support centre infrastructure. Our support team provides expertise from all directions and sits down termly with the Principal. This makes sure that everyone who is working towards these goals is lined up to see the same objective through the same eyes, and our principals have that expertise permanently on tap to talk to them. What we also provide is a termly information pack for our governing bodies, because while they enjoy a high degree of autonomy in decision-making around things such as curriculum, the staffing structure, budget priorities, uniform colour scheme etc., we have to be going in the same overall direction and have the ability to make efficient decisions.

So for instance, we talk to our governing bodies about their individual risk profile and have introduced risk registers to all of our schools, which is not a norm for the sector despite using it forever at trust level. We make sure all of this information in the pack is designed to be easy on the eye and understandable, even from a lay perspective, and covers all aspects of school effectiveness, including those parts of the iceberg that sit below the surface. For example, understanding how estates and procurement are performing can,

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

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and will, inform the school improvement agenda. Or, knowing how I.T is performing across the school is critical in relation to what is going on in classrooms. Sharing this rich suite of information with our governing bodies helps engage all of our schools with the forward agenda and to make insightful decisions that align with the shared vision. And that is part of how we ensure that our armada continues to travel through its own waters towards that common destination.

All of our academies now have multi-year estates plans, which cover the next five to eight years. Each of these plans detail what we aim to do over that period, how we can prioritise our capital and how we can see those schools profile their commitment from revenue to the forward development of their school that pays forward to future generations. Alongside this, we've developed comprehensive design guides for everyone, detailing specifications, colour palettes, material choices, etc. What we all know is that when financial times feel hard, the first thing to be dropped is those aspirations that are not on the frontline, not centred in the classroom. So, we made sure that each of our schools has a comprehensive development plan that maps precisely what we want to do with every square centimetre of the environment that we hold and how we are going to add value to it.

This runs alongside our consideration of our carbon responsibilities, with a focus

on how we plan, how we capture rainwater for toilet flushing, natural ventilation and green walls. We are also contracting with professional artists, some of very high renown, to create exciting, immersive and unusual environments in our schools for our young people. I don't want our youngsters looking at concrete fences. I want our children to be looking at green and red and pink and orange and blue, to inspire and capture their imaginations. And that idea is something I don't want to just last for this generation of students, but the next, and the one after that.

Mark Wilson has been Wellspring's Chief Executive for eight years during which the trust has increased in size from one school in South Yorkshire to, at current, twenty-eight schools across six Local Authority areas in the North and East of England. Wellspring has been privileged to build eight new schools in this time and has a further five in the pipeline for completion between 2023 and 2025. Wellspring currently employs a workforce of around one-thousand-eight-hundred people working with a student population of around six thousand in Secondary, Primary, Special and Alternative Provision. Mark says that the most impressive statistic of all is the trust's record of zero permanent exclusions since its inception.

# Why you can't be truly children-first without looking beyond your own trust



**Jo Young**  
Director of Primary  
at The Learning For  
Life Partnership

## Factfile

Number of pupils:

1,799

Number of schools:

5 schools

Location:

Cheshire East

The thing with culture is that it's important, but it doesn't come overnight. It's also not just about vision and values, but having that realised through action and making sure that everybody is singing from the same hymn sheet in their day-to-day work. It's about making sure that everyone's behaviours are in line with the values. Interestingly, it was Covid that helped to make sure our culture was permeating down all of our channels. We were made to realise that we didn't have to travel all the time to stay in touch. Not only that, but it made sure that schools knew that they were being supported by the trust structure and facilitated new means of us talking together as one organisation.

Our strapline is 'working in partnership to improve life chances for all', so collaboration has always been at the heart of what we do. Creating this culture is a project that we have been emotionally invested in from the start. I joined the trust as a Head of one of the schools, and that's when we sat down as a team and asked, 'what are we all about?' That's when everything started with our aims, visions and values, but more importantly thinking about how we were going to get this message out there. My vision of leadership is that you need to lead the ship to sail, with you not at the helm, so it was important that we provided the framework for all of our schools to bring this culture to life.

We're at a point now where most of our staff can tell you what our core values are. We have a staff forum every Half Term, which gives staff from all levels of school life a chance to vocalise what they're thinking. We've listened to what they've got to say, acted on it, and fed back to them, which has been successful all round. It goes without saying how important staff buy-in is when wanting to move forward as one organisation. But it can be difficult to align this vision across all staff and implement the changes you feel need to happen, if the people aren't on board with or truly

understand the reasons that underpin it. That's why culture is so important.

The lockdowns enabled us to visualise this coming together in new ways. One of the things we've done is begin using a communication and project management tool, which has already had a huge impact. Within this tool, we have different groups where we can share documents, chat and schedule meetings. It's this collaboration and support, especially through sharing best practice, that I consider to be our big USP. This is just one example; we've also got other initiatives in place to bring this value to life, such as network meetings (be it SEND, safeguarding, or teaching networks), which bring together coordinators from each school and encourage the sharing of best practice.

But what we ultimately want to tackle is schools being inward-looking. We've started by helping our Headteachers to see things beyond their own school. It taps into my personal stance as an outward-looking person, who believes firmly in networking, listening and learning from others - it's something I want to truly integrate into our wider trust culture. I'm hoping this mindset filters through with the networks we've established, so that people can see, even when they are busy, that investing their time into sharing best practice is a benefit to each individual.

Importantly, we've also invited the primary schools from another trust to these networks. This invitation stems from the belief that culture and collaboration is not just about protecting your own schools. We're very passionate about having an impact system-wide, and I don't think you can call yourself children-first unless you have that moral perspective. This ties into us being part of the Confederation of School Trusts, which is all about the civic duty of trusts. We believe strongly in bringing people together, having that curriculum conversation, and sharing best practice. When we talk about shared culture, and the duty of trusts,



Why you can't be truly children-first without looking beyond your own trust

I think you need to be people-driven, not corporate, and acknowledge that you need to work together.

We're also at a point now where we can harness our data to make better use of moderation and comparative judgements. What does Geography in Year 3 look like? What does Expected Standard look like? What might higher standards look like? The aim is to come up with a big portal full of the answers to these questions that all of our staff can tap into across the board. We currently use Insight for our tracking, an aligned data drop system. This makes it easier for me to see patterns across the five schools, which in turn simplifies taking action. For instance, we were able to spot that writing has been hit hard during lockdown, so we were proactive in our response and directed funding for all of our schools to have a third party literacy company come in and turn this around. This is just one instance where our staff can see we're doing things for the right reasons. It comes down to the children getting the best quality teaching in the classroom, and that's something that we all believe in.

Another thing we've been working on is a handbook, based on the Great Teaching Toolkit. Everything is evidence-based, looking at things like cognitive load and pedagogy. Because if we get the best teaching, the children are getting the best deal. Through surveys we've gauged that our staff have been

completely receptive to the Toolkit and they have told us what they need further CPD on. We ultimately want to see consistency across the board and standards improving, because this means the children are getting great teaching.

One of the things I've implemented are teaching and learning principles. These follow our belief of being evidence and research-based, and that way, we would expect schools to believe in them as much as the trust does. These principles set a standard for all of our teaching and learning staff, whilst also giving them the autonomy to tweak those to the context of their school.

The principles fall into four sections, all based around things from the Great Teaching Toolkit:

- Understanding the content – so the teacher has really good subject knowledge and knows where their lesson fits in the grand scheme of the curriculum
- Creating a supportive environment – all about relationships and behaviour management
- Maximising opportunity to learn – having clear rules and expectations
- Activating hard thinking – really starting to look at that, modelling and questioning to make sure children are always moving forward

If we get the best teaching, the children are getting the best deal.

I would love to get to a point where I walk around every school and I see a similar kind of routine to the teaching, and a routine that is steeped in evidence.

I would love to get to a point where I walk around every school and I see a similar kind of routine to the teaching, and a routine that is steeped in evidence. Things like retrieval practice to tap into that research on cognitive load and long-term memory. My next step is to do the same thing for curriculum, so that our curriculum is ambitious, broad and connected, but also so that each school has the autonomy to tweak it to their own context.

I think it's important that schools retain some of their own identity. For instance, one of our schools is in a railway town, and so History and Geography should naturally reflect that. But this shouldn't put a stop on the support we offer one another and work as one unit moving forward. We have the most deprived school in Cheshire on our books with very high levels of free school meals and SEN. We've moved people around, where it's suited them, to try and bring all our schools together. And you can see the impact of that. We've also got specialist teachers in each school to drive them forward, and are employing somebody to work alongside me to help with pushing those standards even further.

Our metric of success? Listening to the children. I do half-termly visits to the schools where I speak to the students, as well as the curriculum leads, and run sessions. The heads obviously do this regularly as well. The views of pupils and staff, as well as what we physically see on the ground and how this culture comes to fruition, is how we can safely say that we've been successful.

Ultimately, our aim is to make sure that, on a student-level, each child is benefiting from being in a trust. Our culture of collaboration is what supports that, as it makes sure that best practice is at the heart of everything we do.

Jo Young is the Director of Primary at The Learning for Life Partnership. Before taking on this role full-time in September 2021, Jo was a headteacher for six years. Her role as Director of Primary involves school improvement work, as well as working with staff in a coaching capacity to make sure that they're all leading their areas as best they can be. She's also been commissioned to do school improvement work for another trust to help them with their primary focus.

# What exactly is Shared Teaching and how can it enhance the student experience?



**Tom Hill**  
Director of Post-16 for  
secondary sites at The  
Olympus Academy Trust

## Factfile

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Number of pupils:

**5,000**

Number of schools:

**5 primaries**  
**3 secondaries**  
**1 UTC**  
**1 all-through**

Location:

**South**  
**Gloucestershire**

Arbor

For some, sharing courses within MATs and across communities of schools is a way of life. Whether it's about increasing access to specialist subjects like art or music, or having to decide which course to run where budgets are tight — sharing courses allows some secondaries and sixth forms to increase the learning opportunities offered to their students.

Hear from Tom Hill, Director of Post 16 on how sharing courses is a critical — and very tangible — way of making sure that each of their students and schools benefit from being within their trust.

# Sharing courses at the heart of The Olympus Academy Trust's culture and strategy

Tom Hill, Director of Post-16 for secondary sites

It comes down to making sure that every student benefits from being part of a trust, and to us, a big part of that benefit is having shared opportunities. We are big believers in parity and equity; if a student can do something in one school, they should be able to do it in each of our schools. The fact that one child lives five miles away from another shouldn't restrict whether or not they have access to certain subjects, a factor that could influence their future. With a programme of shared courses, it means we can offer those more niche choices that would otherwise not be financially viable, like economics, drama, languages, music etc.

This isn't restricted to GCSEs alone — we are able to offer a really broad mix of A levels and vocational courses, which encourages students to stay within our trust regardless of which avenue suits them better when they leave secondary school. At one point, we had the broadest school-based Key Stage 5 curriculum offer in the South West, and we continue to run around 45 different courses within the shared programme. It was something that was not only commented on positively by Ofsted, but is loved by our students too.

In other words, sharing courses is an integral part of our school ecosystem. Over 70% of our sixth form students are involved in a shared course, which is just one indication of how significant a role it plays in our trust culture. It's important to remember too, that the benefits of sharing courses go beyond equal access to the curriculum. It's about all the other things that make schools great. Extra-curricular opportunities are critical to school life, and sharing courses means we can offer a wider variety, be it a hockey team, a debating group or a global citizenship project. Not only that, but travelling to and experiencing different schools makes for well-rounded students, who get the chance to be independent, resilient, and experience new environments beyond their own school.

That said, I'm all about students still feeling part of their own school. There's a sense of identity there that shouldn't be shoe-horned into something else for the sake of trust branding. What's nice about sharing courses is that students get to truly feel like they're part of a partnership, and reap the benefits from it, without feeling like they are losing that connection to their individual

## Sharing courses is an integral part of our school ecosystem

school. It's a meaningful and tangible way to make students feel part of a trust or community. Like I say, we shared courses even before our schools academised.

The same can be said of our staff, who are able to thrive in their own environments, whilst being able to support students and colleagues from across the participating schools. There's no easy switch that can be flipped to help teachers see beyond their own school when they join a trust. It's something that I have experienced myself as a teacher through the years but sharing courses is a unique way of encouraging that collaboration and advocating the sense of shared benefit for students. We are always looking for opportunities for staff to collaborate and work together, and this provides a structured basis for people to do that.

What we're not looking for is clones, be this of the schools, the staff or the student experience. We don't want to create four secondaries, five primaries and a UTC with the exact same identity. Our schools are unique in that they are within five miles of one another, but each has a very different catchment area, and each has its own character. What is crucial to us is that the wraparound culture, and what brings

us together as a trust, simply embodies our core values: collaboration, opportunity and excellence. Sharing courses is at the core of these, making sure that each student is granted choice and access to the education that will help them as an individual.

Tom has worked at the Olympus Academy Trust since it was first created in 2012 and he currently has a role as part of the MAT Central School Improvement Team. He has a wide ranging portfolio including overseeing assessment from EYFS up to Year 13 and he also oversees the four sixth forms in the trust. Prior to joining the Central Team, Tom worked as an Assistant Headteacher at Bradley Stoke Community School where he was predominantly responsible for Sixth Form and Careers. Tom is also one of the Careers and Enterprise Company (CEC) Careers Leads for the West of England.



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# Servant leadership: How and why we take on vulnerable schools



**Sajid Gulzar**  
CEO at Prince Albert  
Community Trust

## Factfile

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Number of pupils:

3,145

Number of schools:

5 primaries  
1 secondary

Location:

Birmingham  
area

When I get asked why I focus on vulnerable schools, I often reply, 'Why not?'

I've always believed in leading with a strong moral purpose, supported by the idea of servant leadership. The simple values that we learn in everyday life, like treating others how you like to be treated, are ones that should be brought into your organisation. The power of education in my own life has been transformative, and so my own purpose is to make sure that generations of children and communities also benefit from the education they receive. It has to be good enough for our own children.

And I take that with me when thinking about culture. Whether it be in a classroom, a corridor or on the playground, I'm always thinking, would I be happy for my child to be involved in an interaction like that? Once you start viewing things through this lens, you can be guided by your moral purpose.

Somebody asked me once, where does your moral purpose come from? There's some obvious stuff for all of us in terms of upbringing, but one story about my grandfather stuck with me. He worked on an ocean liner at the turn of the century as a cook and a dishwasher and formed a bond with a group of fellow Kashmiri men on board, who would entrust him with their valuables when they went out to sea. On one occasion, the ship sank and many died, including

his friends. My grandfather was rescued and, despite the families of these men never knowing he existed and despite not being a rich man, he spent the next few years of his life tracking down their families and paying back the cost of the valuables he felt he owed, despite losing everything himself. This story speaks to me, because it showed a life in service to others and a real strength of character. You do the right thing, regardless of how easy or difficult it is for you.

It's why so much of our work as a trust has been around schools in special measures. When I get asked why I focus on vulnerable schools, I often reply, 'Why not?' It's who we are and what we do. Many teachers get into the profession to make a difference, and I'm no exception. I want to improve the lives of young people, and I felt I should do that in challenging schools because that was my own experience growing up. Certainly in the early years, it wasn't even a consideration to turn down a school who would ask for help. You learn along the way about pinch points within your own organisation and the risk, then, that comes with this approach. Over time, you find the balance of helping others without negatively impacting what you've already established. However, I certainly don't think trusts



What people begin to understand is the reason they're in the school is exactly the same as yours — to provide the best possible education for the students in that school.

should have a blanket approach of not taking on vulnerable schools. It's got to be an informed choice.

It's also key to acknowledge when thinking about this choice, that taking on a vulnerable school can be brutal, both physically and emotionally. You have to unearth the challenges which have led that school to where it currently stands, which can mean uprooting safeguarding policies and having to look face-on at the harm that the previous ineffectiveness of the policy may have caused to children. That's difficult, even when you know you are there to fix it. At the same time, there will be people who aren't yet onboard with their school joining the trust, which can lead to further difficult conversations. Not to mention that trusts aren't awash with extra capacity given the challenges of funding over the last ten years. You've got to have a really good process for identifying what that capacity is going to be, so that you can get that transfer of resource right.

That's why due diligence is absolutely essential. You need to make sure that the infrastructure is there, so that teachers are able to get on with their job. You can't have out-of-date servers or significant HR issues — you need to set up the conditions for them to succeed first. Often, people are drawn

immediately to focus on the quality of education, particularly in schools that Ofsted would define as 'failing', though I'm never comfortable with the term 'failing school'. That's undoubtedly important, but you have to get the infrastructure of the school right first. HR, finance, safeguarding... all of those structural things that enable you to focus on education. If you don't fix those, they'll keep coming back and knocking you off course. In that sense, the due diligence in those areas is far more important than what's going on in the classroom.

When it comes to changing the culture, the way I like to think of it is that we are all there for the same 'why', as dubbed by Simon Sinek. What people begin to understand is the reason they're in the school is exactly the same as yours — to provide the best possible education for the students in that school. It's important to communicate that, especially when talking to those who have been through the emotional toll of going into special measures. This way, you can be sure that, whatever comes next, your moral purpose and values are aligned. The next step is convincing them that they're part of the solution, and not part of the problem. For a long time, staff would have been told they're part of the problem. Their understanding of the weight of responsibility they take

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

is disproportionate to the impact they've had. Often they're the people who have tried everything to help that school, but the conditions haven't been there for them to have the impact they want to have.

When we take on a new school, we do this by getting everybody together. Every single member of staff, be that the caretaker, office manager, through to the head, comes together so we tell them exactly why we're there. More importantly, we show that we're there to listen and to stay for the long-term. It's an open-door policy. We've done it quite formally too, where in some cases I've met with every single member of staff individually. I would ask them what they feel are the problems and what they think is to come, unpicking how they feel about their situation. That's really good intelligence to unlock.

The same goes for parents, as creating that external culture is important too, especially where they've lost confidence in the school. If parents are angry or uncertain, the answer is also an open-door policy - let's get them into the school and allow them to get it all off their chest. Let's convince them that we're in this together.

I had a colleague who is a head, who had gone into a school with special measures and had done a tremendous job, but couldn't get the parents onboard. I asked him, where are you at the start and the end of the school day? He said he was in the office, to which I told him that he had to be on the playground. The response to this is that school leaders are extremely pressed for time, which is true. But being on the playground or at the school gates is the best use of your time. It supports the

development of relationships and enables you to nip problems in the bud. It's also key to acknowledge to both parents and staff that you are on a journey, and that your presence doesn't equate to an instant turnaround of results.

What it comes back to is that acid test of, would this be good enough for my own child? That's the ultimate measure of success, in my opinion. It's an indescribable feeling when you are walking through a school that was a huge challenge, and teachers are teaching, children are learning. Or even seeing a particular child who has had some real difficulty making progress, however small the steps are.

Sajid is the founding CEO of the Prince Albert Community Trust (PACT), consisting of five primaries and one brand new secondary school which opened in September 2021. Sajid has led the trust in operating a 'turn around' model, taking on failing schools and improving them markedly.

Sajid is a National Leader of Education, has previously inspected for Ofsted and has worked internationally on behalf of the National Association of Special Educational Needs (NASEN) and Cambridge Education. Sajid is a guest lecturer at the University of Birmingham's Education Leadership Academy and has served on the West Midlands Regional Schools Commissioners Headteacher Board since 2017.

In June 2019, he was awarded an OBE for Services to Education.

# 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. Other contributors delivered their piece as recorded talks at ArborFest, our bi-annual conference.

The majority of our respondents were:

CEOs	18%
CFOs	17%
COOs	12%

The majority of our respondents worked in trusts with:

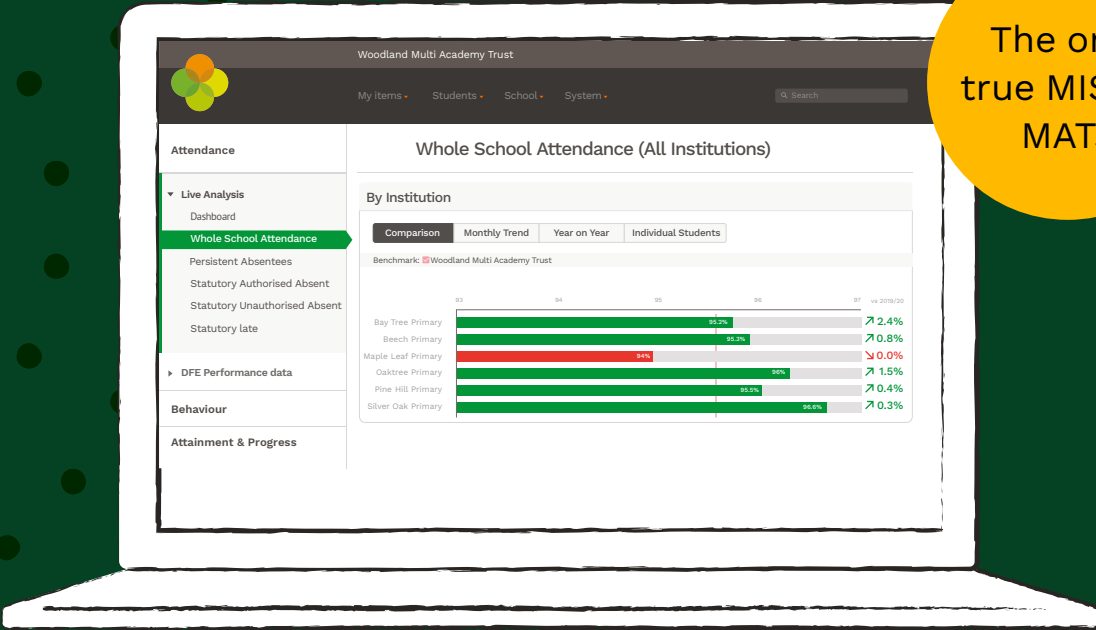
1-5 schools	48%
6-10 schools	25%
11-15 schools	7%
16-20 schools	12%
21-30 schools	6%
31-40 schools	1%
41+ schools	1%

Most of these trusts were:

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

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