

SETTING UP A MULTI ACADEMY TRUST DISCUSSION EVENING SEPTEMBER 29 2014

On Monday September 29 2014 the first of the discussion evenings for 2014-15 was held at Gresham College. The topic was 'Setting up a multi academy trust - professional collaboration or free marketisation?' and the presenters were Liveryman Susan Cousin and Liveryman Alan Yellup OBE. Middle Warden Martin Gaskell was Chairman and welcomed those present to the meeting. In his welcome, he introduced the topic, which currently attracts a lot of attention and introduced the speakers.

Alan Yellup is CEO of Wakefield City Academies Trust, Executive Head of Wakefield City Academy and Head of the Wakefield City Academy Regional National Teaching School Alliance. Alan is a National Leader of Education and has been directly involved in providing support to over 300 schools facing challenging circumstances nationally each year since September 2008 providing support and guidance to headteachers, governors and senior leadership teams. Susan Cousin has led national raising attainment programmes and has worked with Wakefield City Academy and Wakefield City Academies trust (WCAT) for the last six years and as Senior Director of Leadership and Professional Development leads on Leadership and Learning across WCAT's chain of primary and secondary schools and acts as an Executive Headteacher in WCAT schools when required. Currently Susan is Principal of Yewlands Academy, which joined WCAT in April 2014 and faces significant challenges to raise achievement.

Susan Cousin opened the presentation by describing the current education scene. Recent changes to the governance structure of schools in England have radically transformed the educational landscape. Whereas only 1,188 of the 24,500 state maintained schools opted out of local authority control in 1989 when the conservative government introduced grant maintained schools, the 2010 White Paper has led to a dramatically extended academies programme. Over 3,000 academies have been established, either by opting to become 'converter academies' or being directed to become 'sponsored academies', usually under the aegis of an academy chain in an attempt to raise standards. In a number of local authorities they represent the main form of secondary education provision and many more conversions are planned, especially in the primary sector. 50% of secondary schools are now academies and 11% of primary schools. This may be seen as a freeing-up from local authority bureaucracy.

The governance landscape is now very mixed with a range of different types of state schools in addition to the established independent schools. Currently forms of governance include: free schools, maintained schools, converter academies, sponsored academies, University Technology Colleges (UTC)s, City Technology Colleges (CTC)s and three types of academy trusts; multi academy, umbrella and collaborative trusts. All academies are public funded independent schools run by a trust which employs the staff. A multi academy trust (MAT) is funded directly by the Department for Education (DfE). In an umbrella trust the governors of the schools have responsibility for various other aspects such as the land and buildings. In a collaborative trust partners are involved and the governors of the school have control

over a number of aspects. There can be mixtures of trusts and in the WCAT of 14 schools one school is in a collaborative trust, several are in umbrella trusts and the remainder are in the MAT.

Academies in general and MATs in particular are currently the focus of much debate publicly. Ofsted have raised questions in some inspections on the efficacy of support for the schools. There are comments that some multi academy trusts have simply exploited the free market with a greater focus on business interests and self-promotion at the expense of system led school improvement. Successful school leaders have in some cases taken over the school improvement role formerly carried out by the Local Authority (LA). Some LA schools outperform academies but this may be because the weaker schools have become academies under a MAT. There has been vocal opposition from a number of bodies: Local Authorities especially the members, Trade Unions who see it as a loss of power and possibly pay reduction, the Anti Academies Alliance and the general public who have been drawn in through the media attention.

Alan Yellup then described the setting up and operation of the Wakefield City, was once a failing school, serving a deprived area with a low prior attainment. Changing the school culture to one where success is consistent and has also led to changes in the culture of the surrounding housing estate. After a ten year period of improving school standards the skill set and capacity was there to support and raise standards across a number of schools. There are now 14 schools both secondary and primary in the WCAT. The MAT offers long term sustainable development and improvement. It gives good opportunities for retaining and developing staff talents. There are economies of scale and efficiency to make optimal use of resources.

A MAT needs a sound base in education, administration, finance, legal aspects and governance. Alan and his team undertook 183 consultations when the trust was being set up. The consultations included governors, staff, parents including prospective parents, students, LAs, Trade Unions and the wider public. Good leadership is crucial.

The values of the WCAT are:

- People only learn if they like or respect the teachers.
- If teachers believe the students can succeed then the students will.
- Helping people understand where they have gone wrong rather than criticise.
- The aim is make ordinary people do extraordinary things.
- If the staff are good the students will be smart.
- Every person matters.
- Assume nothing but expect everything.
- Tackle negativity and overcome resistance.
- Use comparative data positively
- Raise and maintain morale.
- Never strip people of their dignity but never shirk tough decisions.
- Coercion is not effective as it breeds resistance

Susan and Alan believe in collaboration rather than marketisation. The following ideas have been used in setting up the trust.

- Only work by invitation

- Build confidence
- Retain local governance.
- Support should be context led.
- Provide careers and development opportunities across the Trust.
- Work with people and don't do things to them.
- Education should be the prime focus.
- Employ a central expert support team.
- Offer first class CPD as a national teaching school.
- Establish networks in all fields to spread best practice.
- Tailor support to needs and do not assume 'one size fits all'.

The achievements to date include:

- Raised standards.
- Failing schools are now happier places.
- Teaching and learning standards have been raised.
- Higher numbers are on roll.
- Ofsted reports are positive.
- Teacher and support staff strikes have been averted.
- Fear has been removed from classrooms which have now opened up.
- Staff morale in the failing academies has been raised.
- A change in the climate and culture of leadership across all the academies.

In conclusion Alan Yellup gave the following quotes: 'Shared experience is the key driver in raising standards' and 'Learners inherit the earth whilst the learned remain beautifully equipped for a world that no longer exists.'

In discussion the following points were covered:

- The MAT model may be thought of as a bottom up model with the schools in the lead rather than a top down model from LAs.
- The model can work across geographical distances to give parents more choice.
- The DfE is more directly involved in the academies than it was in LA schools. However, the named liaison person in the DfE is changed frequently.
- The MAT provides a middle tier of support for the academies with intervention when necessary but when a school is doing well it can be given more autonomy.
- The CPD provided by the WCAT is felt to be better than that provided by the LAs previously.
- Good leadership is crucial and in particular leaders should be trained in the softer skills and emotional intelligence. Often it is not what is said but the way it is said that can make a difference.
- The WCAT takes a 5% cut of money from the member schools to provide the central services and advice. This is felt to be typical nationally although there will be variation depending on what is provided centrally.
- It is an interesting political debate as to how much of the education system should be government run and how much should be run at the school level. Internationally there are considerable differences.
- The trustees of the overarching MAT have the role of overseeing the work of the local governing bodies. They receive a regular update from Alan Yellup on the situation in each of the schools and they hear appeals.

- The local governing bodies vary in the amount of autonomy they have. An outstanding school has full autonomy and weaker schools have less. The scheme of delegation for each school is reviewed periodically.
- Skills audits are used to select trustees and local governors. Local identity is important at the school level.

The final question was from a Chair of Governors of a secondary school that is wondering about becoming a converter academy. The advice from the presenters was becoming an academy was a good thing and neither had any regrets. It is helpful to visit local academies in making the decision. The evening ended with a vote of thanks from the Chairman for the interesting and stimulating discussion. As usual several participants continued the discussion in the local pub.