

Pearson and SSAT discussion dinner: Driving improvement for all through a school-led system

13 December 2016 Note for the record – **not for public circulation**

Context

On 13 December 2016, Pearson, supported by SSAT, invited a small group of policymakers, policy-shapers, academics, and school leaders to discuss the emerging issues facing multi-academy trusts (MATs) within an increasingly school-led system. Sir Michael Barber, chief education advisor at Pearson, introduced and chaired the discussion.

The discussion was far-reaching, exploring both opportunities and challenges for MAT chief executives, leaders and their schools. This paper is intended to reflect this discussion, and suggest some implications for future policy, practice, and research. The dinner was held under the Chatham House rule and so no comments, other than Sir Michael's introduction are attributed.

The attendees were:

Sir Michael Barber, Chief Education Advisor, Pearson
Simon Beamish, Chief Executive, Leigh Academies Trust
Sarah Burgess-Parker, Key Account Manager, Pearson
Sarah Clark, Sales, Pearson
Ian Comfort, Group Chief Executive, Academies Enterprise Trust
Sam Derby, Director UK Schools, Pearson
Lucy Heller, Chief Executive, Ark Schools
Wendy Marshall, Chief Executive, DRET
Tom Middlehurst, Head of Policy and Public Affairs, SSAT
Sylvia Paddock, Director of Operations, SSAT
Professor Toby Salt, Chief Executive, Ormiston Academies Trust
Sue Williamson, Chief Executive, SSAT

Introduction

Sir Michael introduced the discussions by suggesting two (potentially opposing) narratives that he felt could be used to describe the educational landscape in England.

The first is one of a constantly-interfering government, who refuse to allow school leaders the space and time to actually lead their schools. Proponents of this narrative argue that no education system in the world is as top-down as the English system, and that central government policy is stifling innovation and professionalism. Despite such heavy-handedness, the government, local bodies and MATs and other partnerships lack a system-wide, holistic approach to school improvement.

The second narrative is a more positive one focused on the opportunities offered by the current landscape. OECD results suggest that English education is (relatively) improving over time. Our system is characterised by self-reflective teachers and leaders who actively work to improve educational outcomes for all students, and, indeed, the system has been improving. The success of the state sector is a risk to private schools, with the top-performing state schools achieving the same or better results than their private counterparts. Moreover, the improvements in our system are a source of interest to other nations, the proof of which is seen each year from the number of international study visits that take place.

In both of these narratives there remains an acute regional aspect: between London, the south-east and the rest of the country; between different LAs within regions; and between rural, coastal and urban settings. As such, when analysing system-wide improvements, it is difficult to form any firm conclusions.

The question, therefore, is how to build on the successes we have had, driving improvements for all schools and young people.

Sir Michael cited the health secretary Jeremy Hunt, reflecting earlier that day on the CQC's review into avoidable deaths in hospitals, and his proposed new reporting systems. Crucially, the new reporting of avoidable deaths will focus on 'what lessons need to be learned on a regular basis' and 'alongside the data, [NHS trusts] will publish evidence of learning and action that is happening as a consequence of that information'. Hunt stressed further that he will not be setting a target for reducing avoidable deaths, because to do so would limit the learning achieved. Indeed, Hunt expects the number of avoidable deaths reported to rise, not because care is deteriorating, but because trusts will get better at reporting.

Perhaps, asked Sir Michael, we need a similar paradigm shift in education. We need measurements to lead to improvements, rather than focus on fault and personal culpability.

Of the two 'cursed questions' in Russian culture: 'kto vinovat?' ('who's to blame?') and 'chto delat?' ('what's to be done?') in English education we need to switch from the former to the latter, Sir Michael concluded.

A unified system?

There was a general feeling that England lacks a unified system that works in the interests of all schools. In part, this is due to the nature of the organic growth of multi-academy trusts, and that different MATs grew in different ways over different time periods.

It was identified that there are differences between different types of academy: sponsored, convertor and free schools. It was suggested, for instance, that convertor academies joining a MAT often perceive their relationship with the central trust differently to a sponsored academy or new free school; perhaps not sharing the trust's values wholeheartedly or needing different support from the central team.

This inconsistency in how individual academies perceive their relationship with their trust presents a challenge for a school-led system. If, for example, an academy sees itself as largely autonomous from its trust, then the trust may have limited scope as to how it can use that academy's expertise to drive improvements elsewhere.

In other MATs, chief executives saw the MAT as larger than the sum of its parts, and that academies were expected to work collaboratively in the interests of every child in the chain.

Such differences of opinion both within and across MATs highlights the fact that 'the school-led system' may be a simulacrum of a system: with schools and academies, and headteachers and chief executives not

always working in tandem together. As one chief executive asked, when we say 'we' as school leaders, who do we mean?

The English education system was also described as a 'deconstructed system' at one point during the discussion.

The role of RSCs in a school-led system

There was some criticism of the role of the regional schools commissioners, not down to the individuals themselves, but that their remits were poorly defined and have already changed in a short space of time.

It was suggested that, within a fully-functioning school-led system, the RSC role is a hindrance rather than a help; and may limit collaboration across MAT partnerships.

If the RSC role is to work well, then RSCs need to know all the sponsors are active, and willing to be active, in their region. Different chief executives had different views on how well their RSC knew them and their MAT's growth strategy. If the RSC has a role in brokering and rebrokering schools with MATs then they need a good understanding of what type of school will best help the trust achieve its short and long term aims.

This raised further debate about how so-called 'SNOWS' (schools no one wants) are handled. How do we ensure that these schools, for a variety of reasons, are not left behind, whilst at the same time maintaining MAT's right and autonomy to reject taking on schools they don't feel they can adequately support?

Furthermore, as identified by recent studies, there is a definite 'long tail' of MAT success, with some MATs consistently underperforming; but where academies within chains have failed, it was felt that little to no support was given by the RSC. That there might be metaphorically too much pig-weighting rather than fattening. Likewise, where there are trust irregularities, the role of the RSC in intervening remains ambiguous.

It was agreed that neither MAT size nor school size are the only factors in brokering new relationships. Sir David Carter's taxonomy of system-leading MATs as being over a certain size, could therefore be more nuanced, it was suggested. A range of factors need to be taken into account as MATs continue to grow.

The role of the RSC therefore remains somewhat unclear, particularly within an emerging school-led system.

MAT leadership

Some contributors commented that whilst MATs are 'up for the challenge' and eager to take improvements forward, it isn't clear exactly what this looks like, or how to go about it.

At the heart of this uncertainty perhaps is a difficult balance between autonomy and accountability. Since the introduction of the first city technology colleges in 1987, there has always been a question over whether local self-governing schools leads to greater autonomy or greater top-down government. It was commented that as school leaders, the current generation have 'never been more micromanaged' and 'never more accountable'. It is clear that you cannot achieve a self-improving system under these conditions.

In some ways, it was suggested, the growth of MATs over the last five years has actually undone any move towards greater school autonomy. As such, school autonomy and school-led system improvement should not be seen as necessarily being two sides of the same coin.

There was a sense that the sector needs to be braver in driving its own vision, and that it is currently too compliant.

This may, in part, be achieved by the establishment of a national network of MATs, working towards a common vision of system improvement. There was some doubt raised as to whether such a shared vision could really be achieved; and it was agreed that careful facilitation was needed.

At the same time as the need for a more unified approach, there were concerns over any attempts to over-standardise MAT operation and practices. Due to the nature of their organic growth, MATs inevitably work in different ways. Whilst it is important to learn lessons from the highest-performing MATs, it was recognised that different academy chains in different contexts need to operate differently, and the system must allow for plurality of approach.

The role of central government

There was general consensus that the current administration lacks a coherent vision for education in England, and that ministers need to plan long term.

It was felt that from the early CTCs, through Andrew Adonis' time at the department, to the reforms made by Michael Gove, that there was a strong vision of what a self-improving, school-led system could look like; but that this vision had become clouded.

The intervention in educational policy by No 10 may weaken successes already made by the academies movement; the reintroduction of grammar schools was cited as an example.

Government need to be clear about what their role is. It was suggested that good government can be described as 'stewardship', leaving the country better than you found it. It is rightly assumed that a) no individual school or trust should decide on the direction of the whole system, b) the government therefore has a role in determining the basic rules of play, and c) must also have an overview of supply of professionals and places.

If we therefore see the role of government has principally that of controller, what, then, is the role of providers in this emerging system?

Funding

It was acknowledged that funding remains a key concern for almost all school leaders, and that whilst MAT structures can relieve some financial burdens, funding, and its associated risks with teacher supply and retention, remain.

There was a debate about the best way in which to fund MATs. Under the current system of 'top-slicing' some MAT leaders felt their hands were tied in reallocating money where they really felt it was needed to drive system improvement. Some contributors felt that if MATs were funded centrally by the EFA, with the MAT then distributing funds directly to schools, this relationship would change.

The uncertainty at the time of the discussion around how the new national funding formula might affect schools, also led to financial pressures and uncertainty in some schools.

The discussion identified a conflict of interest in the dual role of the EFA, and it was suggested that this also needs to be reviewed.

Concluding statement

While there is much to celebrate about the successes of the best MATs and academies, their success has been variable. If we are to achieve system-wide improvement through a schools-led system then we need a national vision, with room for local autonomy – and clear roles for providers, the middle tier and inspectorate, and central government.