



Special points of interest:

- Government states Multi Academy Trusts are preferred option
- Literacy Matters
- Digital Learning

Inside this issue:

Focus: The Rosary Trust 2

Digital Learning 2-3

Literacy Matters 4-5

Bishop Alan & CMATs 5

Think Piece 6

CMAT NEWS



BRENTWOOD DIOCESE MULTI ACADEMY TRUST NEWSLETTER

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Summer Term 2021

Government signals MAT growth is here to stay.....

The secretary of state for Education, Gavin Williamson, delivered a landmark speech at the Conference of Schools Trusts conference in April in which he set out the government's intention to see all schools become part of MATs. Education at a good or outstanding school that is part of a successful multi academy trust has been stated as the government's preferred option to build back better from the pandemic. He said the pandemic had brought to the fore the benefits of strong MATs in providing outstanding support for both children and staff, through their collaborative approach and being able to pool resources and knowledge. Williamson said: "I am determined to finish what we started and end the pick and mix approach to school types, building back fairer from the pandemic to make sure every parent has the certainty that their child is at a school that is backed by a strong trust".

Extra funding available for our academies

Further new interventions to encourage and support schools to join strong MATS include :

- ◇ An expanded Trust Capacity Fund of £24 m to grow existing MATs so that they can take on and support more converting schools
- ◇ Updated guidance for trusts to improve educational outcomes
- ◇ A pilot programme with the Catholic Church and the C of E to set up turnaround trusts to assist schools needing intensive support

Gavin Williamson's speech also mentioned extra financial support for leaders to gain professional qualifications in executive leadership.

A "try it before you buy" initiative was also mentioned using the STEP trust as its model. Details can be found on the DfE website.

Baroness Berridge, the Academies Minister also added to the debate. She said there would be "no going back for academies" and that there would be "no blissful isolation for single academy trusts". This is the clearest indication yet for the SATs in our own diocese that changes will be forthcoming. Prudent and sensible planning for our diocesan schools to join CMATs will be one way in which schools can continue to thrive.



" I know from my own experience that parents want something very simple - a good or outstanding school with excellent teaching in a wider school environment that supports their child to fulfil their potential. And that is exactly what a strong multi academy trust provides"

Summer Focus on The Rosary Trust

This is a Trust based in Mid Essex and consists of 7 primary schools covering a wide geographical area ranging from Colchester and Chelmsford to the coast at Clacton and Harwich. The trust is growing and currently has over 1,500 pupils with another school set to join next year. The aim of the trust is to build a network of schools that will work together to provide a quality first Catholic education for pupils. A strong feature of the Rosary Trust is its non hierarchal model of organisation with an equal partnership between schools and distributed leadership. The unique character of individual schools is celebrated and they continue to work closely with their own local governing bodies. Their website states:

*"We have leaders who will engage with, learn from and support each other. **Pupils will be at the heart of all that we do.**"*

The Chief Accounting Officer is Bridget Harris who combines her role with being head teacher of one of the academies. She works closely and collaboratively with a strong leadership

group of experienced heads from each academy. Together they have put in place successful initiatives on school improvement, ITT, recruitment and retention, CPD and workforce development. As well as making savings through economies of scale, the trust employs financial expertise to support schools in this crucial area. The chair of the trust board is Simon Fenning, a telecommunications director who leads a very skilled board who have legal, financial, human resource, asset/risk management expertise combined with a wealth of educational experience. The board includes current and former head teachers from the primary and secondary sector and others with a huge amount of governance expertise.

There is no doubt that this is a highly successful CMAT and one that continues to thrive for the benefit of all its pupils.



"The individual character of each organisation within the trust will be preserved"

COVID Advice



Schools within our CMATs are dealing effectively with the pandemic and strive to follow the latest government advice.

It is wonderful to see so many pupils back in our schools receiving high quality education from their teachers. The Diocese fully recognises that this has only been possible through the hard work and dedication of all the staff in the schools. They have done a

tremendous job under very challenging circumstances and deserve the highest praise.

With the end of the school year fast approaching we all hope that the staff in our schools get the rest they fully deserve and that they come back refreshed to meet the challenges next year may bring.



Digital learning is here to stay

The biggest barrier that schools faced during both lockdowns was being able to consistently reach every one of the students because a significant number of them had limited or no access to a suitable digital device. Schools were allocated devices through the Get Help with Technology Service to support those students who were academically highly vulnerable or those who just did not have any access to a device or the internet. These devices enabled many schools to support a broader range of students and meet most of their needs while they were working remotely.

Now that most pupils have returned to school, not only have the allocated devices enabled students who are self-isolating to join their lessons from home, they are hugely beneficial in supporting all students with their independent learning and sustaining the use of digital technologies in education.

The remote education learning curve

To say remote education has been a learning curve for us over the last year would be an understatement! During the first lockdown, teachers set tasks via a variety of methods online, requiring students to work through activities independently. There was sometimes relatively low engagement with this model so more blended learning models were developed by schools in our diocese and nationally, often using Microsoft Teams or similar platforms. This allowed them to offer a mix of live and pre-recorded lessons, pre-allocated workbooks and lessons where part of the class was learning remotely whilst part of the class was receiving face-to-face teaching.

Blended learning is our new normal

This blended approach has been the most successful and even now that all students are back in school, teachers invariably

continue to deliver content online to ensure consistency for those isolating.

Initially, engaging students was a significant challenge, particularly for students who already had lower engagement before the pandemic. Schools hoped that removing the technology barrier would ensure that all students actively participated in remote education, but this was not always the case. A good idea was to align the online model with the standard school day and insist that all students join a virtual form time every morning, this would hopefully help maintain better engagement every day throughout the term. It was also a good idea to send daily targeted communications to parents to keep them involved and let them know what was happening for their children.

Digital learning and the return to face-to-face teaching

One thing that has been learned over the lockdown is that there truly is no substitute for having students in the classroom with a teacher. It's been a hugely positive return to school with students quickly settling back into the demands of face-to-face teaching, and most schools attribute this smooth transition to the clear routines set in place when working remotely.

While one of the most popular responses from students when they were asked why they were glad to be returning to school was that they "didn't have to stare at a screen all day" (the most popular response was that they were glad to see their friends!), schools continue to embrace the fantastic range of online-resources and tools that help our students become more independent with their learning.

The digital learning approach has also made room for flexibility in teaching models, allowing more lessons to be taught by subject specialists.



Department
for Education



Why a school should join a CMAT

ADVANTAGES



It was interesting to read **Bishop Alan's** end of term letter to schools in his diocese recently. He reaffirmed that it was his intention to write to all Catholic schools and parishes to once again encourage the further growth and development of Catholic MATs across the diocese. Whilst this may be in line with thinking coming out of national Government it is also genuinely my firm belief that this is the best future for our schools. It is an opportunity for schools to actively and formally work together to shape the Catholic education system in their locality. It is this approach that will enable high standards of Catholic education to be maintained and where schools can contribute more widely as beacons of good practice in the local community.

As with all school improvement there is never a quick fix and schools have to be mindful that it will take time to see tangible results. Nonetheless improvements can be made and schools and trusts can evidence these when inspected.

There are several features which are common to all school improvement initiatives. Firstly it is crucial to establish an accurate baseline, so in terms of literacy schools should have assessed reading ages and identified areas of weakness in pupils. Secondly the importance of getting all the staff on board cannot be stressed enough. Literacy needs to be seen as a whole school issue and not the remit of one particular department. Thirdly successful initiatives often focus on one or two areas rather than implement a multiplicity of changes. The "walk don't run" mantra is applicable here. It's important to embed changes first before moving on, this will ensure development is more sustainable.

It is important that teachers and other staff model good reading to pupils and that leaders raise the profile of reading across the school. As we know children respond to praise and recognition and having that public acknowledgement of their reading progress can be a highly motivating element. We began this article with Jane Austin, it seems appropriate to end it with her again: "I declare after all there is no enjoyment like reading".



ARE YOU UP FOR THE CHALLENGE?



Literacy Matters

In the words of Jane Austin “it is a truth universally acknowledged thatwell developed reading, writing and speaking skills are crucial to pupils doing well at GCSE and A level!” Although she may not have actually said this there is no doubt that there is a correlation between literacy skills and academic attainment across all subjects. It could well be said that reading is the master skill all pupils need to develop. It seems obvious to point out that children who are more literate can access the curriculum better than those who have weaker reading skills. As a consequence they will do better in public examinations, especially with the new GCSEs requiring higher reading skills.

According to some studies, nationally 25% of 15-year-olds have a reading age of 12 or below, 20% a reading age of 11 and below and 10% a reading age of 9 and below. Those proportions of course will vary by school – and will tend to be significantly worse in the most challenging. On average, nationally only 20% of 11-year-olds have a reading age of 15 or above. That is one reason why schools that introduce GCSE curricula prematurely at Year 7 are likely to encounter difficulties – because four in five students will lack the reading ability to readily access them.

So if this is the case what should our schools be doing to ensure that all their pupils develop this mastery of reading? One place to start might be by looking at the Ofsted framework.

Ofsted have emphasised the importance of reading and that they will focus on it during inspections. In the latest framework they want to see: “a rigorous approach to the teaching of reading which develops learners’ confidence and enjoyment in reading. At the

early stages of learning to read, reading materials are closely matched to learners’ phonics knowledge”.

In Ofsted’s school inspection update of 2019 they stated: “If we want to give all children an opportunity, a good place to start is reading to them frequently, introducing new vocabulary and meaning within contexts that stimulate their thinking.”

Practical steps for schools

There is no easy solution to any educational problem but there are practical steps every school can take.

1. Appoint a leader with the authority to make the decisions needed to get a literacy project up and running and maintain its momentum.
2. Form a small project team of committed people who can identify the key problems that need to be addressed. Start to get other key partners on board, for example GL Assessment, CUREE and Lexonic (Sound Training), among others.
3. Include substantial professional development for the senior leader and staff. Literacy development in the classroom is closely linked to professional development in the staffroom.
4. Evaluate progress regularly.
5. Get pupils reading first thing every morning in form time.
6. Invest in quality textbooks and teach skim, scan access skills.





Think piece

Why multi academy trusts will thrive post pandemic

In his book *“Leading multi academy trusts”*, the former National Schools Commissioner Sir David Carter and his co-author Laura McInerney assert that trusts will thrive post pandemic. Sir David highlights the role trusts played in supporting and helping their schools in the crisis. This involved the everyday support in constructing generic risk assessments and standard letters and guidance to more strategic support. Trusts were in the position to enable access to much needed computer technology, PPE as well as leadership support and the sharing of online resources. Of course many schools also worked closely with their LA and found this connection invaluable as well. But in a trust the smaller number of schools often allowed more targeted support on the ground. This role has been recognised by the government and is one of the drivers behind their desire to see MATs expand.

The future

Interestingly Sir David and Laura see some significant changes in the future for trusts. Firstly they foresee a tighter alignment of how things are done within trusts with a standard model evolving for training and CPD. There could be a consensus around what constitutes effective teaching and how to ensure that all staff are able to deliver this. They think the idea of what a “god” school looks like will dominate future structural thinking. This model will be replicated across trusts to ensure that pupils everywhere can access an education that is more likely to allow them to fulfil their potential.

However they both also stress that standardisation will have its nuances. Often schools have their own sense of uniqueness and this can be a real strength. In our own diocese we would recognise that our schools, while sharing a common ethos, are very much individually unique. We would want to preserve this individuality as it is something which parents, governors and staff themselves value. In the Brentwood diocese we would want our schools to be part of a CMAT but also to be strong individual entities in their own right building on the traditions and history of their own setting. The combination of preserving individuality with working together and supporting each other is surely a winning formula.

Laura McInerney stress that the education system does not stay static but continues to evolve. Already we have seen that schools are developing blended learning approaches with content online supplementing (but not replacing) face to face teaching. Innovation and new ideas are sure to come and the relationship between schools, parents and students will subtly change over time. Flexibility may well be the key to successful schools in the future and the backing of a strong , well run CMAT will be vital to success.

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