



Policy Brief: Lessons learnt from how Multi-Academy Trusts responded to the Pandemic

Introduction

The pandemic has had an impact on every child's learning, and for disadvantaged pupils in particular. Research conducted by the University of Nottingham between January and September 2021 looked at how leaders in all types of school in 30 small, medium and large Trusts (many serving disadvantaged and "Red Wall" communities") responded to the challenge of maintaining progress during a continuing period of considerable disruption.

The research showed how robust, resilient Trust structures, with strong, agile leadership, a systems approach, clear values, high expectations and pooled, contextually relevant resources, provided support for teachers, and were protective factors for all pupils and their families, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The study was not comparative, although its positive findings contrast with more negative findings from research into responses in other school systems.

Detailed findings

1. Governance: trust structures as basic units for England's education system

Trusts as strong legal entities have shown themselves in their response during the pandemic to be highly efficient and successful vehicles in protecting and ensuring the continuing welfare and academic engagement of groups of schools and their pupils.

This evidence suggests that consideration be given at national level **for the group of schools in a strong and sustainable school Trust to be treated as the basic unit for funding and delivery across the school system.**

Key policy insights

The key lessons for policy makers from this research are:

- The pandemic has shown how strong and sustainable trusts are a resilient and protective structure for pupils and schools.
- Training for Trust CEOs and leaders needs to build the ability to lead complex, value-led systems.
- These strong and sustainable Trusts are particularly important for disadvantaged communities and levelling up educational attainment.
- More evidence is needed of the relative effects on pupil attainment between Trust schools and others.

2. Future proofing quality: robust and resilient leadership

Whilst Trusts' legal and management structures provided optimum conditions for resilient survival, it was the values, qualities, strategies and actions of Trustees, CEOs and their teams that enabled the efficient and effective development and implementation of necessary, context-sensitive material, welfare and education support to all schools.

This would indicate **that training and development for Trust CEOs and their leadership teams needs to build capabilities and competence to manage complex, values-led systems.** The current qualifications for education leaders (NPQEL) do not adequately capture the knowledge and expertise

required to lead trusts as complex organisations. Creating the pipeline of the next generation of Trust CEOs requires a new, research-informed approach to leadership development.

3. Levelling up: building and sustaining engagement and learning opportunities for disadvantaged pupils and their communities

Many of the participant Trusts served high need, disadvantaged pupils in the Midland and Northern regions of England, including 'red wall' communities. These Trusts prioritised the maintenance of access and learning engagement of all pupils, mental health and support to the most vulnerable. The fact that Trusts were able to provide pooled expertise and support to back up this prioritisation was a key factor in making this work.

This would suggest that ensuring all schools serving disadvantaged communities would benefit by being part of strong and sustainable Trusts would be an important lever to level up education.

4. Pupil outcomes: comparisons between Trusts and standalone schools

CEOs reported that whilst it was too early to assess the extent to which interruptions to school-based learning for many pupils had affected their longer-term academic progress, vulnerable groups were showing signs of more learning loss than others. However, the monitoring and tracking systems Trusts had established suggested positive progress and achievement.

We cannot yet make strong claims based upon empirical data that pupil outcomes from schools that are part of Trusts are discernibly better than those of pupils in maintained schools (except for the earliest sponsored Trusts), though Ofsted judgements show that strong Trusts can turn around schools that are historically weak. However, it is likely that **the improved conditions and contexts for learning that Trusts provide through accountability and collaboration hardwired through governance structures will lead to greater improvements.** It is essential to determine differences through the commissioning of empirical research in a range of Trusts.

Background to the Research

The policy focussed research which informs this paper was carried out independently by the School of Education, University of Nottingham between January and September 2021 in collaboration with the Confederation of School Trusts (CST). The findings are the researchers' own. Data were

collected from questionnaire, online semi-structured interviews and documentation analysis with CEOs from primary, secondary and special schools in 30 small, medium and large Trusts across the East and West Midlands, North and North West, many of whom served 'red wall' disadvantaged communities. In addition, 20 Headteachers were interviewed, to test these perspectives.

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More detailed reports outlining the research and its implications for policy makers can be found via the following links:

[Polycymaking in disruptive times: the development and impact of School Trust-designed policies on teacher and student outcomes](#)

[System leadership in disruptive times: robust policy making and enactment in School Trusts](#)