



In the classroom at Belgrave St Bartholomew's Academy

Academies: a mid-term report

One in four church schools is now an academy. Paul Handley asks what has been gained by such a radical overhaul

IN 2010, the Government revolutionised the school system by enshrining in law the concept of an academy: a school with a greater degree of independence, receiving its funding directly from the Department for Education, not through its local authority.

The Church of England is now the largest operator of academies, followed by the Roman Catholic Church. One quarter of C of E schools

The new structure

IN THE LEA model, school heads report to a board of governors. This is often a large body of people, including parent representatives. The LEA relates both to the governors and directly to the head. In a multi-academy trust (the new norm), there are potentially four levels. **Members:** the owners of the academy trust, typically meeting once a year. The diocesan board of education is usually involved at this level.

Board of directors: legally responsible for running the academies, in charge of finance, HR, regulation, marketing, relations with other bodies, education issues, etc.

School committee or council (sometimes still called a board of governors): each school in an MAT has its own group of people to monitor morale, protect its particular ethos, and support the staff. **The executive:** the head and his or her senior staff, responsible to the board of directors for the implementation of policy.

— 1059 out of 4700 — are in academy trusts. Eight years on, then, it is perhaps time to produce a report on progress. If anyone is in a position to give a verdict on the academies experiment, it ought to be the Church of England.

ACADEMY trusts (the name "trust" is a bit of window-dressing: academies are technically charitable companies, and subject to company law) were created by the Labour government to bring another stakeholder into the struggle to turn "failing" schools round. The idea was to draw in both business expertise and business cash to schools where nothing else had worked.

In return for business involvement, the new or revamped schools would be reordered as companies, responsible for their own budgets and with the freedom to alter school policy over staffing, admissions, and remuneration. The concept was embraced by the coalition government — the Conservatives not being averse to reducing the power of the local education authorities (LEAs). Suddenly, becoming an academy was no longer simply a matter of choice. Under the 2010 Academies Act, the Secretary of State for Education could require any school deemed to be failing to be turned into, or absorbed into, an academy trust.

The church authorities were confronted with the possibility that a failing church school could pass out of church hands. (There are examples where this has happened.) If a school could not be revived, it needed, at least, to go into a church-sponsored academy trust.

At the same time, all state-funded schools were encouraged to make the change. The lure was extra cash from business sponsorship, and from a government determined to see the project succeed. The growth of academies continued apace, either as single units or, increasingly, in small groups, known as multi-academy trusts (MATs).

In the past year or so, however, the extra funding has been drying up. Schools are still given £25,000 to cover the costs of the transition, but this does not stretch far, especially now that LEAs are starting to charge for the costs that they incur in the handover. As well as this, there has been a rapid turnover of Education Secretaries, each adding a different nuance, and the drive towards academy-conversion has slowed. Inter-

views talked variously of uncertainty, dependency, and lethargy. Quite naturally, schools and educationists are taking stock.

IN THE plus column, it is undoubtedly true that a new breed of businesspeople have been drawn in, either as sponsors of trusts (members) or, more typically, directors.

Most diocesan directors of education (DDEs) can point to flagship academies where struggling schools have been turned round, thanks to a partnership with other, more successful schools. These are well-run trusts with sound financial backing.

One such is the St Bart's Multi-Academy Trust, in Stoke-on-Trent. It was one of the first C of E schools to convert, and became a multi-academy trust in 2013. It began with three schools; it now has 13. By the end of this year, it expects to have 20.

Every one of the trust's schools inspected by Ofsted has so far passed as "Good" or "Outstanding". Some of the newest additions bring challenges with them, the trust's CEO, Chris Brislen, says, but, for all the talk of risk, he remains optimistic about progress.

A key moment in the development of St Bart's was when it moved from three to five schools. At that point, it became clear to the governors-become-directors that a different set of skills was needed to run an expanding MAT. They stepped aside, and new people came in. The current board of six, Mr Brislen, a former head teacher, says, has the skills to monitor risk and take the right strategic decisions.

As support from many LEAs has been eroded, Mr Brislen has focused on ways to replace it. Collaboration, he says, is key. The trust is known for its emphasis on teacher training and development, and has been described as a "mini-LEA". The difference, he says, is that the trust is determinedly bottom-up organisation. All principals join an executive management board, which shapes policy and reports to the board of directors.

Another element that Mr Brislen emphasises is diversity. "It's absolutely crucial that the schools are very different. We talk about 'siblings, not clones'." It is this range of experience which improves the trust's ability to cope with new challenges.

TRUSTS the size of St Bart's are currently in the minority, particularly in the north. Most church-run trusts are small: two or three schools. Brislen reckons that, in future, a grouping of anything less than six to eight schools is going to struggle. Many schools bring a financial deficit with them into a trust, although these are actively written off by the LEA. But, without a significant boost of cash from outside, many trusts do not have the pooled resources to improve the lot of any struggling partners.

One of the St Bart's directors is Colin Hopkins, the Lichfield DDE. He echoes Mr Brislen's comments about collaboration. His fear is that the academy programme has a tendency to cause fragmentation, not only between academy trusts but within them. "A lot of these small trusts operate as if they are federations,

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especially in what are called 'flat MATs', where everyone is supposed to be equal.

Each school in an MAT tends still to have a local governing body, sometimes called a council, or committee. They think they're still in charge, but they're not. All the important decisions ought to be sent upstairs to the academy company directors, who have the decision-making powers, supposedly the expertise, and the legal protection [if things go wrong].

This points to a concern that I heard from virtually everyone to whom I spoke: recruit-



A young pupil at Kingsland C of E Academy

ment. One of the reasons given for the slowdown in the academy movement is simply that the number of high-calibre people willing to devote their time to running an academy company, without pay, is running dry.

It is a big task to find possibly six or more people not only willing to serve, but with the right mix of skills in finance, leadership, HR, marketing, the built environment, and education.

The shortage of directors might not be quite as critical as the current shortage of teachers, but it comes a close second, especially in rural areas and some inner cities.

The push towards professionalism has also had an unlooked-for effect on social mobility, the head of school policy at the C of E's national Board of Education, Rowan Ferguson, thinks. "The risk of pursuing an approach that says 'We must have only high-level business people as directors of academy trusts' is that it disengages communities and wastes talent.

"Becoming a school governor was, in the past, one of the most accessible ways for people to start doing something for their local community, and develop leadership skills which can then benefit the community more widely."

A LITTLE more on finance. Many academy trusts are on a sound financial footing. But there is a caveat concerning property. The head of education at Lee Bolton Monks, William, Howard Dellar, has warned in these pages about slack — and, in some instances, desperate — accounting practices that have led many academies to include the value of their buildings and land in their accounts.

The trouble with this is that the land on which a church school is built seldom belongs to the academy. Typically, it remains in the legal ownership of the vicar and churchwardens of the parish church — or, occasionally, the diocesan board of education — to be used in perpetuity for the purpose of education. Thus, any academy that uses the value of the land to balance its books creates a misleading impression of its solvency.

Church officials are guarded on the subject, although they have recently issued new directions to academy accountants and auditors to discourage the practice. The inference is that some academies — it is not known how many — are technically trading while insolvent: a criminal act under company law.

ONE good thing about the academy programme is that it has forced the Church to raise its game. When the Church operated in partnership with the local authority, in voluntary controlled and voluntary aided schools, there was a tendency to take a back seat and leave most of the heavy lifting to the LEA. This might still be the case. In Lancashire, for example, few schools have made the switch.

But not all LEAs were fully functional; and, as schools switch to academies, their area of influence is diminishing further.

The job of diocesan director of education is now significantly harder. They must advise schools that are contemplating the switch to an academy trust, appoint academy-company directors, liaise with the regional schools commissioners (or, if the diocesan boundaries straddle two regions, two commissioners), and, increasingly, troubleshoot when academies start to look shaky.

Multi-academy trusts make their life a little easier, but bring their own challenges. For example, the combination of church and community schools into the same trust has provoked comment. Some diocesan boards of education discourage it; others see the value in merging neighbouring schools, regardless of ethos. Fears have been expressed that a church school's mission might be diluted. Alternatively, others have talked of a new proselytism.

Mr Hopkins has seen no sign that either is correct. "Church schools in academy trusts generally retain their ethos. Mixed academy trusts do, though, give the Church an opportunity to show that it is a positive force in education."

SO, WHAT to write in the school report? At this stage, it has to be one of those irritating mid-term assessments that contains no grades for the truth is that nobody knows, not even the Department for Education. Useful statistics are scarce, and the question is too political to be answered honestly — or even asked.

Undoubtedly, the academy programme has brought new blood into the running of the country's schools. This is offset, to a degree, by the fact that it is a bloodthirsty system: finding people to fill vacancies on academy boards is becoming a serious headache.

Its introduction has also absorbed huge swaths of time and effort, and this is likely to give its smaller academy trusts realise that their viability is in jeopardy (see Howard

Dellar on the process that awaits those who wish to merge with another trust, page 29).

The greater freedom that the academy system offers has been key to the turning round of many failing schools but it takes skilled and experienced directors to use that freedom well. A system that gives schools the freedom to succeed also gives them the freedom to fail.

Several people told me that they were not sure that it mattered. Mr Ferguson, for one, believes that it is not the structural stuff that makes the difference: the old issues of access to great leaders and staff are of far greater importance when judging the quality of the education that a child might receive.

Mr Hopkins puts it succinctly: "A school will do well if it has excellent teachers, children who are willing to learn, and parents who are supportive." Anything beyond this is secondary. "Are children learning any better because of academies? Because we don't know the answer [it] suggests that the benefits have been marginal where schools have converted of their own volition."

Mr Brislen, at St Bart's, makes the point that any system, whether an LEA or a MAT, "will only be as good as the people within it, and the strength of the organisation they build".

There remains a great deal of scepticism among DDEs. When they get together, I was told, they are "rarely upbeat".

But the education world does not stay the same for long, as governments attempt periodically to solve the problems in the wider society. At present, schools are being left largely alone to decide whether the benefits of joining an academy trust outweigh the effort it takes and the greater degree of uncertainty it brings.

Given the relative strengths of different LEAs, and the patchy talent available to fill academy boards, this might be the best approach.

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