Teaching and Curriculum Excellence

Transforming and sustaining school improvement in a multi-academy trust

The following case study demonstrates how a nationally recognised, high performing secondary MAT has been successful in both transforming and sustaining school improvement across its schools.

The Redhill Academy Trust

Located in a suburb of Nottingham, Redhill Academy Trust is a predominantly secondary trust and was one of the first multi-academy trusts to be formed. Its CEO, Andrew Burns, is very open that the Trust’s beginnings were more accidental than planned – a result of his work supporting other schools in his role as a national leader of education (NLE) and Redhill Academy as a national support school (NSS).

One school in particular – the Weldon School in Carlton (now The Carlton Academy) – was in special measures when the local authority asked Andrew and Redhill Academy to provide leadership and school improvement support. Following the formation of the coalition government in 2010, it was decided that any school which had been judged to be in special measures at its most recent Ofsted inspection should be formally sponsored by a successful school.

It therefore made sense for Redhill to become the sponsor for the Weldon School. Whilst there was some initial reticence from Redhill’s governing body – who were concerned about the future of their own school – they agreed on the basis that they had a moral duty to the pupils at the Weldon School to continue to support the school’s improvement journey and give its pupils the best possible chance of success.

Developing a vision for growth and school improvement

The Redhill Academy Trust was formed in 2011, consisting initially of just the two schools – Redhill and Weldon – and it remained so until 2013. At this point, the Trust began receiving an increasing number of enquiries about other schools joining the Trust, based on its success and reputation regarding school improvement, and the fact that it was now a designated academy sponsor.

Up until this point, Andrew admits that the Trust didn’t have a clear vision or strategy for growth, or indeed any clear criteria against which they would decide (or not) to take on other schools. However, Andrew was very clear on two key points – the first being that the Trust’s core purpose was about raising the achievement of all students; and the second being Andrew’s determination not to repeat the mistakes of some other MATs, which had taken on all-comers in the rush to rapidly grow their trusts, without first ensuring they had the leadership and school improvement capacity in place.
The Trust’s core purpose is about raising the achievement of all students

In order to set out the Trust’s plans for growth and how it would ensure sustainable improvement across all its schools, the Trust’s Executive Board (its board of trustees), chairs of governors (from the local governing bodies of each of its schools), its headteachers, deputy headteachers and Andrew developed a shared vision for the Trust. They drew on extensive educational experience, business expertise and parental representation in order to fully involve the community and ensure local accountability for the Trust’s future growth.

The resulting vision and strategic growth plan for the next five years set out the desire for a smaller, slower growing locally-based Trust – providing an outstanding education for local students – with an initial aim of growing to between six and eight schools within the next three years. At the centre of this strategy was the Trust’s core purpose of raising pupil achievement, enabled by sustainable school improvement capacity and underpinned by its ethos of very high expectations (of both students and staff) and the importance of academic success for all its students. Therefore, great emphasis was placed on the need for the Trust to build the right leadership and school improvement capacity within the organisation before each subsequent stage in its growth and before taking on any new challenges. As such, the Trust developed – as part of its strategic growth plan – a number of ‘shadow’ leadership and support structures, which sought to anticipate when and how additional leadership and school improvement capacity would need to be secured if the Trust grew to different sizes (e.g. 6-8 schools; 9-12 schools; 12-15 schools).

Establishing improvement principles

Between 2011, when the Trust was first established, and 2015, the Trust remained relatively small, comprising only four secondary schools including Redhill. Following the development of a clear vision and strategy for growth, the Trust could then be clear about the criteria against which it would decide whether or not to agree to taking on another school:

- Will we still have the capacity to improve other schools without compromising the existing Trust and its schools? Will it be sustainable over the long-term?
- Will it assist our aim to develop a coherent 3-18 education pathway for pupils and students locally?
- Will the school fit into a local cluster model so that staff can share best practice?

These core criteria underpin the Trust’s robust due diligence process, through which the Trust is able to determine whether it has the capacity to transform and sustain school improvement within the potential new school.

From the perspective of any new school wishing to join the Trust, a set of Leadership Guiding Principles outline the Trust’s expectations of how its academies should be led and managed – aligned to the key elements of: simplicity, positivity, intelligent accountability, communication, teamwork and trust. These principles form a set of leadership ‘non-negotiables’ for the Trust, which means that any new school wishing to join the Trust must be willing to adopt them.

In addition, a set of Trust Academies Partnership Strategies (TAPS) have been developed and reviewed/refined by the Trust’s Executive Leadership Group, which comprises the headteachers of all schools within the Trust. These TAPS outline the systems and procedures the Trust expects to be implemented within each academy, as
well as the support they can expect to receive. The TAPS cover key principles relating to: teaching and learning; achievement; curriculum; quality assurance; students’ experiences; leadership; and governance. Taking this more prescriptive approach to the adoption of Trust-wide systems and processes has meant that the Trust has enabled a greater pace of school improvement when struggling schools have joined the Trust.

Supporting a coherent learning journey
Between 2015 and 2017, the Trust continued with its steady growth plan, taking on a further four secondary schools to form a total of eight schools. In the Trust’s early stages, Andrew states that they did not feel that as a secondary only MAT they would have the expertise to support a struggling primary school to improve, so they made a conscious decision at that point to not move into the primary sector. However, in 2017, Andrew and the Trust’s Executive Board determined that the time was right to begin their plans for the development of a coherent 3-18 education pathway for local pupils and students.

Always with school improvement capacity and sustainability at the core of its growth, the Trust last year (2017) welcomed three primary phase schools – Carlton Central Infants Academy, Carlton Central Junior Academy, and Robert Mellors Primary – all of which were rated ‘good’ at their most recent Ofsted inspection. In taking on these three good primary phase schools, and also recently appointing the previous head of Carlton Central Junior Academy as the Trust’s Director of Primary Education, the Trust now feels it has the leadership and school improvement expertise and capacity in place to begin to support other struggling primary schools, as the first step to supporting a coherent 3-18 offer for local pupils.

Embedding a sustainable school improvement strategy

Focus on your core purpose
The Trust’s school improvement strategy incorporates six key elements, the first of which is its core purpose of raising the achievement of all students. This is communicated relentlessly at all levels, with Andrew being its main champion as CEO. The Trust’s leadership and governance are clear that its success is built on the quality of what happens in classrooms. This is underpinned by a big focus across the Trust on widening students’ experiences through a range of extra-curricular activities, including sports and the performing arts, as well as regular school visits, all of which support students to build self-confidence and resilience and help to raise achievement across all subjects.

Invest in teaching
The second key element of the Trust’s school improvement strategy is its investment of time and resources in teaching and learning, so that pupils’ and students’ experiences in the classroom are of the highest possible quality, in order that the Trust achieves its core purpose of raising achievement for all. Training, support, internal professional networks, opportunities to lead, and career progression opportunities mean that the Trust is able to retain high quality teachers and leaders and sustain its capacity to support improvement in schools both within and beyond the Trust. Teachers and leaders at all levels are expected to not only participate in, but also contribute to, the Trust’s CPD programmes, recognising and building on the expertise from across all the Trust’s schools. This reflects the learning from Andrew’s experience as a national leader of education, which clearly demonstrated the pockets of excellence in teaching and learning that can be found in all schools, no matter what their circumstance or improvement requirements. This overall approach to recruiting, developing and
retaining the best teachers also ensures that the Trust is able to offer a broad and flexible curriculum for all its students, whilst ensuring they are able to study towards securing the recognised EBacc.

**Develop Trust-wide systems and processes**

The third element concerns certain Trust organisational models, which are implemented in all the Trust's academies. As described above, the TAPS (Trust Academies Partnership Strategies) establish a core set of approaches which underpin the Trust’s school improvement strategy, roles and processes, and include behaviour approaches, data systems, curriculum models, and governance and leadership structures. Whilst individual academies are able to develop and retain their own local identities, the Trust has learned that school improvement can be achieved faster and more sustainably if certain proven systems and processes are rapidly implemented by new academies joining the Trust.

**Implement student-focused quality assurance**

The fourth element is robust quality assurance, which is focused on improving outcomes for students. All academies new to the Trust are supported through a Faculty Standards Review process, which involves a team of experienced senior leaders and lead practitioners conducting a thorough subject by subject diagnosis of performance. This not only serves to highlight any areas of concern (where deployment of Trust staff might be needed to improve outcomes for students) but also highlights areas of excellence, so that the Trust can quickly identify and draw on pockets of expertise. This process results in the production of a written report of the review team’s findings, and a development plan to address any short- and longer-term areas of need and required actions.

The Trust currently has access to 35 specialist leaders of education (SLEs) and lead practitioners amongst its staff, and across its Teaching School Alliance (TSA) who are able to transform and sustain school improvement across new and existing schools. The faculty standards review process is also deployed if there are areas of concern identified within any other school in the Trust. The Trust has developed and introduced its own badged lead practitioner status, based closely on the Advanced Skills Teacher (AST) model, so that it can be confident in the calibre of staff it deploys to support school improvement.

**Engage leaders closely with their area of influence**

The fifth element of the Trust’s improvement strategy is to ensure that its leaders remain engaged with the day to day activity of the areas they lead, so that they are able to retain their subject expertise and remain close to the areas of work they need to influence. There is a strong focus on face-to-face communication, which Andrew believes is crucial to embedding a sense of shared ownership of the whole Trust’s success.

**Continually build school improvement capacity**

The sixth and final element is a focus on continually building school improvement capacity, investing time and resources in identifying and developing the best staff from all schools across the Trust. This supports staff retention, increases the talent pool and enables a sustainable school improvement strategy.

When the Trust consisted of only two or three schools, Andrew acted as the main coordinator of its school improvement activity, using his experience as a national leader of education (NLE) and undertaking a large
proportion of this activity himself. However, as the Trust grew over recent years, it became clear that this approach was going to be unsustainable and that Andrew needed to step back from direct school improvement and focus on his core role as CEO. The Trust has therefore appointed four Executive Headteachers – three secondary and one primary – which each look after a small group of schools within the Trust. All academies joining the Trust are supported by one of the Executive Headteachers, whose role is to challenge and support the headteacher and senior leadership team, to lead quality assurance and oversee the school improvement action plan.

There are also currently six Trust Subject Directors (for maths, English, science, history, geography, and modern foreign languages), who each work half time for the Trust and half time within their own schools, and who have a subject-specific overview of all the Trust’s schools. The Trust has also just established a new role – that of Director of School Improvement. The post-holder will lead the Subject Directors and will be responsible for deploying school improvement support. Whilst Andrew had been hesitant to commit the Trust’s resources to such a role before now, he feels it has now become essential due to the size of the Trust (which is shortly due to add another primary and another secondary – totalling around 8,000 pupils). Indeed, Andrew suggests that in hindsight he would now recommend establishing some of these Trust-wide posts a little earlier than has been done at Redhill Academy Trust.

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In addition to the above posts, the Trust’s school improvement team draws on the experience and expertise of colleagues from across the Trust’s schools, including:

- 2 Academy Directors – both very experienced headteachers who have led both The Carlton Academy and Hall Park Academy to very significant improvements over the last few years.

- Trust Teaching and Learning Director – Head of Teaching and Learning at The Redhill Academy, who leads on the CPD offer for staff across the Trust.

- Trust Achievement and Data Director – responsible for ensuring data is used consistently and effectively in all Trust schools and on a Trust-wide basis.

In order to support staff development and encourage innovation, the Trust has established networks for every subject which are open to all schools within the teaching school alliance (currently 30 schools). These subject-based networks are focused on raising achievement through the sharing of good practice and discussion of the latest available research evidence. In addition, there are four senior level networks which look at: curriculum; teaching and learning; achievement and data; and student support. These networks meet four times a year, with a focus not only on sharing good practice at a strategic level but also on developing innovative approaches to address key issues.
Measuring impact

In order to determine the impact of its school improvement activities, the Trust collects and analyses a range of data about pupils and staff.

The headteachers of the Trust's individual academies each complete, four times per year, an 'academy targets tracker', which sets out their predictions on a range of measures for their schools and provides an early warning system regarding any areas of concern, which may then trigger a faculty standards review.

The central Trust team also presents key data across a wide range of key performance indicators (KPIs) for the whole Trust, which includes data relating to: the quality of teaching and learning; curriculum issues; attendance and exclusions; staff absence and vacancies; and child welfare and safeguarding issues. These are coded yellow as a warning of possible issues, or red to indicate a major risk. These KPI reports are presented to the Trust’s Executive Board at each of their three yearly meetings.

There is also a big focus across the Trust on extra-curricular activities, including sports and other activity clubs, as well as regular school visits, all of which underpin not only academic achievement but also support the development of life skills such as leadership, teamwork, self-confidence and resilience. Having the opportunity to participate in a range of non-academic activities through the Trust means that pupils and students are more engaged with each other, their school and their learning, which improves behaviour in the classroom and enables better teaching and learning, thus raising student achievement.

Whilst the Trust doesn’t formally collect data on the impact of these additional activities on school improvement and student achievement, they are none-the-less valued for the opportunities they provide for inclusion and enrichment. For example, the Trust games event, which is held each term, is open to all pupils, no matter what their skills or aptitudes across a range of sporting events. Students are also able to achieve different levels of award in the performing arts, drawing on Redhill’s status as a performing arts college.

What is clear is that the Trust’s relentless focus on its core purpose of raising student attainment, and its development of a proven and robust school improvement strategy, has enabled the Trust to both transform and sustain school improvement, regardless of whether a school is struggling or already successful.
Key learning points for sustainable Trust-wide school improvement

• Ensure your school improvement strategy is always fully aligned with your MAT’s vision and growth strategy – whilst being flexible to the changing needs of the Trust.

• Think carefully about how you will secure sufficient school improvement capacity in line with each stage of the Trust’s growth – consider developing staffing ‘shadow structures’ for the MAT to be different sizes during its growth journey.

• As part of this forward planning process, appoint the key staff you will need to scale up your school improvement model – as soon as you are confident to do so. Consider whether you have the expertise already within the Trust to fill these roles or whether you will need to look externally.

• Establish the Trust’s ‘non-negotiables’ early – that will apply to all academies within the Trust and all those that wish to join in the future – so that expectations are clear.

• Remember that an effective and sustainable school improvement strategy is much more than a well-defined structure and named roles – it must engage the support and commitment of leaders and teachers across the Trust by reflecting its core purpose, ethos and values.

• Set clear performance indicators, embed consistent reporting and develop robust quality assurance processes so that you can continuously measure the impact of school improvement activity.

• Consider how your provision for staff development and opportunities for career progression will continue to support and sustain school improvement across the Trust.

• Ensure leaders and teachers have regular opportunities to engage in face-to-face dialogue with colleagues across the Trust – to share good practice, get support with any areas of concern, and to provide the space to reflect, create and innovate.

For more information

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