



## Briefing note

# From good to great: The positive impact of school trusts in education

## Introduction: The education landscape in England today

School trusts have become the successful cornerstone of the education system in England. Most children in England are educated in academies and most schools in England are academies.

- 62% of all children in state-funded in schools are educated in academies.
- 82% of secondary age children in state-funded in schools are educated in academies.
- 44% of primary age children in state-funded in schools are educated in academies.

School trusts are the heart of the nation's opportunity mission, serving the majority of England's disadvantaged children and most children with EHC plans in state funded schools

- 61% of all children eligible for free school meals are educated in academies.
- 47% of primary age children eligible for free school meals are educated in academies (which is a higher percentage than the 44% of children, showing a skew towards serving disadvantaged communities).
- 82% of secondary age children eligible for free school meals are educated in academies.

School trusts are the biggest employers in the school system too, employing 60% of teachers and 65% of administrative staff and almost half of all teaching assistants.

## An improved school system

The growth of trusts has corresponded with an upturn in the performance of the English education system. There are far fewer failing schools in England than a decade or so ago, and evidence from international tests shows children in England have risen up the rankings and are now among the highest performing in the western world (Department for Education, 2023).

The English education system, like most systems, has variability within it which must be addressed. It is important we hold onto that drive for improvement and also recognise the strengths in our system: the aggregate picture of the quality of what is happening in our nation's schools is, compared to many other nations, a good one.

The challenge is how we go from good to great. This will require the system to grapple with key issues, such as:

- Better meeting the needs of all children, including those with SEND.
- Closing the disadvantage gap, which unfortunately widened further following the pandemic.

- Recruiting, retaining and developing the highest quality workforce.

Across several papers, including *Unleashing Greatness: Nine Plays to Spark Innovation in Education* (Barber and Klein, 2016), Sir Michael Barber argues that state control cannot mandate greatness but rather it must be unleashed by empowering those closest to children and communities to innovate and respond to local need – coupled with appropriate accountability.

This is where the English education system currently resides: on the cusp of unleashing greatness. School trusts have brought to bear professional agency and accountability to make significant strides in improving educational quality, especially in areas where it has historically been weakest.

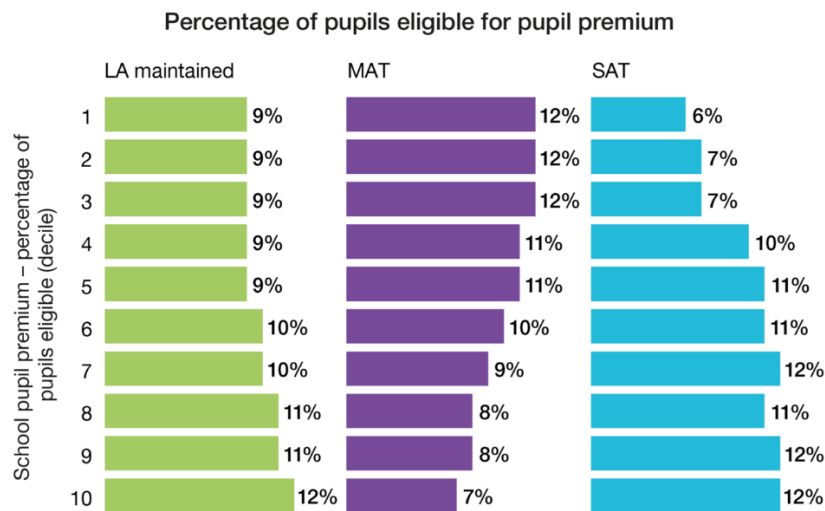
This paper describes some of the positive impact trusts have had on education in England. It is important we ensure trusts can continue to build on this into the future.

## Transforming outcomes for disadvantaged pupils

One of the strongest areas of impact for trusts has been improving outcomes for disadvantaged pupils. Many of academies are part of a multi-academy trust, offering a structured framework for governance, collaboration and school improvement.

Emerging evidence underscores the effectiveness of trusts in raising attainment, especially for disadvantaged pupils, and supporting previously underperforming schools.

A Department for Education analysis from 2022 (Figure 1) illustrates the extent to which multi-academy trusts are leading the way in educating children in the most disadvantaged communities. This underlines that the trust sector is the inclusive sector.



Note: 1 (most eligible for pupil premium), 10 (least eligible for pupil premium)

Figure 1: Department For Education (2022)

A number of trusts are systematically leading the way and show the transformational potential that resides in trusts. The Sutton Trust's *Chain Effects* reports (Hutchings & Francis, 2016, 218)

highlight that the best-performing trusts consistently deliver better Progress 8 scores for disadvantaged students than the national average. These high-performing trusts also demonstrate that it is possible to close attainment gaps while achieving improvements across entire cohorts.

Analysis shows that: “The top 10% of MATs outperform the highest performing LAs by 0.2 Progress 8 score. For disadvantaged pupils, the pattern is repeated, with a lower absolute but larger relative performance advantage.” (Department for Education, 2022).

Given trusts tend to teach greater numbers of disadvantaged children, and disadvantaged children tend to achieve less well on average, it is notable that academies overall do not underperform when compared to other school types. This suggests trusts are making a positive difference to the outcomes of disadvantaged children.

## Addressing persistent underperformance: Insights from Ofsted

Ofsted’s *Fight or Flight? How ‘Stuck’ Schools Are Overcoming Isolation* (2020) report identifies trusts as critical agents in addressing entrenched underperformance. Stuck schools—those rated less than ‘Good’ across multiple inspections—often face challenges related to isolation, poor leadership, and resource constraints. Trusts have been shown to address these issues by providing structured support, expert leadership, and trust-wide policies to stabilize and improve struggling schools.

The report notes that previously stuck schools benefit from the strategic oversight and resources that trusts bring. These schools frequently experience rapid improvements in leadership, teaching, and pupil outcomes, often achieving their first ‘Good’ rating within a few years of joining a trust.

## Turning around previously failing schools

FFT Education Datalab’s analysis, by Dave Thomson (2021), offers compelling evidence of the positive impact of multi-academy trusts on previously failing schools. The report, *What Became of the ‘Failing’ Schools of the Early 2000s?*, examines schools that were persistently low-attaining in the early 2000s and tracks their progress after converting to academies. The findings show all but seven of the 142 schools in the study improved to Ofsted good or outstanding after joining high-performing trusts as sponsored academies.

A further analysis concludes that “comparing annual cohorts of sponsored academies with similar local authority maintained schools shows that, on average, sponsored schools improve more quickly. Before they joined a trust, they performed significantly less well than otherwise similar schools. However, after joining a trust, the majority of sponsored academies demonstrate improvement, and their performance matches or exceeds these comparator schools. More than 7 out of 10 sponsored academies which were found to be underperforming as an LA maintained school in their previous inspection now have a good or outstanding rating.” (Department for Education, 2022).



These findings reinforce the broader body of evidence that show trusts have been particularly effective in supporting schools with entrenched challenges, driving both immediate and long-term improvements.

## **Leadership development, collaboration and capacity building**

Trusts play a vital role in developing leadership capacity within schools. Research by the Department for Education (2021) showed a high level of positivity from school leaders who had joined a trust. Among recent convertors, 82% of primary leaders and 74% of secondary leaders felt the move had been positive. Around 90% of primary and secondary leaders cited improvement as a result of the sharing of skills and expertise across the schools in the trust. More than 80% cited improvements in training too. Given we know that staff development is central to school improvement, these results are greatly encouraging about the system-wide benefits of schools joining trusts.

There is also evidence that being in a trust provides schools with robustness and resilience. Day's (2021, p. 3) research into how trusts coped during the pandemic showed "trusts created and established systems to develop more central approaches for financial matters, remote teaching and learning, health and safety, monitoring of student attendance. This early streamlining of decision-making processes by the central trust teams had reduced the stress felt by individual academy heads and their staff. Processes of decision-making were reported to be collaborative, collegiate, keeping the communication very strong between schools, and sharing practices."

This is supported by an Ofsted analysis of trust's pandemic response that concluded: "These findings show how important this can be to schools' resilience in the most challenging of circumstances, and how being part of a greater whole builds that resilience. Trusts have supported the work of school leaders throughout the pandemic, and seem to have done so quite successfully."

Importantly, staff development in trusts seems to support the recruitment of teachers into schools serving disadvantaged pupils. Compared to those in other schools, teachers in trusts are more likely to move to schools within their trust serving more disadvantaged children as their career develops (NFER, 2017).

## **The path to great**

The English education system has many areas it must improve, but it has many strengths too. These strengths have led to a transformation in the quality of education for many children, particularly in those areas where school standards had been low for generations. The notion of the 'failing school' is not yet eradicated but it is much reduced. The available evidence concurs the best explanation for this is the growth of school trusts.

But the benefits of school trusts have not been reserved only for the most challenging schools. Evidence shows that those within trusts – those who have experienced the benefits of collaboration and strong governance – recognise the added value of being in the group.



At the heart of this success is the two-fold system design of marrying institutional autonomy with appropriate accountability. This is the recipe for success that Sir Michael Barber pointed the system towards almost two decades ago, and following this recipe has led to important improvements that we must retain.

The challenge ahead is to move the school system from good to great. Achieving this will require us to continue on and not drift off the path set out by Barber. We should walk it with purpose and confidence.

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