Strength in numbers
How multi-academy trusts use pupil data to drive improvement in failing schools
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The pace of change in education continues unabated. One of the key developments in the last few years is the creation of multi-academy trusts. These trusts often specialise in taking on failing schools to turn them around in a very short space of time. But how are each of these trusts managing this and what role does data play in this process?

This white paper, which includes contributions from those leading and working within multi-academy trusts, examines how chains are using data to inform decision making that leads to improvements across all schools in the group.
INTRODUCTION

“Our objective is to get a school that is in difficulties to outstanding within three years.”

Executive Director at a Multi-Academy Trust

Three years is a very short time to make fundamental improvements to a school. However, the motivation behind this executive director’s ambitions – like many others in his position – is the fact that if you take any longer, you will have failed the children currently studying at the school.

Increasing numbers of multi-academy trusts are taking on the task of turning around schools that are in difficulties and many trusts have seen good results from using this approach.

Strong improvement
Figures from the National Audit Office showed that the proportion of pupils gaining 5 A*-C grades at GCSE, including English and mathematics, increased by 15 percentage points in chains of three or more academies, compared with 12 percentage points for standalone academies.

Ofsted inspections also showed a higher proportion of multi-academy trust schools classified as outstanding than standalone academies.

The challenge
But as academy chains grow, the challenge is to ensure school improvement continues throughout the group and that a new entrant does not have an impact on the rest or jeopardise the reputation of the group as a whole.

So, how are multi-academy trusts improving teaching and learning at such a rapid pace without impacting their overall achievement? How are they setting achievable targets and how are they using data to help in this process?

In this white paper, we will look at the approaches that trusts are adopting to turn around failing schools quickly, ensure children reach their potential, and lever the best possible performance from every school in their chain.
TURNING DATA INTO INFORMATION

“When a multi-academy trust adds a failing school to its portfolio, one of the first things it does is look at pupil data and how it is being used. After all, good analysis of information can provide invaluable insights into how best to make a positive impact.”

Mick Marks, a Central Advisor with responsibility for data at Education Central and an Ofsted Inspector for nearly 20 years.

“Data analysis is one of the most important processes in our group. It allows us to pinpoint the issues and often the likely causes and therefore we can intervene appropriately,” says Mick Marks.

A senior director at another multi-academy trust agrees, “We use data extensively. We believe the key to success is not only the analysis of individual pupil data but also that of micro-populations, such as ethnic groups or particular demographic groups that may be liable to underperformance, as well as of course, to pupil premium students.”

Nick Weller, Chair of Independent Academies Association and Executive Principal of Dixons Academies

“Unsuccessful schools are awash with data; successful schools produce succinct one page summaries targeted at different groups.”

Consistency is key
All the contributors we spoke to felt that recording data for its own sake was counterproductive. They felt data collection should be focussed on achieving specific objectives – improving behaviour, for example.

An executive director of one trust warns that one of the biggest enemies of school improvement is lack of consistency. “Consistency is essential in terms of both formative and summative assessment as well as in terms of moderation and applying the appropriate intervention for each student,” he says.

“In addition to this, our contributors highlighted the need to get the data out of the school office and into the hands of teaching staff.

“One of the questions we ask when a new school joins is whether the data role needs to be transferred to someone with a more educational slant,” says Nick Weller, Chair of Independent Academies Association and Executive Principal of Dixons Academies.

“It is not just about importing loads of stuff and then printing it out. It’s about having the capacity to analyse the data and being able to say, ‘There’s something up with boys’ attainment over the year, can I explore that a bit?’ This is a higher role than it is often given credit for.”
Regular analysis
The general consensus is that assessment data needs to be reviewed regularly to ensure that progress can be clearly monitored.

Sir David Carter, Chief Executive Officer of the Cabot Learning Federation feels that data should be collected and analysed every four weeks. “In simple terms, there are 25 periods a week at secondary level, so four weeks represents 100 lessons. If pupils are not making progress in 100 lessons, I want to know why.

“Regular scrutiny of data drives our intervention, so if grades are sliding in a particular subject, we can put a team together that month to review the faculty.”

Nick Weller, Chair of the Independent Academies Association and Executive Principal of Dixons Academies, meanwhile, believes that assessment data analysis four times a year is more than enough. “I think if you do it six times a year, there is insufficient time between collection, analysis and intervention to measure a difference before the end of the next cycle,” he says.

Tips for using data effectively across a trust to help failing schools:

- Ensure that the processes and systems in place to monitor data are as efficient as possible
- Ensure data used for analysis is live and not weeks old
- Analyse assessment data regularly, at least 4-6 times a year
- Analyse sub-groups of pupils such as SEN, EAL, children in care and those receiving pupil premium
- Be consistent in all your data collection and analysis across all of your schools
- Ensure that the job of data analyst is in the hands of someone with the skills to ask questions of the data and find out the answers
- Only ask for summary data from the school so as not to overburden an academy head with producing unnecessary data
USING DATA TO IMPROVE OUTCOMES FOR PUPILS

“Effective data analysis helps monitor teaching quality and identify where pupil progress is not happening. This will help failing schools drive improvement across the board.”

Sir John Dunford, National Pupil Premium Champion for the DfE and former General Secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders

Pupil data on attendance, behaviour and progress can tell a compelling story of what is holding a child back and help remove barriers.

One multi-academy trust of 12 schools, told us that they build a three-dimensional picture of each child, matching up progress information with behaviour and attendance details to help them target interventions with pinpoint accuracy.

“It means that we can target resources into curriculum intervention, more support teachers, extra teaching assistants or simply a chat with parents; whatever is more appropriate depending on the issue uncovered. This approach has enabled us to lever performance in our schools,” says one of the directors of the trust.

The Cabot Learning Federation has a centralised data management team which gives Sir David Carter the tools he needs to drill down into the data. “If I want to know about attendance, behaviour, rewards or individual grades, we can pull that from the information I have without having to ask the individual academies each time.

“If I want to see how Year 11 girls are performing in maths across all academies this afternoon, I can have a graph showing me that data by 9am tomorrow, it is really effective.”

Even with the large number of students in a multi- academy trust, it is possible to focus on individual student outcomes. “I am accountable for around 6000 children, so I need to have my finger on the pulse of what is happening in the classroom. By tracking the data, interventions for individual students can be put into place,” says Sir David.

“Twice a year we write a maths and English GCSE-type exam paper for every Year 11 in the federation, that’s about 750 students.

“We mark them centrally and write a report for every single child’s teacher to benchmark against their current grades. That way we know if child X is really a C grade or a D.”

Tips for using data to help pupil progress:

- Create a rounded picture of each child – even if they appear to be doing well
- Only focus on areas of detailed data analysis relevant to your trust’s challenges
- Pinpoint where intervention and resources will have the greatest effect
- Intervene and use data to track the results of that intervention
- Stimulate discussion with teaching staff
- Be open and share data across the group so you use the strength of the group to move forward

“The use of the data ensures consistency and means that the resources which are very scarce at the moment in education are being precisely targeted in those areas where you know they will make a major impact.”

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One of the advantages that multi-academy trusts have over standalone schools is more teaching know-how that can be shared across the group. Scrutinising the data to see where the teaching issues are means this know-how can be deployed to struggling schools to facilitate quick changes.

At the Cabot Learning Federation regular meetings take place so staff can discuss any issues and share ideas. “We have raising achievement meetings once a month to look at data, best practice and teaching we need to develop,” explains Sir David. “Every term we bring subject teachers together to share data and strategies to improve teaching. It doesn’t just stay with the leaders; it goes right down to NQT level.”

Comparing schools
Another advantage of having a portfolio of schools is that it allows for comparison between different teaching methods, the interventions employed and their varying degrees of success.

This allows those at the centre of the chain to roll out best practices across the group. “At multi-academy board level we don’t report on individual students. We ask ‘Why is Year 10’s progress in one school less than in the other schools in the group?’ and we ask, ‘What are we doing to intervene?,’” says Nick Weller.

Similarly, good results from one school can be utilised for the benefit of the others in the group. “If you know your maths progress is strong in one school across the trust you would look at that. Our best practice is often driven by the next layer down from board level, by those senior managers who do joint observations across the trust,” adds Nick.

Teaching staff within a trust can provide a pool of knowledge and experience. “One of the benefits of being a federation is that there is so much expertise available to us,” says Sir David Carter of the Cabot Learning Federation. “For instance, there are about 70 English teachers in total across the academies. That’s such a great resource that we can tap into.”

Setting clear standards
One of the most important aspects of improving teaching quality in underperforming schools is to give staff a clearer idea of what is expected of them. Transparency is key – and data can help teachers know what they are being judged on.

“If a school isn’t performing well, then the majority of the teaching cannot be good or outstanding. You see patterns emerging, so if one subject is weak, the chances are that there is more than one weak teacher in that faculty,” says Sir David.

“This is where leadership comes in; practice needs to be monitored with a series of support packages for improvement. One of the challenges about taking on a failing school is that you haven’t got time to give people 18 months to improve. Teachers have to demonstrate that they can give good lessons.”

Use data to improve teaching quality by:
- Making comparisons between schools
- Identifying and employing best practice
- Knowing where the gaps are in teaching skills and filling them
- Giving teaching staff clear guidelines on what is expected of them
- Giving staff live access to data
- Challenging and supporting teaching staff
“There are always two levels of governance in multi-academy trusts and the most successful groups use data at both levels. But the leadership team at board level must be the ones that determine what data is going to be kept, how it is going to be kept, how it is going to be generated and how it is going to be used.”

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A multi-academy trust relies on the quality of the communication between its management teams at school and trust levels. Many employ advisors or regional managers who can support the schools to achieve their aims and report back at board level.

"The whole business around governance is around challenging and support; supporting the intervention but also challenging whether are we doing enough. Is there more that we could be doing? Asking these questions means we never ever take our foot off the accelerator and are always stretching and pushing forward," says one senior leader at a trust.

Data is a very effective way to help everyone in the chain of communication understand exactly what is happening in each school and to help set targets.

"We look at building aspiration and not putting an artificial ceiling in place in terms of the data. This is not just about achieving our targets; this is about exceeding all expectations. When students are being assessed, they know the level they are performing at, they know what the data says about them and they know that the aspirations are as high as possible for them. School leaders should have the same expectations for their school," says one trust board member who believes his role is to ensure each school leader has a good grasp of data.

The board has a duty to ensure each school leader has a good grasp of data. "What you don't want is for anyone to get an unpleasant shock when the summative examination and testing period is upon you. The results should reflect the expectations that we have of the school based on ongoing, effective data analysis," he concludes.

Ofsted’s expectations for leaders

What Ofsted expects of schools in terms of data analysis is a crucial concern for leaders, as the new framework stresses the importance of using data to track students and sub-groups of children who may be at risk of underperforming.

"I try really hard not to say to schools, 'You need to do this to keep Ofsted happy.' That is just a by-product,” says Mick Marks from Education Central. “Instead it should be, 'You need to do this to make sure you are doing the best for the kids.' The main reason to do this is for teachers to understand what is happening, as well as the leaders and managers.”

Ofsted has placed a greater emphasis on proving timely intervention when progress is dropping off. This means schools that still need to improve can perform well at an inspection, if they can show there is a plan in place.
“Ofsted analyses data like we do,” says Sir David Carter at the Cabot Learning Federation. “They explore an audit trail, so if there is a significant gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children for example, this will inform their teaching observation schedule. We try to do the same. If science data shows that performance is dipping we see which sets are affected, and look at the data and see how this correlates with the judgements being made about the quality of lessons.”

So the direction of data collection and analysis needs to come from the top and it must be standardised throughout the group in order to offer the greatest benefits.

But it is not only a story of data, according to Nick Weller, Chair of Independent Academies Association and Executive Principal of Dixons Academies. "Sometimes the choice of KPIs the board chooses tells just one story. Learning walks, shared observation and moderation across the group is also incredibly important and gives a more detailed picture. This kind of quality assurance is essential so you do not miss issues at any level.”

**Using data to improve leadership:**

- Communicate measurable goals clearly
- Reveal an accurate picture of each school’s status with no hidden flaws
- Illustrate to Ofsted and other stakeholders the work that is being done to turn a school around
- Ensure quality of data across the group
- Define mechanisms for collecting data and assimilating it for strategic use
As multi-academy trusts continue to grow, this model of schooling will be a significant influencer on the educational outcomes for the nation as a whole. The drive and energy witnessed in this sector is no doubt contributing to trusts’ ability to turn around failing schools and pupils’ achievement.

Underpinning every aspect of this is their consistent and regular use of data; helping them analyse areas of underachievement in schools, any training requirements for teachers and giving leaders the insight required to facilitate effective change.

As the chain of schools grows, the challenge will be ensuring multi-academy trusts retain the ability to make significant improvements. Data, if used effectively, will remain at the crux of achieving this – providing a spotlight on where resources need to be focussed and the information to set targets that are aspirational and achievable.

“Data is vital, it is the mirror in which you see your schools. There’s no narrative, no words to confuse you; the data tells you clearly what the schools have and haven’t done.”

Sir David Carter, Chief Executive Officer, Cabot Learning Foundation
We would like to thank the multi-academy trusts who contributed and the Independent Academies Association for their support in compiling this white paper.

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