

Case study 8 - L.E.A.D. Academy Trust, Nottingham

Primary leadership case study: growing an urban schools partnership with global reach

This case study is about leadership of the L.E.A.D. Academy Trust, founded on what is now Huntingdon Academy, a primary national support school and teaching school in Nottingham. The multi-academy trust has evolved from Huntingdon initially sponsoring two other academies and then by way of a transitional and short-lived 'umbrella trust' whose member academies were linked by a partnership agreement. The Trust included nine partner academies by September 2013 and could have grown very much larger if it accepted all the schools that wished to join. The Trust is led by the chief executive, who was headteacher of the outstanding Huntingdon Primary School and converter academy. There is an overarching Trust Board, but the academies in the Trust retain their individual non-executive governing bodies.

L.E.A.D. represents *Lead, Empower, Achieve* and *Drive*.

Chief executive: Diana Owen

Chair of the L.E.A.D. Academy Trust: Mark Blois

Portrait of the Trust

The L.E.A.D. Academy Trust is a growing body of primary academies which utilises the strengths of each member school to the mutual benefit of all. It was founded on the experience of Huntingdon as a national support school and academy sponsor together with a belief in the power of partnership as a catalyst for school improvement and better outcomes for young people. Reconciling these two approaches, which for the headteacher of Huntingdon meant combining the roles of executive head and partner head, was attempted initially using a hybrid organisation, the 'umbrella trust', which brought schools together through a partnership agreement.

This proved to be too flexible to ensure that the objectives of driving school improvement and raising standards in all member schools were achieved. The organisation quickly evolved to the formal establishment of a multi-academy trust (MAT) with the cooperation and agreement of the member schools. The process benefited hugely from the professional expertise in education law of the chair of governors of Huntingdon Academy, Mark Blois, who is now chair of the Trust Board.

The academies in the L.E.A.D. Academy Trust include:

- Huntingdon Academy
- Edna G. Olds Academy
- St Ann's Well Academy
- Sycamore Academy
- Warren Academy
- Windmill L.E.A.D. Academy
- Millfield L.E.A.D. Academy
- Hogarth Academy
- Bishop Alexander L.E.A.D. Academy

Within the Trust there are two national leaders of education and two local leaders of education. Three of the headteachers are trained Ofsted inspectors. The Trust has a directory of other professionals with a broad range of expertise, including specialist leaders of education and former Her Majesty's Inspectors.

Vision and core principles

The L.E.A.D. Academy Trust aims to ensure the leadership that will provide the highest-quality education to enable every pupil to realise their full potential. Its member academies also realise the need for children to be motivated if they are to succeed in life and are committed to providing a stimulating curriculum and environment which will

prepare them for their futures with confidence and determination. All member academies sign up to the core principles shown in Figure 8-1.

Figure 8-7: The core principles of the Trust⁴

Lead: to show the way; to be first or foremost

In every aspect of life the ability to lead is essential. Strong leadership is the key to the success of our schools. We will develop leadership skills in everyone who attends one of them, ensuring the development of pupils as leaders of their own learning.

Empower: to give power to; to enable

At L.E.A.D. Academy schools pupils are empowered to have high aspirations for their futures. We nurture and challenge pupils to take responsibility, make decisions and work together so they grow into confident and resilient young people.

Achieve: to accomplish; to get or attain by effort

We believe in achievement in its broadest sense and that enjoyment of learning is crucial to success. We continually look for and reward achievement in every individual in our schools. We also know that a strong command of English and maths is vital as a foundation for the whole curriculum and prioritise learning in these core subjects.

Drive: to cause and guide progress; to impel forward

We will provide the very best education and training for every individual in our schools and will ensure that this is delivered. We value excellent teaching, underpinned by high quality professional development and will constantly move forwards, using and instigating the best ideas and practice.

These principles are much in evidence in the classrooms of Huntingdon and Edna G. Olds, two of the academies visited in connection with this case study. Older children know and can explain the L.E.A.D. initials and how they apply to them.

⁴ Trust website: <http://www.leadacademytrust.co.uk/about-us/our-vision>

Leadership and governance

Diana's journey from taking on Huntingdon as her first headship to becoming the first chief executive of the Trust reflects an unrelenting commitment to social justice and school improvement. She was deputy headteacher and a full-time year 6 teacher in another school in 1998/99 when the headship of Huntingdon primary school was advertised. The school was in a poor way: in special measures and due to close. She considered the job but decided not to apply. The post was not filled and was re-advertised. What happened next is best told in her own words.

"I was walking around Nottingham and saw all these banners saying 'Save our School'. The community really wanted to keep their school and wanted it to improve. I had a change of heart; I was ready to lead a school but was very naive and did not realise quite how bad things were. The buildings were horrendous; it felt wrong and unjust that they had got into such a terrible state. But it was seeing the parents and children who so passionately wanted all that to improve that moved me. Certainly it made me look again and reassess what I wanted to do in education."

Her approach to leadership was characterised by absolute determination to transform the school, a pragmatic sense of priorities, a strategic approach to dealing with them and a commitment to involving the community fully in the mission to recreate and shape the school. Step by step, the school was transformed and it came out of special measures in 2000.

- The first priority was to demonstrate what could be done. The head and the newly appointed site manager spent the summer holidays refurbishing the entrance and the school hall; the entrance because it was the first aspect that pupils and parents would see and the hall because that was where she would hold the first assembly.
- The school's mission statement was drawn up co-operatively and finalised in a day's workshop involving pupils, staff, governors and parents.
- Quality of teaching was top of the list of ongoing leadership drives. The head recalls: "having the HMI monitoring visits was one of the most helpful things because it really helped us focus on priorities".

Although the school came out of special measures quite quickly, it remained quite vulnerable despite being judged 'good' when inspected in 2002. In 2007, the school was judged 'outstanding'. Two thirds of the staff that were in the school when it required special measures were still there when it was judged outstanding. Inspectors wrote: "The quality of education provided by this school is outstanding in almost every way. Its improvement in recent years has been remarkable. The school is a very special place that gives pupils an excellent start to their education", later commenting that "leadership

and management in this school are of the highest order". The school has remained outstanding ever since.

Empowering leadership

'Empowerment' of both children and staff, now part of the L.E.A.D. vision, has long been a feature of Huntingdon. A teacher who started her career at the school 10 years earlier and is now a professional tutor explains how Diana brings this about.

"I find Diana a very motivating and exciting person to work for, with big vision. She's encouraged me not to fear anything really. She's given me all these opportunities – 'Will you go to this school and present this for me?' or 'Will you have these teachers come in and watch?' and she's taught me that there's nothing wrong with putting yourself outside your comfort zone, having new challenges. I admire her immensely for it, and I see that she does that all the time. I'd like to think that I've modelled myself on this approach and got to where I am because of it rather than playing safe all my career and thinking 'No, I don't want teachers watching', or 'I don't feel comfortable going to another school'.

She asked me recently to go to the National College and give a talk on becoming a new person into leadership. Your initial thing when someone says that to you is 'gosh really? I've only been in the role for a couple of months'. But she's so confident in you, and I know she wouldn't ask me to do that if she didn't think I could do it, and so I went and did it and I was really proud of myself at the end. The links she has with so many other people provided me with that opportunity and I've then got contacts from that. She's just always been so enthusiastic, in staff meetings – you just sit down and afterwards you're thinking 'yeah, that's really good'. She's really good at getting you on board."

This approach extends throughout the school. In every class, children are encouraged to welcome visitors and explain what they are doing. There is strong encouragement for them to put forward and share their views in lessons; talking for learning is important, and this is stressed with both experienced teachers and new teachers in the school. In describing her approach to coaching new teachers, the professional tutor indicates the learning behaviour expected from children.

"When I coach new teachers I don't like to bombard them with everything straight away. First of all they need to know what behaviour we expect of the children. With new teachers, for example, we master expectations of behaviour first: the respect the children have; the confidence to share their ideas because they know the other children in the room are going to listen, and making sure that they are looking at the teacher when she's talking. When they have mastered these principles, we build in the effective use of the teaching assistant, challenge for the higher attainers and differentiation."

“I’m a big believer in the children being engaged and having talk in their lessons, so we bring in the response partner work and body language needed for response partner work. And we make sure we get it right, so I talk to the new teachers, and I’ve worked with more experienced teachers in the school as well, about the fact that there’s good talk and there’s bad talk – a noisy classroom doesn’t mean an unfocused classroom, if the talk is relevant. A talking classroom is an active learning classroom, so we bring a lot of that in. And that links to the research that we are doing on this as well ...”

The last inspection report (November 2011) reflected the approaches illustrated above when it opened with the view: “This is an outstanding and highly inclusive school where pupils develop a love of learning.” The report later finds that: “Pupils know exactly what they are expected to learn in each lesson. The strong emphasis on learning through practical activity and first-hand experience makes learning exciting for pupils. One reason for the excellent behaviour is that pupils get so involved in their work.” Inspectors found that “all those with leadership responsibility, including the governing body, monitor and evaluate the school’s work assiduously and have an accurate picture of its performance. Planning is sharply focused on raising pupils’ achievement and accelerating progress. Governors have links with each subject of the curriculum and thorough knowledge of pupils’ attainment and progress. This enables them to make a real input to school improvement decisions.”

Looking outward

After the school was first judged outstanding, Diana knew that it could not stand still. She had been recognised as a 'Chartered Urban Leader' in a short-lived programme in which successful headteachers came through a one-day assessment centre. She has also been a primary strategy consultant. As a result of the school turning itself around and then being recognised as a school of very high quality, the staff at Huntingdon felt they were in a good position to share their experience with other schools in Ofsted categories. They had 'been there', could empathise and offer support, and – crucially – knew what to do to transform a school. With the governors' support, the school applied to become a national support school in 2007, and the head a national leader of education. This active role meant that not only the headteacher but also the staff became actively involved in partnering schools causing concern, helping their recovery.

The then chair of governors strongly supported the school's designation as a national support school. A city councillor, he was committed to children having the best possible education and the other governors followed suit. For both governors and parents, levels of trust and confidence in the school had grown enormously and they could understand why it was important for the school to share what it had learned with other schools so as to benefit more children. The governors at Huntingdon knew both that they could not hold their outstanding leaders and teachers back and that such 'outreach' work provided enhanced professional development for staff. Commissioned outreach work also allows the school to build extra capacity and resilience. The governors and parents are proud that their school has earned not only a regional but a growing national reputation for its excellence.

Despite this support, everyone understands that Huntingdon will not allow its outreach commitments to work to the detriment of children in the school. There have been occasions when the school has had to decline requests for help if to agree them would have put the school under pressure.

The school improvement journey began with the head supporting another school in special measures (for two days a week over two terms) when Huntingdon was a 'good' school. Huntingdon was then asked to help two schools causing concern in Leicester. Now it was not only the head but also staff working with these schools on everything from playground design to subject leadership. But difficult decisions were looming for Huntingdon.

Becoming an academy and sponsoring another school

The academy prospect was triggered when Huntingdon, by now an outstanding one-form entry primary school in the very disadvantaged St Ann's area of Nottingham, was first asked to expand to two forms of entry but was then passed over for expansion funding in favour of other schools in the area.

Neither the headteacher nor the governors had previously wanted to seek academy status but the school was full, heavily oversubscribed and losing the opportunity to offer more children a first-rate education. They felt that conversion to academy status was the only way forward for the school. This was a period of great stress for the headteacher and great tension for the governing body. But the governors backed the school, which became one of the first primary academies in Nottingham. The very supportive chair of governors at that time (who was also an elected member of Nottingham City Council) was in a particularly difficult position and relinquished the reins when the school gained academy status. Diana describes going it alone as an academy as a “very scary moment”.

While Huntingdon was following the path to academy conversion in 2011, it was already working closely – in its capacity as a national support school – Edna G. Olds primary school in Lenton. The link started in September 2010 at the request of the local authority. Edna G. Olds school was a cause of considerable concern having had a crippling rate of leadership turnover: seven headteachers in five years. There were substantial staffing issues and the school was described as a “sad place to be”. It has since been transformed.

The local authority wanted Diana to take charge full time from September 2010, but – faced with staff on maternity leave and other changes in Huntingdon – Diana insisted on there being a head of school that she could support for about half the week. Eventually a suitable head of school was appointed, making Diana’s role as executive headteacher more sustainable. The head of school later became the substantive headteacher. Her strong steer has been reinforced by the vision and ethos of the L.E.A.D. Academy Trust and raised staff expectations still further. The leadership structure has been reorganised astutely so that skilled practitioners can take a more direct lead in taking the school forward. On the 1 October 2011, Edna G Olds converted to an academy. Two years later, Edna G. Olds was inspected again and judged to be a good school on all counts. The inspection report found that “the LEAD Academy Trust has a secure overview of the school’s work and has supported the school effectively over the last two years, particularly in developing the skills of the leadership team.” The headteacher of Edna G. Olds Academy provides an insight into the improvement journey. This started by feeling that a crucial part of her role was to embed the key principles of L.E.A.D. very quickly, because – applying these – she could see the potential to “completely turn the school around”.

“This has involved uniting a team. Everybody is working towards the same agenda, and I think that’s where L.E.A.D. has been so fantastic. Not only have I had what I would consider to be a great induction as a new headteacher – the cross-collaboration, the partnership working, everything else – it’s enabled me to strengthen philosophies that I’ve always carried through my teaching. We have actioned things at a faster pace than would ever have been possible with a single head in one school at one time, particularly from where the school had come from.

The core group from LEAD have really helped me stand up against some quite testing times.

“One of the keys is my relationship with Diana. When I was first appointed head, Diana was executive head. So you’ve immediately got a leader that’s leading by example, and you’re following that ambition and drive. Because we’re very close and we work so closely, the journey the school has taken so far has been rapid. This journey of improvement has been helped because you immediately feel this sense of purpose, and it’s about the children. That is the most important part of L.E.A.D. In Huntingdon, we have a partner school that’s outstanding. You know, when you’re delivering a key message or doing CPD with young teachers, teachers who’ve lost their drive and their ambition, you’ve immediately got a centre of excellence to sign them up to. So rather than reading in a book what they should be delivering, they go and experience the practice. My own feeling is, every single person in this school is important and valued. So we’ve had the teaching assistants and the class teachers going across to L.E.A.D. schools and visiting. They’ve seen the different element of work, they’ve developed friendships, and actually that school-to-school support has been completely natural. It’s been open and honest, and I don’t think you always get that.”

Huntingdon was also inspected while heavily engaged in supporting Edna G. Olds and received a second successive judgement of outstanding. Huntingdon also took in many children when another local primary school closed. “The results dipped slightly and triggered the inspection so it was something of a relief to be judged outstanding again.” said Diana. Edna G. Olds was judged ‘good’ by inspectors in November 2013.

The evolution of the L.E.A.D. Multi-Academies Trust

When Huntingdon became an academy in 2011, they had the opportunity to join another highly regarded academy chain in Nottingham but the final sticking point for Huntingdon was reluctance to lose their autonomy. It was clear that other schools that were partnered with Huntingdon wished to retain a close association with the new academy. They discussed with the Department for Education (DfE) various mechanisms for forming a group of academies other than through formal federation.

The new chair of governors, an education lawyer, was familiar with the Academies Act and related regulations and was able to guide Huntingdon and its partner academies in becoming an ‘umbrella trust’ linked by a partnership agreement. The umbrella trust became the L.E.A.D. Academies Trust and other schools soon began to approach the Trust to become members. Although the umbrella model allows each school to retain its autonomy, a partnership agreement between the schools ensures that all schools work collaboratively to raise standards. But the umbrella trust turned out to be short-lived. The reasoning was described by Diana and Mark as follows (Figure 8-2).

Figure 8-8: The learning journey towards a multi-academy trust

All the academy groups were multi-academy trusts. There was a certain dynamic: very tight central control, no real delegated powers to governing bodies, and little apparent partnership ethos. We felt the way to broker relationships and draw from each other's strengths was through an umbrella trust held together by a partnership agreement, which would be in accord with our values. It quickly transpired that although the umbrella trust was a nice way of allowing academies to be part of a group, it lacked teeth. Our partnership agreement gave powers of intervention in certain scenarios but it was too loose and cumbersome and we kept encountering new scenarios. Close monitoring was difficult and there were no powers to intervene. The partnership agreement was forged in good faith but a steep learning curve persuaded us that a more formal structure was needed.

There was little opposition to becoming a multi-academy trust, with the associated management and executive powers. We talked to all the heads over several months and they and their governors felt it would be the right decision. Many of the governors who took on academy status found the implications and responsibilities were more than they had bargained for and were happy to leave the big decisions to the Trust board. We were surprised by the number of schools wanting to work with us. But the core principles of L.E.A.D. remained, in a spirit of true partnership working, collaboration, sharing best practice, leadership development and the succession planning that comes from that. We have two outstanding schools in the Trust. The Trust came at a time when Huntingdon was reaching the limits of its capacity in terms of the extended contributions it was making and this was alleviated by the formation of the L.E.A.D. Academies Trust, with a board and a chief executive.

Looking forward

By September 2013, the Trust consisted of seven academies with three more about to join: two in Nottingham and one in Newark. Another of the member academies has been judged outstanding and others are good schools. There is an overarching Trust board which is an advisory and strategic board. Member academies must:

1. Subscribe to the L.E.A.D. aims.
2. Make a financial commitment to the Trust.
3. Work in partnership with the other schools.

There is high demand from other schools to join the Trust but Diana is cautious about unplanned growth. She has always been interested in the urban context, because of the intensity and immediacy of some of the challenges. There has been dialogue with groups of schools in at least two other cities that are interested in joining the Trust. Their motives and drive have to be right, and Diana's initial response is deliberately discouraging. The Trust does not aspire to becoming an empire but is about promoting high quality within its capability. Nevertheless, there are advantages: economies of scale, shared posts and the ability to pool expertise such as business management.

Asked why so many other schools want to join the Trust, one of the member headteachers replies:

"I think it's very simple, there's clarity there. When you pick up a brochure, or look at any part of L.E.A.D. on the website, you see a very clear statement of 'Lead, Empower, Achieve and Drive', together with key core principles. A good leader should want these for their school, irrespective of where your school is situated within the country. There's very clear drive towards doing what we all should be doing, providing the very best for children ... and getting the best from the children ... and not settling for anything less. Yes, each school has its own autonomy, which is really important because every school is unique within L.E.A.D. However, there's a common thread that should be expected to be seen through each of the L.E.A.D. schools, and that's a give and take relationship. I do believe that everybody wants to improve and being part of L.E.A.D. gives us that capacity. There's great networking; L.E.A.D. can deliver and we can all improve."

In 2011, Huntingdon took another major step forward by becoming a teaching school. It is now the hub of an alliance of over 20 schools and other organisations in what is known as the L.E.A.D. Urban Teaching School Alliance. The Alliance recruited to its first School Direct programme for training teachers in 2013, working in partnership with the University of Nottingham. The Trust has also been licensed by the National College for Teaching and Leadership to provide for the range of leadership qualifications awarded by the College. In terms of professional development, six teachers have been accredited to facilitate the Improving Teacher and Outstanding Teacher Programmes.

Reflections on leadership

Diana is conscious of ways in which her leadership approach has broadened and developed as circumstances have changed. Initially she felt she had to be quite directive because so much needed to be done. She is not dictatorial, consciously including people in decisions, but has had to make many decisions quickly. Leadership has become much more distributed, not just within the school but across the Trust. For the system leader, there is also the recognition that one cannot always influence as directly as before. Despite knowing that what works in one school does not necessarily work in another, “you sometimes have to hold back some frustration”. The other need is avoiding a dependency culture: “some schools simply want to be told what to do.”

Strong systems are key. For example, the schools in the Trust have been working towards a model for self-evaluation. They have streamlined their systems to combine the headteacher’s report, self-evaluation form and monitoring reports from the classroom. Monitoring is undertaken at set times during the year. Quality assurance is based on monitoring, self-evaluation and peer review. The Trust headteachers meet together to review performance and identify key issues. Work is moderated for consistency of judgements. The schools are collectively taking responsibility for each other, ensuring that they all move forward and any risks are identified early. Diana reflects on the changes.

“This is a huge change from the days in which schools were their own little islands; they did not work collaboratively for children’s learning. As expectations have increased and children are encouraged to do their very best, so the focus on children’s learning has had an effect on teachers’ learning. This is far more collaborative; there is greater clarity about leadership – it is far more focused on leading teaching and learning. Here, we video lessons and discuss them. There is no coasting and teachers are constantly learning from each other, both within the schools and through contact with colleagues in other schools. Our schools have a clear focus on children, but we are very businesslike about our work in what remains a competitive environment.”

One of the Trust’s senior managers, not a teacher, describes Diana’s qualities as a leader:

“I think the first words are inspirational and aspirational. Those two words are very key. I’ve worked for many different people, many different characters. I have to say I’ve probably not come across anybody with so much drive, and a great personality to go with it, in terms of being very open and collaborative. The beauty of working with Diana is that nothing is not an option. Everything is always a possibility, and anything I take to her ... sometimes they’re off-the-wall ideas I’ll come up with ... she’ll say, ‘Yep, come on then, let’s look at this and see if it’s a possibility’. That’s been really refreshing compared to many people I’ve worked for before, where the door has been slammed on ideas. I have never come across

that here, and you can imagine we've had many conversations. Things move forwards at a good pace, which is also a realistic pace in terms of the capacity we have within the organisation. And she's always thinking about the welfare of her staff as well, to ensure that no one is being ground down. She does look after the staff in that respect."

A positive response to new freedoms

Diana is positive about many aspects of policy. Giving schools the freedom to break away from local authorities that inhibited their freedoms has been very positive from the perspective of Huntingdon and the other schools in the Trust. Academisation has made a "massive difference" to them. Governance arrangements have changed and strengthened, particularly at board level, where L.E.A.D. has appointed eminent educators as well as skilled professionals such as the education lawyer who chairs the board.

The schools nevertheless feel they have made the changes against the odds, with the local authority putting up many barriers to them becoming academies. Funding was disappointing, particularly given the demonstrable impact that Huntingdon was making. The DfE has not always been consistent in its messages and decisions. But Diana pays tribute to the "amazing team of heads. Everyone is enjoying the challenges; there is a real buzz". Some secondary schools have wanted to join the L.E.A.D. Trust. Diana believes that the philosophy, values and principles of L.E.A.D. should not stop when the child reaches 11 years old but should carry on into the secondary years.

An urban education focus

The urban character of the alliance is a reflection of Diana's passionate interest in urban education and ambition for the Trust to build its national and international credentials for expertise in this field. Strategically, the next steps could involve partnerships with schools in another British city and urban schools in another country. But what is becoming more evident is that requests for school improvement help are increasing. The demands on L.E.A.D. services are expanding and the organisation already manages a range of functions beyond its Trust schools, including the teaching school alliance, provision of accredited leadership programmes as an NCTL licensee, the urban leadership programme and urban initial teacher training, for example.

What is evident about the L.E.A.D. Multi-Academy Trust is how much depends at this relatively early stage on the commitment, expertise, shared values and stamina of the chief executive and the chair of the board. The Trust is operating to near the limits of capacity, in terms of financial as well as human capital. The new type of infrastructure that is multi-academy trusts is a powerful lever for national policy to improve schools and raise standards but is essentially self-funding. Core funding comes from thin-slicing the budgets of member academies: a minimal percentage, slightly higher if a school is in an

Ofsted category. The Trust has also established a traded services company, led by a director of L.E.A.D. services, to recycle the proceeds, which are fed back into schools.

Mark and Diana are anxious to populate the board with more innovative business people to help them grow the L.E.A.D. brand and mission. They do not want to replicate local authorities. Schools should only pay for what they need. But L.E.A.D. management is conscious of having a huge range of responsibilities to its member academies and having to work “financial miracles” to meet these. They would like to work more on a corporate group model but need a greater degree of funding in order to build central capacity. This depends on having a critical mass of schools.

Reflecting on the journey they have taken, Mark recognises not only Diana’s remarkable achievements but how difficult it has been to develop the multi-academy trust and engage in so much school support work when she has still been responsible for and emotionally attached to Huntingdon Academy. She says: “This is a lot more lonely than headship!” and feels her responsibilities acutely.

Chairing Huntingdon Academy and the board has been very demanding on Mark. He would not countenance payment but is doing the work because he is passionate about education, is a leading expert on education law, finds it fulfilling to make a creative contribution and is inspired by Diana’s leadership and vision. He considers that they are still at the early stages of seeing schools and school systems evolve on a corporate model. They feel there is insufficient understanding by policy teams of what is involved in the work they are doing and feel there needs to be more encouragement and less impatience.