



Jason Wing Executive Principal of Neale Wade Academy talks about the decision to become part of the Active Learning Trust.

Following the government's recent announcement that all schools will become academies by 2022, there will be a lot of parents and a lot of headteachers wondering what exactly lies ahead for them, their school and their children. Turning Neale-Wade College into Neale-Wade Academy was a big decision.

Three years later though, I can safely say that my experience of the whole process has been hugely positive. The key benefit is, without doubt, the support of the academy's sponsor, The Active Learning Trust. This support manifests itself in numerous ways. Having readily available guidance from highly experienced individuals, who I know and who know me, has made the process of converting a great deal easier. Whether it be regarding a specific staffing issue, or something more long-term such as strategic planning, or areas to prioritise for development, I know that I am able to draw on the advice of the trust's Senior Leadership Team (SLT) at any time.

The support of the trust is also demonstrated in 'hub' meetings, whereby the governing bodies from schools within each hub (a cluster of schools in the same geographical area) come together to share best practice; I have found these meetings invaluable. With the benefits of academy life of course come challenges, and increased accountability is certainly a direct result of conversion. The trust is very child-centric, meaning that accountability is always related to child progress and attainment. There are a number of factors at play in a child's life, and the trust expect us to meet these varied needs across the full spectrum of children. Once again though, the support of the trust is ever-present, this time in the form of joint reviews, held to assess progress in key areas such as under-performing departments, behaviour and attendance.

Furthermore, there is a clearly defined process for both performance management review and accountability, ensuring that we have a can-do culture and are solution focused. There have been, and no doubt will be, a number of challenges along the way, but the benefits really do offset them and more. As is the case with a number of academies, we converted having been placed in 'special measures' following an Ofsted inspection. Bringing the academy up to, and beyond, the required standard is of course a challenge. As part of a trust though, we have been able to work very closely with a former Ofsted inspector, who has been helping us to prepare for our next Section 5 inspection. In addition, we have received support from a serving inspector with a focus on our Self Evaluation Form and Academy Improvement Plan. Looking forwards, the trust takes the view that it is essential to move with new initiatives to secure progress for all children. The CEO and SLT ensure that the trust and all its academies are kept abreast of the latest developments in education and, as Principal, I am very much encouraged to embrace those developments. This is demonstrated by encouragement from the Trust that I take a flexible approach to funding, staffing and other resources. That flexible approach leads to opportunities that may not previously have been possible, such as organising intensive intervention sessions off-site, as and when required, for things such as GCSE History.

The funding approach also enables me to keep the academy in line with those latest sector developments without being hamstrung by a number of the constraints that affect traditional LEA run schools. The decision to convert from the community college that we were, into an academy, was at the time met with a great deal of apprehension. There have been, and no doubt will be, a number of challenges along the way, but the benefits really do offset them and more. And, above all, academies aren't going anywhere anytime soon.