

Academy Status – What it would mean for the TEACH Trust/Ad Astra Infant School

The academies programme was originally introduced by the previous Labour government and is a central feature of coalition government policy. They believe that every school should be given the opportunity to decide if it wants to continue with the Local Authority or to be an independent autonomous body.

What is an Academy?

An academy is a government funded school that is independent of the local authority. It owns its land and buildings, has control of its admissions, can set its own staff pay and conditions, and has more control of its finances. In terms of the day to day functioning, an academy school is not noticeably different to a Local Authority maintained school. However, responsibility for funding the school falls to central government rather than local government. A Multi Academy Trust is one where each school has a separate funding agreement with the DFE but the funds are managed by the overall Trust rather than each individual school. Becoming an academy does not alter the character, nature or ethos of a school but becoming an Academy, whilst bringing additional responsibilities, brings greater freedoms.

If a decision is made to transfer to become an academy, the school and governing body will form what is known as an Academy Trust, which in reality is a charitable company. By becoming a Multi Academy Trust the 4 schools can collaborate in a legally binding arrangement. This can bring greater financial and cultural benefits through having a joined up approach to education in our local area.

Becoming a Company

Academies are operated by an 'academy trust' which is a charitable company limited by guarantee. There are no shareholders so no one can make any money from the school becoming a company. Although academy trusts are not registered charities, they are exempt charities and are required to comply with charity and company law in terms of financial management and accounting, which requires them to file records with Companies House and produce and file annual accounts. They also have to pay VAT but can reclaim this from HMRC. As charities they have the right to apply for grants from other charities.

What is a Multi Academy Trust (MAT)

A MAT is a single academy trust for all schools within the group and provides the strongest form of governance. The MAT will have a board of Directors which will deal with the strategic running of the MAT. This will in turn delegate the day-to-day running of each academy to its local governing body. The level of delegation to local governing bodies can be varied to reflect the level of performance of each school.

Members of the MAT are chosen by the schools. The DfE requires a minimum of 3 Members but prefers schools to appoint at least 5 Members so that any special resolutions do not require unanimity. The Chair of the board of Directors will be a Member. At least one Member should be independent of the board of Directors.

Employees of any of the schools may not be Members.

Each academy will usually be represented on the board of Directors of the MAT. In many cases, the Chair of each local governing body and possibly each head teacher will be Directors. Any Executive Officer will also be a Director. There is no requirement to have staff representation on the board.

Funding of Academies

At the moment, each TEACH Trust school receives its funding from central government via Poole Local Authority. The Local Authority takes a slice of the funding available to pay for its own central services such as school improvement services, property management/ maintenance services, financial services etc. The rest is then delegated to each school.

In becoming an Academy the funding is received directly from Central Government, and it is then down to the Academy to decide where to buy the services such as HR and Payroll, either from the Borough of Poole, or from external providers. In our particular circumstances, with the 4 schools combining to form a Multi Academy Trust, there may be greater scope to reduce some of these core costs in view of the fact that we are 4 schools combined.

The Curriculum

Academies do not have to follow the national curriculum, however, all schools have to provide a broad and balanced curriculum, and are judged by Ofsted against national standards, which, to a large extent, are based on the national Curriculum. We therefore do not envisage our 4 schools departing significantly away from the National curriculum but, by becoming an Academy, we do have greater freedom to create a curriculum that we feel best meets the needs of our pupils. We are particularly interested in creating a curriculum that builds on good quality `basics` (reading, writing and maths) but also creating a curriculum that celebrates the arts, performance and music. By being an Academy we would have improved authority to make curriculum decisions in the best interests of our children. Academies are inspected by Ofsted under the same `inspection framework` as all other schools, so parents can be assured of quality standards. Academies must also abide by the governments statutory regulations concerning children with Special Educational needs and meet expectations re. safeguarding and welfare.

Length of School Terms and School Days

The Department of Education say that an academy can vary the length of the school term and the school day. However, even as a Local Authority school, subject to consultation and discussion, the school could already seek to change the length of the school day.

However, at the present time there is no plan for the Trust to make any changes to each schools term or school day.

Staff Pay and Conditions

Academies have the ability to set their own pay and conditions for staff. Currently, there are no proposals to change these for staff. All staff would transfer to the new academy under the TUPE provisions which would mean no change to their terms and conditions. Also we believe that the 4 schools have an excellent track record of working closely with teachers' unions and professional associations who act for the staff. Maintaining these good relations is seen as vital for the overall health of the schools and for ensuring that education is delivered in the best possible way to the children.

The current pay and conditions for teaching staff and non-teaching staff within the 4 Trust schools are determined by national agreements and there is no intention for these to be undermined.

Admissions

The local authority still has an obligation to make sure that there is a place for every child in its local area to attend an appropriate school. However, as a Trust, we already have significant control over our Admissions policy and this would not change if we became an Academy. The TEACH Trust is already intending to consult this autumn on a major change to its admissions policy from 2016. This would remove the currently defined catchment area for the 4 schools and, if the schools were over-subscribed, give preference, to those wanting to transfer to one of our Junior schools, to children with siblings, or those who have attended one of the Trust `feeder` schools (Ad Astra Infants, Canford Heath Infant). More details will come to parents shortly but becoming an Academy would not change our position on this. Academies must abide by National admission code requirements which includes giving preference to children with statements of Special Educational Need and Looked After children.

The Leadership and Management of the Multi Academy Trust

The Multi Academy Trust would be led by a Board of Trustees. These would be individuals drawn from the 3 governing bodies. The Trust would also appoint some Trustees from local business to strengthen an external and impartial view. The Board would have additional legal and financial responsibilities to take into account the change of status to an Academy, as well as looking to have an overall Academic strategy for the 4 schools.

Each school would continue to have its own Governing Body, with the full involvement of staff, parents and Governors, so that those involved in our schools community will continue to have a voice and influence on the future of the Education on Canford Heath.

Head teachers would be accountable to the Board of Trustees and collaborate via an `Academic Board`. The Head teachers would report regularly to their governors and the Trust Board.

Relationships with other local schools/providers

We value the relationships we have with our local neighbouring schools (Magna Academy , St Edwards, and the Grammar Schools etc) and the good links we have with our pre-schools. As an academy we want these links to continue and even to strengthen as we work together in the interests of local children's education.

Why not stay as a Co-operative Trust?

The Trustees considered whether to remain as a Co-operative Academy Trust and we liaised with the Co-Operative College over this. However, remaining as a co-operative does not give us all the freedoms inherent with becoming an Academy, both in terms of financial freedom, and also in the legal requirements of being a Co Operative Trust, and so, after much deliberation, the current Trustees agreed that remaining as a Co Operative Trust was not the best route for the future of the 4 schools.

Why convert now?

The pace of change in education is very swift at the present time, and we are seeing rapid changes. A recurring message Head teachers are hearing at meetings and conferences is that the future for schools is to unite and collaborate. In fact Ofsted are now inspecting schools under a framework where there is a strong expectation that schools evidence where they are collaborating and creating partnerships. We have already seen the benefits of this collaboration as a Trust, but feel that this co-operation can be further extended by forming a Multi Academy Trust.

At present, 11 of Poole schools have converted to being an Academy and we are aware that many more are considering this process. Nationally the figure is much greater with around 50% of Secondary schools converting. There are nearly 4,500 open academies. Nearly 40% of children across the primary and secondary sector are now being taught in academies. Attendance at the London `Academies Show` in April indicated to the 4 TEACH Head teachers that becoming an Academy is the `way forward`. The view taken by the Heads was that it was better to control your own destiny than have it imposed upon you. In addition the government have made substantial funding available for primary schools seeking to convert into a Multi Academy Trust and we were keen to secure this funding. We have been awarded an Academy Conversion Grant which is allowing us to seek professional advice on the merits of converting to an Academy, as well as providing the financial support for the schools so that staff can fully investigate all aspects of a conversion of status. This means that no funds are being used from the existing schools budgets to fund this investigative work.

Final Comments.

The TEACH Trust is proud of our achievements to date. We are fortunate to have supportive parents, great children and dedicated staff. We are all working together with the same ultimate goal, to provide the best education for the children who attend our four primary schools. We want to keep our schools firmly rooted at the heart of the Canford Heath community and we believe becoming an Academy will strengthen this.

The Trustees and Governors of the TEACH schools have taken the time to consider the future direction of education, the changing financial landscape, and ultimately what is the best way forward to improve provision for the children. However, the Trustees are anxious that they must not rush into any decision and they need to take on board everyone's views. The future is uncertain, but they believe a change to Academy status offers the best long term future, particularly given the current economic pressures.

The Trustees and each School's governors believe now is the time to widen the debate and we seek the views of staff and parents.

V. Arbon. Headteacher and Chair of the TEACH Trust.