

Executive Heads course: “the experience that has most significantly shaped my thinking as head of a MAT”

Wendy Tomes

Sidney Stringer Academy Trust

Wendy Tomes, executive headteacher of Sidney Stringer Academy Trust in the West Midlands, took part in SSAT’s course for executive headteachers in 2014-15, when she had just taken up post in this five-school MAT. “I wanted to find out about good practice elsewhere and how a successful MAT was led,” she says.

“MATs were quite new when we first became one in 2014. Many of us were unsure about the role of executive headteacher and wanted to make sure that we were getting it right. On the course, we were with colleagues in a similar position to us or about to move towards forming a MAT. What really attracted me were the visits to different schools. I remember the SSAT organising a brilliant event in 2010, when I first became head of an academy: a coach tour to six different academies in two days. It was a great opportunity for meeting people and seeing outstanding schools, and I hoped this would be similar.”

On the executive heads course, “I liked all of the trusts that we visited but my favourites were George Spencer MAT, probably because it was the one most similar to ours but a few years ahead of us in terms of development. I also really liked the Ark school we visited very much. They are a large MAT but the sharing of expertise and resources across the trust was very impressive and it was so helpful to hear about how they work with new schools that join, which is a challenge when you first set up.

“There are a lot of differences between MATs, and these learning experiences are as much about seeing what you don’t like as what you do. It was good to realise that there is no one model for a successful MAT.”

Headteacher to executive head

“There is a massive difference between being headteacher of a school and executive head of a number of schools. This leadership course helped me to appreciate this and understand the enormous scale and range of the role. As head of a MAT you will inevitably have less day-to-day contact with the pupils. You will need to delegate more in your own school and be prepared to move highly effective leaders out of your school to support others if they are not yet securely good or outstanding.

“I liked hearing about how other leaders have moved schools that join their MAT from special measures to good. I realised that if your school is in a category then as executive head you will need to be far more involved.

This raised the issue of the extent to which a school could retain its own identity against the corporate identity.

“It made it clear to me that with our own MAT, schools should retain their own identity, but have that Stringer thread running through them. You have to get the balance right. There is more of a Stringer influence if they are or were underperforming. In effect we’re saying to a school: ‘you can have your own autonomy and identity, when you are rated good’.”

Wendy adds, “There was a lot of useful information on governance in the SSAT course. For example, looking at structures and how the governors should hold the trust to account.

“The course also made me think: you have to be really careful about which schools join your MAT. It is quite flattering when schools want to join you, and you could be tempted always to say yes. However, for the MAT to work well it needs to be a partnership – and the school joining needs to understand what the non-negotiables are. The lead school needs to appreciate that whatever the position of the school joining, there will still be good practice that others can benefit from.

“Having been participants in the executive heads course, we were very flattered this year to be invited to host one of the days at Sidney Stringer. I always recommend SSAT’s executive heads programme,” she concludes. “It sharpened my thinking about being a leader of a MAT more than any other course I’ve ever been on.”