



SSAT on the School-led System

Sue Williamson

SSAT

We are **SSAT, the Schools, Students and Teachers network.**

We exist to help improve outcomes for all young people. As a membership organisation of schools and academies across the UK and internationally, we work with leaders, teachers and students to drive school improvement and innovation, and celebrate their successes. We believe in a **truly school-led system**, with schools working in partnership across and beyond the education sector.

At SSAT's heart are our **membership networks**, bringing together school leaders, teachers and students. We have been working with schools for over 30 years, and continue to offer **insight and understanding** into teaching, learning and system leadership. Our **professional development and school improvement programmes** help leaders and teachers to further outcomes for all young people, and develop leadership at all levels across the system.

We are SSAT and we provide fresh ideas for ambitious schools.

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SSAT on the School-led System:

**refocusing governance in local areas,
MATs and individual schools**

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INTRODUCTION

Education in England is still in a transitional phase of moving to a school-led system. SSAT has long been an advocate of schools leading the system, in partnership with other stakeholders. We value the professionalism of teachers and the drive and vision of school leaders, who are committed to meeting the needs of every young person in their care. We have always said that to achieve this there must be specialist support from health professionals, employers, careers experts, etc. Schools need to focus on their core business of teaching and learning, and buy in expertise that enhances learning or removes barriers to learning.

The introduction of multi-academy trusts (MATs) appeared to be a positive step in developing collaboration and, in cross-phase trusts, understanding the transition from one stage of schooling to the next.

However, not a week goes by without some issue being raised about MATs or the system in general. In many ways this is not surprising, as with any innovation there are mistakes made and problems have to be tackled. Most of the mistakes were made at the beginning, when there was a relentless drive for schools to be sponsored and some organisations included

geographically dispersed schools with which it was impracticable to collaborate on all desired levels.

For me, there was not enough open discussion on how we might realise the school-led system and the framework needed to ensure that it succeeded within sensible accountability measures – locally and nationally. At the start, lessons could have been learnt from a small pilot of volunteers that was committed to making the system work.

SSAT wants the school-led system to be successful, but recognises the challenges the system faces:

- Reaching agreement between stakeholders on the purpose of education and the criteria to be used to determine the success or otherwise of the school-led system, and how any changes to policy should be formulated.
- Determining the middle tier. How can we ensure that all schools meet the needs of a locality and are accountable to that community? Can this be achieved within a system of multi-academy trusts or local authorities, or is there a third way? Is there a role for regional school commissioners?
- Accountability. What are the right measures to support appropriate behaviours of school leaders in meeting the needs of all students whatever their ability?
- Governance. What framework should exist in multi-academy trusts and single-standing schools? How do we attract the right quality trustee/governor so that school/MAT leaders are challenged and held to account?
- Learning from business. What lessons can be learnt to ensure best use of resources? This is particularly tricky as many education professionals are fearful about the privatisation of education and the loss of moral purpose.

- Salaries. How do we address the issue of chief executives' and executive headteachers' remuneration?

We have to find answers to these challenges at a time when: we are failing to recruit teachers; there is a reluctance of teachers to proceed along the leadership pathway; and schools are struggling with budget constraints.

This pamphlet is not a piece of academic research, but a discussion piece with some ideas for how we might move to a school-led system that meets the needs of all young people.

The context

Since 2010, ministers and officials at the Department for Education have presented the vision of a school-led system with schools and school leaders having more autonomy than ever before. This is not necessarily how some members of the teaching profession view the situation – they see greater central control.

The Coalition Government placed considerable emphasis on a greater role for school leaders in the system, and greater autonomy through the academy programme. The Schools White Paper in November 2010 advocated a self-improving system: 'The primary responsibility for improvement rests with schools.... Our aim should be to create a school system which is self improving.... We know that teachers learn best from other professionals.... We will make sure that schools are in control of their own improvement and make it easier for them to learn from one another.' An ambition that SSAT not only shared; it had led the development work with programmes such as Leading Edge, Raising Achievement, Transforming Learning (RATL), and its mantra 'by schools, for schools'.

However, SSAT also stressed the importance of collaboration between schools and other stakeholders – academics, higher and further education, employers and parents.

Collaborative working, in the view of SSAT, produces better outcomes. For example, SSAT's work on personalising learning was collaboration between school leaders and an academic, professor David Hargreaves. School leaders brought their knowledge of teaching and learning and shared their outstanding practice. Professor Hargreaves's task was to conceptualise it in ways that made it more coherent than a mere list of what to do next; and SSAT used its networks to distribute the resulting pamphlets mainly authored by professor Hargreaves. SSAT also collaborated with SHA (now Association of School and College Leaders – ASCL) to ensure that the work was distributed widely throughout the profession. In all the pamphlets there were examples of practice from the business world and other sectors. A collaborative approach ensured that individual stakeholders concentrated on their areas of strength.

This approach was endorsed by the McKinsey & Co report – *How the world's most improved school systems keep getting better* (November 2010): 'Few [schools] were certain about why they had been successful: they often did not have a "theory of the case" about why what they did worked. Even fewer had a mental map of how all the changes they made fit together as a coherent whole. Some even thought they had just been lucky.'

Ofsted in its publication *Twelve outstanding secondary schools*, 2009, identified the common strengths of the headteachers in these schools: 'These heads are excellent story tellers – they develop an inclusive narrative for the school that links vision, moral purpose, direction of travel and action.' This is why collaboration and partnership with academics

is so important. When SSAT led on personalising learning, David Hargreaves captured the work being done in schools, drew out the lessons learnt, linked to practice in other sectors and wrote about it in a way that would be eagerly read by the profession. School leaders could take from the work what was right for their school in their context.

As I mentioned earlier, SSAT provided school leaders with the opportunity for school-led improvement through projects such as RATL. Professor Andy Hargreaves and a team from Boston College evaluated this project, and he writes: 'First, RATL taught us that you can raise achievement by getting schools to work with one another, by enabling struggling schools to recognise they are all in the same boat, and by connecting struggling schools to stronger partners.

'Second, you can and should collaborate even, indeed especially, in market competitive systems. Left to themselves, markets widen inequities and isolate professionals. It needs strong professional forces and voices to provide countervailing influences and this is what SSAT has done. Paradoxically, therefore, while England has been one of the most robust promoters of market competitiveness, SSAT has significantly helped ensure that it is also an international leader in how to get schools and local authorities to work together and take collective responsibility for everyone's success. This is what the business literature calls co-opetition.

'Last, our first draft evaluation of RATL had some difficult findings as well as praise. The project raised achievement more than it transformed learning. But, to the delight of my US research team, these limitations were not treated as a fatal blow by SSAT but as a spur to further change and improvement. Openness and dialogue were possible and palpable in research partnerships with sponsors.'

The point I am making is that the schools led the way, but the focus was on collaborative working between schools, and between schools and other stakeholders. Networking ensured that schools were outward looking and that the knowledge was shared – failures as well as well as successes. Innovation was encouraged and it was accepted that not all innovations would work. Criticism needs to be a spur for a cycle of continuous improvement. I have given examples of SSAT projects, but there were others run by organisations like the National College for School Leadership.

Given this ambition, there are dangers of multi-academy trusts being isolated groups and not working across the system. Often this is not because there is an unwillingness to collaborate, but the ‘day job’ and the demands of the ‘now’ take over. There is not a forum for MATs, particularly the larger ones, to collaborate and have a voice. This is why an independent broker or middle tier can be so helpful in promoting cooperation. Undoubtedly the accountability regime needs to encourage collaboration.

Michael Gove, as education secretary, believed that he inherited a system that had too much bureaucracy and too many quangos. He saw SSAT as part of the ‘blob’ that was not helpful to the development of a school-led system. SSAT could continue in a reformed way, but other organisations were closed, eg BECTA (British Educational Communications and Technology Agency), TDA (Training and Development Agency for Schools). So schools lost support mechanisms and people who offered both challenge and support, and the system lost strategic planners.

These decisions were made before schools were ready to lead the system, and while the major focus was the drive to make all schools academies. Gove should have tested these

organisations before closing or reducing their roles. Rather than pilot the introduction of MATs, there was a rapid drive to put failing schools into federations and/or chains. There was no discussion on the balance between autonomy and accountability, and generally any comments made about the new arrangements were seen as unhelpful and unwanted. In my view, the old system was indeed smashed, but little thought was given to governance arrangements in the new system.

Gove wanted to reduce bureaucracy and change the accountability framework. In 2012, he said: ‘Under the last government, accountability was all about accountability upward, either to the local authority or to the Department. We believe that accountability should also be downwards to the community and to individual parents, and that is why we have published far more data than ever before about the performance of schools.’ This approach is one that SSAT would readily endorse, but the reality has not matched the ambition. Later in this pamphlet, I will be presenting SSAT’s line on accountability and how this might influence governance.

A major part of the school-led system is the formation and development of multi-academy trusts. Initially, schools were encouraged to join chains that operated on a national basis. It is well documented that there were major problems with such an approach. At the time of writing there is no evidence that it is an effective way of operating the system, and there are numerous references to failures in operation and governance.

The old system was indeed smashed, but little thought was given to governance arrangements in the new system

The focus now is on developing local trusts. A large number of very effective trusts have been set up and operate in a principled manner. Their focus is on the education of young people and they work with other trusts in a variety of ways.

But even in these effective trusts there are questions regarding the issue of autonomy – are MATs reducing the autonomy of schools? Individual schools no longer have responsibility for their budget and, depending on the MAT, may have no say over curriculum and staffing. These are the issues that I will be looking at in the pamphlet, and I will be making recommendations for improving governance and local accountability.

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