

Joint Union Statement on the Government plans for every state school to join an academy trust

Education unions representing teachers and school staff note the government's recognition that the current school system has become increasingly fragmented and that stronger collaboration between schools is needed. This acknowledgement reflects concerns that have been raised for many years by teachers and support staff about the consequences of repeated structural reforms that have divided the system and weakened local accountability.

However, the proposals in the White Paper risk reinforcing and exacerbating the very problems that the government itself has identified. The plan to move all schools into trusts represents a continuation of a policy approach that has focused on structural reorganisation that has done nothing to address the fundamental challenges facing the education system.

Over more than two decades of academisation, the education system has become increasingly complex and fragmented. Schools now operate within different governance frameworks and regulatory arrangements, with inconsistent levels of transparency and accountability. Publicly funded schools should be subject to clear and consistent local democratic oversight. Instead, the continued expansion of academy trusts has led to decision making that can be remote from local communities, parents and the workforce.

Evidence from across the sector has also highlighted serious concerns about financial oversight, governance and the use of public funding within some academy trusts. Parliamentary committees, regulators and independent research have repeatedly raised questions about whether current arrangements provide sufficient transparency and accountability for the use of public money. In particular, there is widespread and justifiable concern about the excessive amounts paid to academy CEOs and, also, the large sums that some MATs are taking from their academies' budgets to fund their central services. This is not just an issue of accountability, but

of ensuring that the money in the system is used where it should be: to improve the education of students.

Academisation programmes have required significant public expenditure on legal, administrative and restructuring processes. At a time when schools are already facing severe funding pressures, it is difficult to justify diverting scarce public resources towards further structural reorganisation rather than supporting pupils and staff directly. The White Paper provides no information about the likely cost of moving all schools into trusts or how these costs would be funded. This raises serious questions about whether such structural change represents the best use of limited public resources.

Employment practices in too many multi-academy trusts are often extremely poor. Many members of the school workforce have experienced adverse changes to their terms and conditions of employment that undermine their workload, wellbeing, pay and ability to focus on their core learner-focused goals. Pay and conditions for education workers have also been fragmented and the government amendments to the SSSNB, creating floors but no ceilings, risk further pay fragmentation if there is no oversight or reporting mechanisms at local level. Expanding the academies sector will put even more members of the school workforce at risk. If there are no oversight or reporting mechanisms at local level, there is a risk of further pay fragmentation, creating confusion, inequality and lack of fairness.

Research over the past decade has found no clear evidence that academisation improves outcomes across the school system as a whole. Overall, the evidence suggests that factors such as teaching quality, leadership and resources have a much greater impact on educational outcomes than whether a school is an academy or maintained school. Research by Public First (2022) also found that parents prioritise the quality of teaching and support their child receives, rather than school structures. This raises questions about the value of further large-scale structural reform when the evidence suggests that investment in teaching, support staff and resources is more likely to improve outcomes. We would question how it can be fair that MATs continue to grow and senior leaders wages continue to increase whilst

support staff pay is so poor- and yet these workers will be vital to the government's proposed SEND reforms.

At the same time, schools are facing a growing workforce crisis. Recruitment targets for teachers and support staff continue to be missed and levels of teacher wastage remain deeply concerning. Significant numbers of teachers leave the profession within their first few years, while many experienced teachers are leaving early because of excessive workload, pressure and declining morale. Recent NFER research has also highlighted record numbers of school support staff turnover because of these same issues.

Research across the profession has consistently shown that improving teacher retention requires action to reduce workload, strengthen professional trust and improve working conditions. Further academisation or fragmentation will not solve these challenges.

The focus of education reform must be on strengthening the whole system. Schools benefit from genuine collaboration, shared expertise and strong local partnerships. This requires clear accountability, transparency in the use of public funding and policies that support and retain the workforce on which the education system depends.

It also requires sufficient funding, to allow schools to employ staff at the right levels, ensure sustainable workloads and make sure students get the best education possible.

We therefore urge the government to work with us to develop policies that address the real challenges facing the school system. The focus of reforms must be on restoring coherence to the system, strengthening democratic accountability and tackling the recruitment and retention crisis affecting education professionals. There are already ways for schools to collaborate within the existing legal framework – for example through federation models – without incurring the financial costs or loss of local democratic accountability associated with academisation.

The government's position that every school will become part of a trust, will have a further destabilising impact on the system as valuable leadership time will be diverted to focus on these structural changes and become a distraction from raising standards and embedding the significant reforms set out in the White paper particularly in relation to SEND. Without addressing these fundamental issues, further structural change risks deepening fragmentation rather than delivering the stable and collaborative education system that pupils, staff and communities need.