

# How academy school groups defied their business-focused reputation to help students in lockdown

August 10 2021, by Christopher Day

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When [Boris Johnson announced](#) on March 18 2020 that pupils were to stay home until further notice, schools scrambled to adapt at speed.

COVID presented a major disruption to pupils' education and welfare.

National wellbeing surveys have since shown the impact this disruption continues to have on teachers and [school](#) leaders, as well as on the academic progress and wellbeing of [the pupils](#) themselves. [A study](#) looking at the impact on attainment in the first two [school years](#) in England found that year 2 pupils have lost about two months' worth of learning, for instance. For the disadvantaged pupils among them, that figure rises to five to seven months.

As part of an ongoing research project into education leadership in disruptive times, I led [a recent study](#) by the University of Nottingham into how one type of school in particular—those in multi-academy trusts—has responded to the challenges posed by the pandemic.

More than 50% of pupils in the English state-education system are now educated in academies, which are [state-funded schools](#) that operate outside of local authority control (as opposed to community schools, which are still controlled by local authorities). Many academies are now [organized into groups](#) of schools overseen by one trust, which is governed by a board of trustees and led by a CEO and a team of senior personnel.

Multi-academy trusts have [been painted](#) by critics as [predators](#) that seek to expand by taking over community schools and are merely concerned with financial dividends. [Our findings](#), however, show that schools that are grouped together in this way have great pastoral potential and a leadership structure that can benefit both [staff](#) and students.

## **Pandemic performance**

Trusts organize the academies in their ranks into a [corporate structure](#), which allows individual schools to draw upon a greater number of

resources than if they were stand-alone. [According to](#) schools inspector Ofsted, leaders of such schools have reported receiving invaluable support from their trust during the pandemic.

Relatively little [systematic research](#) has been conducted into multi-academy trusts. This was why myself and colleagues at the University of Nottingham undertook a small-scale research project, which has since been published as a [policy paper](#), to examine how robustly those across the East and West Midlands responded to the challenges of the pandemic.

A range of data was collected and analyzed from CEOs and headteachers from 15 trusts of different sizes. These included both primary and secondary academies, catering to students across the socio-economic spectrum. As far as we know, this is the first independent study of its kind in England.

[We found](#) that when COVID hit, CEOs and their teams introduced trust-wide policies to govern school life. These included health and safety, provision of PPE equipment, risk management and remote-learning platforms, staff welfare and wellbeing, and communication strategies.

[Much has](#) been [written](#) in [recent years](#) about the administrative, financial and bureaucratic duties that come with school headships. Our findings show that the structure of these trusts effectively reduced the burden of responsibility and sheer volume of work that otherwise would likely have fallen on individual headteachers.

From the outset of the pandemic, heads were instead able to focus on making sure their staff could keep teaching and their pupils could keep learning, which is arguably their [core purpose](#).

## **Support for pupils and teachers**

Providing pastoral care for pupils as they worked at home during lockdown was [a challenge](#) for schools across the board. [Our findings](#) show that being part of a trust made this task easier for staff.

One of the trusts [we surveyed](#) partnered with Microsoft to devise an inclusive home-learning strategy and make laptops freely available for every [pupil](#). Another did whatever they could to help families in rural areas to get better broadband. Monitoring systems were established to ensure students were engaging in home learning. And staff conducted home visits to ensure parents were on board too. Any students who did not show up for online classes were contacted immediately.

Elsewhere, teachers and school-based support workers regularly made home visits to pupils and their parents where possible (or weekly calls when not). They delivered everything from trust-subsidized IT devices to food parcels.

The CEOs and headteachers [we surveyed](#) all spoke to the importance of sustaining teachers' morale and wellbeing. Some put helplines in place and gave their staff access to one-to-one counseling. Others provided online continuing professional development for their teachers, as well as creating mental health champions in their schools.

[Our respondents](#) also emphasized how they had resisted the temptation to narrow the taught curriculum in response to the crisis. They supported their schools in continuing to operate full timetables.

In one instance, this included providing weekly science sessions, modern foreign languages, art, music and drama classes. Another academy created a choral performance of an original composition entitled Hope, which was performed for the whole school. In one large, geographically diverse trust of over 20 academies, many of which served highly disadvantaged communities, a trust-wide policy for outdoor education

was developed and implemented.

During this crisis, the [trust](#) model served its schools and their communities well. It reduced uncertainties for pupils, parents and staff. It ensured that clear communication channels were quickly established. And it allowed for staff and pupils' welfare and wellbeing to be comprehensively supported. Crucially, it allowed teaching staff to focus on ensuring the continuation of quality educational opportunities for all students.

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