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Sir Michael Wilshaw
Her Majesty's Chief Inspector

Rt Hon. Nicky Morgan MP
Secretary of State for Education
Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
20 Great Smith Street
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Dear Secretary of State

Focused inspections of academies in multi-academy trusts

It is just over a year now since you wrote to me setting out your views on Ofsted's role in reviewing the performance of multi-academy trusts (MATs).¹

Since then, Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) have conducted focused inspections of academies within some of the largest MATs that gave us the most concern, to assess how effectively these trusts were supporting and challenging their academies.²

As you know, I fully support the government's ambition to create a more diverse and autonomous school system. As I said in my latest Annual Report, academisation can lead to rapid improvements and I firmly believe that it is right to give more autonomy to the front line. I also want to be clear that there are some excellent MATs that have made remarkable progress in some of the toughest areas of the country. However, it is crucial that all MATs provide robust oversight, challenge and support to ensure that pupils in all their academies receive a good quality of education.

Given the government's clear intention to move to a fully academised system and, in the Prime Minister's words, 'make local authorities running schools a thing of the past', I think it is important as Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to apprise you of the findings from these assessments to help inform the future academies programme.

Although HMI carried out these focused inspections of academies within the MATs that gave us most concern, the findings are nevertheless worrying. The published letters to seven MATs highlighted serious weaknesses that were contributing to poor progress and outcomes for too many pupils.

Despite having operated for a number of years, many of the trusts manifested the same weaknesses as the worst performing local authorities and offered the same

¹ www.gov.uk/government/publications/academy-inspections-nicky-morgan-writes-to-ofsted.

² See annex for full list of multi-academy trusts reviewed.

excuses. Indeed, one chief executive blamed parents for pupils' poor attendance affecting pupils' performance. There has been much criticism in the past of local authorities failing to take swift action with struggling schools. Given the impetus of the academies programme to bring about rapid improvement, it is of great concern that we are not seeing this in these seven MATs and that, in some cases, we have even seen decline.

Across the seven MATs, inspectors found many of the following concerns:

- poor progress and attainment, particularly at Key Stage 4
- leaders not doing enough to improve attendance or behaviour
- inflated views of the quality of teaching and insufficient scrutiny of the impact of teaching on pupils' progress
- a lack of strategic oversight by the trust of all academies
- a lack of urgency to tackle weak leadership at senior and middle levels
- insufficient challenge from governors and trustees who accepted information from senior leaders without robust interrogation of its accuracy
- confusion over governance structures, reflected in the lack of clarity around the roles and responsibilities of the central trust and the local governing boards of constituent academies. This is not helped by some trusts failing to meet the requirement to publish a scheme of delegation.

Given that the academies movement was initiated principally to improve the performance of disadvantaged pupils, it is particularly concerning that many of the academies in these trusts are failing their poorest children. Findings from our recent focused inspections of AET and SPTA academies, for example, both show a gap of around 25 percentage points³ between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils⁴ attaining Level 4+ in reading, writing and mathematics for the group of academies that we inspected within each MAT. This compares with the national gap of 17 percentage points between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils.

Furthermore, as the SPTA letter that I am publishing today shows, disadvantaged pupils in SPTA academies are not making enough progress by the end of Key Stage 4. In 2015, their progress in English was below that expected nationally in six SPTA academies and in 10 SPTA academies in mathematics.

In AET secondary academies, the proportion of disadvantaged pupils making expected progress in English by the end of Key Stage 4 declined from 63% in 2014 to 53% in 2015. Progress of disadvantaged pupils declined in English in 19 academies and in mathematics in 12 academies.⁵

³ Calculated using unvalidated data as validated data were not available at the time of the inspection. Updating to validated data may change the precise numbers but is unlikely to affect the overall message.

⁴ In this letter, the term 'disadvantaged' is used to refer to pupils in receipt of free school meals.

⁵ Calculated using unvalidated data as validated data were not available at the time of the inspection.

In E-ACT academies, the gap in achievement of disadvantaged pupils and their peers nationally continues to be too wide. In eight of 11 secondary schools in E-ACT where Key Stage 4 data were available, the percentage of disadvantaged pupils making expected progress in mathematics by the end of Key Stage 4 remains below the national expected progress figure of 49.6%.

Given these worrying findings about the performance of disadvantaged pupils and the lack of leadership capacity and strategic oversight by trustees, salary levels for the chief executives of some of these MATs do not appear to be commensurate with the level of performance of their trusts or constituent academies. The average pay of the chief executives in these seven trusts is higher than the Prime Minister's salary, with one chief executive's salary reaching £225k.

This poor use of public money is compounded by some trusts holding very large cash reserves that are not being spent on raising standards. For example, at the end of August 2015, these seven trusts had total cash in the bank of £111 million. Furthermore, some of these trusts are spending money on expensive consultants or advisers to compensate for deficits in leadership. Put together, these seven trusts spent at least £8.5 million on education consultancy in 2014/15 alone.

Monitoring a large number of academies across different parts of the country presents a considerable challenge. Given the lack of leadership capacity and the ineffective monitoring of individual academies in these trusts, it is surprising that some continue to operate over such wide geographical areas. For example, in the three most recent MATs that HMI have reviewed:

- SPTA has 46 academies in 11 local authorities
- E-ACT has 23 academies in 10 local authorities
- AET has 67 academies in 28 local authorities.

I welcome the action you have taken through the Education Funding Agency to constrain the growth of some of these seven academy trusts. However, it is clear that, with such a vast spread of diverse provision, these particular trusts are still struggling to monitor performance effectively.

As you know, I firmly believe that one of the great challenges of our education system is the huge variation in regional performance across the country. The same issue applies to the development of academy trusts. If we are to improve national standards in an increasingly autonomous system, much more needs to be done to reduce the variation in standards between the best and the worst academy trusts.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Wilshaw". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial 'M'.

Sir Michael Wilshaw

Annex

Focused inspections of multi-academy trusts between January 2015 and March 2016

Name of MAT	Date of publication of report letter
School Partnership Trust Academies (SPTA)	10 March 2016
E-ACT	9 February 2016
AET	28 January 2016
The Education Fellowship	12 June 2015
Wakefield City Academies Trust	21 May 2015
CfBT Multi-Academy Trust	21 May 2015
Collaborative Academies Trust	25 March 2015
Oasis Learning Multi-Academy Trust	11 March 2015