

Schools sector perceptions of financial and educational interventions

Associates: Sara Bubb (Sara Bubb Associates)

The research

DfE commissioned this research to understand how maintained schools, academies and academy trusts perceive and experience the department's intervention policies and processes, in particular Financial Notices to Improve (issued to trusts that have breached rules set out in the academies financial handbook) and Direct Academy Orders (issued to maintained schools that have been judged inadequate by Ofsted, requiring them to become sponsored academies). It also sought to understand how these interventions affect teacher workload in both primary and secondary schools.

The research was qualitative in nature, with fieldwork conducted over three weeks in March 2018. It consisted of interviews with 27 school and academy trust leaders.

Key findings

The key findings of this research centred on DfE and Education Skills Funding Agency interventions with schools and academy trusts. These included:

- Few people shared the DfE's understanding of the term 'intervention'.
- All those interviewed recognised the need to hold schools and trusts to account and to protect public money. In some cases, intervention was welcomed for improving orderly governance and leadership, and re-establishing the proper use of public funds. Some would have liked intervention to take place sooner.
- Intervention had a huge impact on workload and wellbeing. Timelines were often felt to be demanding but leaders accepted that they were necessary. It often meant an extremely stressful process of reorganisation and redundancies. The publicity around these actions had the potential for reputational damage and required careful handling by all parties. Bad press could cause falling rolls, and thus declining budgets and improvement capacity.
- Where financial improvements were required, respondents generally found the itemised steps required of them and the DfE's financial benchmarking information helpful. They nevertheless commented that proposed solutions to

financial problems, such as deficit reduction programmes, should take careful account of their impact on teaching and learning.

- Leaders expressed concern that multiple simultaneous interventions by different agencies exerted cumulative stress without adding proportionate value. In some cases, intervention activity appeared to them to be ill-timed, repetitious, or poorly co-ordinated between agencies, with adverse effects on schools, trusts, and their leaders. There was also concern that some RSCs and headteacher boards appeared to duplicate the central intervention functions, and should concentrate more on promoting local school improvement.
- The processes of academisation or of re-brokering to a different multi-academy trust were considered demanding, lengthy and costly. This delayed school improvement. Due diligence processes were particularly time-consuming.
- Official communications were considered to require improvement in tone, process and content. This applied to meetings, correspondence, and guidance. Many interviewees felt frustrated by not having contact details and having to deal with a turnover of officials. They called for greater transparency from RSCs and better cross-agency co-ordination. Guidance documentation
Some information demands appeared arbitrary or excessive, and many leaders felt that officials did not appreciate the heavy burdens involved.