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Spreading success

Why Australia should trial multi-school organisations

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Overview

Australia expects each of its schools to provide an excellent education that meets children's diverse needs. But this is difficult work and most schools lack the support needed to achieve it.

Too many children are treading water in schools that struggle to improve academic performance, meet students' complex needs, or offer a rich set of life experiences. Principals, meanwhile, are straining under the weight of expectations. And teachers frequently find themselves in workplaces that lack the resources and know-how to provide the training and career development essential for a strong profession.

Running highly effective schools is hard. On their own, most schools are too small to marshal the experienced leadership, specialist expertise, and operational nous needed to do this well. While education departments have the organisational heft required, they find it difficult to provide each school with a clear vision for improvement, and precise and practical operational support. And the advice they do provide is sometimes incompatible with day-to-day realities on the ground. Meanwhile, regional supports and collaborative school networks – designed to help tackle these challenges – are limited in the actions they can take to drive real improvement.

The result is a system in which schools are expected to provide an outstanding education, but often feel poorly supported to do so. While Australia has a number of exceptional schools, it has struggled to spread enough success to deliver on its promise of educational excellence for all. And when schools fall short, it is unclear who should bear responsibility, and who should take charge of turning things around.

Establishing multi-school organisations (MSOs) could help. MSOs are strong 'families' of schools, bound together through a united executive leadership that is accountable for students' results.

For this report, Grattan Institute conducted case studies of successful MSOs in England and New York City. Most of these MSOs run schools that are fully-government funded, fee-free, and open to all students.

The case studies show that effective MSOs increase the odds of school improvement. Leading strong families of between 10 and 100 schools, these MSOs have a mandate to maintain high standards, and are accountable for doing so. Each has a clear blueprint for running an effective school, and the authority to enact this blueprint across multiple schools, including turning around schools that have under-performed for decades.

Their 'Goldilocks' size helps too. These MSOs are small enough to understand – and 'own' – the specific challenges their principals, teachers, and students face. But they are also big enough to marshal the resources and expertise their schools need.

Each Australian school sector should trial MSOs. State and territory governments and large Catholic dioceses should establish multiple trials. Independent schools – especially small ones – should consider trialling MSOs too. Each trial should start with a high-performing 'beacon' school, and gradually build to a family of 10 schools within a decade, with further growth possible after that.

While the MSO structure gives schools a clearer shot at improving, it does not guarantee it. Internationally, some MSOs have performed poorly or been mismanaged. Australia should learn from these mistakes and set clear expectations for the trial MSOs. Governments should also establish a robust regulatory framework for the trials, including rigorous public reviews.

Schools need a lot more support to provide an excellent education for all. MSOs offer a powerful way to give schools the boost they need.

Findings

Multi-school organisations are school improvement specialists

- The multi-school organisations (MSOs) Grattan Institute studied are strong families of schools, united under shared executive leadership. In each MSO, schools receive substantial support from a head office team.
- These MSOs 'own' the challenge of school improvement, have the authority to implement changes in their schools, and are accountable for students' results.
- With between 10 and 100 schools, their 'Goldilocks' size helps them provide each school with practical support to address challenges 'on the ground'.
- MSOs can spread the influence of exceptional principals, teachers, and specialist staff, so more students in more schools benefit directly from great leadership.
- MSOs create a formal partnership between schools that helps them share resources and coordinate improvement efforts.
- MSOs learn from every school they improve, accruing knowledge on how to lead a school turnaround, and developing a seasoned group of principals who have 'done it before'.

Effective multi-school organisations make a big difference for principals, teachers, and students

- MSOs can give principals practical support to help them focus on teaching and learning, and to support them in crises.
- MSOs can take advantage of running multiple schools to offer teachers and other professionals (such as IT and facilities staff) career pathways and professional development opportunities that are not possible in stand-alone schools.
- MSOs can harness the collective resources of their schools to help teachers with curriculum and assessment.
- MSOs can spread best practice across schools, and provide students with enhanced specialist support and life experiences.

Multi-school organisations provide broader system benefits

- MSOs can help train the next generation of teachers, and deliver high-quality professional development for principals, teachers, and non-teachers across an education system.
- MSOs are well-placed to create and share high-quality curriculum materials, as well as research and guidance on establishing and running effective schools.
- MSOs have successfully turned around challenging, under-performing schools.

Governments must play a key role in school education systems with effective multi-school organisations

- While the MSO structure can increase the odds of school improvement, not all MSOs take advantage of the structure and some perform poorly.
- Governments play a key role in setting public expectations for schools, and establishing the policies and regulatory frameworks that ensure multi-school organisations genuinely add value to the schools they run.

Recommendation

Australia should establish several trials of multi-school organisations in each state, territory, and school sector.

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1 Australian schools are struggling

Many Australian schools are struggling. This is not surprising: governments have underestimated just how hard it is to improve a school.

Too often, school improvement relies on the 'superhero' efforts of individual principals. Australia has tried other approaches to school improvement, but none has led to the system-wide improvement needed. As a result, school quality and student results vary widely across the country.

Australian students – particularly those in poor-performing schools – deserve better.

There is another option that Australia is yet to try. Multi-school organisations (MSOs) feature in several education systems internationally. Grattan Institute researchers studied MSOs in England and New York City and found the structure can be a powerful vehicle for school improvement, delivering big benefits for principals, teachers, and students.

1.1 Most Australian schools struggle to boost student achievement

All Australian students deserve the chance to experience a great education, no matter the school they go to. This includes the opportunity to develop strong literacy and numeracy skills, alongside other skills and experiences that will help them thrive in and beyond school.[1]

In an improving school education system, each new cohort of students should learn more than the students who came before them. By this measure, most Australian schools are stuck.

Average achievement in the past decade has been mostly stagnant. While there have been gains in primary school (between five and six months of improvement in the decade to 2022), these have been largely limited to reading and they have not translated into better results for secondary school students.[2]

Australia has a long way to go to achieve excellence and equity. About one in three primary and secondary students fell short of the proficiency benchmark in reading and numeracy in the 2023 NAPLAN tests.[3] In outer regional and remote schools, nearly half of students did not meet the proficiency benchmark.[4] And about two-thirds of Indigenous students were below the benchmark.[5]

A closer look at school-level NAPLAN data shows that many students are stuck in schools that are consistently performing poorly (see Box 1 on the following page). Every week that a child is educated in an under-performing school is a week where they risk falling further behind their peers in better performing schools. The costs of under-performance

1. This is made clear in the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration*. See Education Council (2019, p. 2).

2. Grattan Institute analysis of ACARA (2023a). In 2022, Year 3 average reading achievement was about five months ahead of where it was in 2012. Year 5 achievement was about six months ahead.
3. Grattan analysis of ACARA (2023b). At least 30 per cent of students were below the proficiency benchmark in numeracy and reading at all year levels, except for Year 5 reading, for which about 24 per cent of students were below the benchmark.
4. Grattan analysis of ACARA (ibid), using a weighted average across results for the Year 3, 5, 7 and 9 reading and numeracy tests.
5. Grattan analysis of ACARA (ibid), using a weighted average across results for the Year 3, 5, 7 and 9 reading and numeracy tests.

weigh heavily on these students – especially disadvantaged students – and on Australia's society and economy as a whole.

This troubling national picture persists despite increased spending. Total government spending on public schools in the decade to 2022 grew in real terms from $43 billion to $58.7 billion, an increase of 23 per cent per student.[6]

More money alone won't fix this problem. We need another way.

1.2 Expectations on schools are also increasing

Over the past few decades, expectations on schools have increased. In addition to delivering a broad academic curriculum and vocational opportunities, schools are increasingly asked to tackle physical and social issues, such as mental health and well-being, obesity, cyber-bullying, and consent in personal relationships.[7] Schools are also now expected to develop students' broad skills in areas such as digital literacy, entrepreneurship, and intercultural communication.[8]

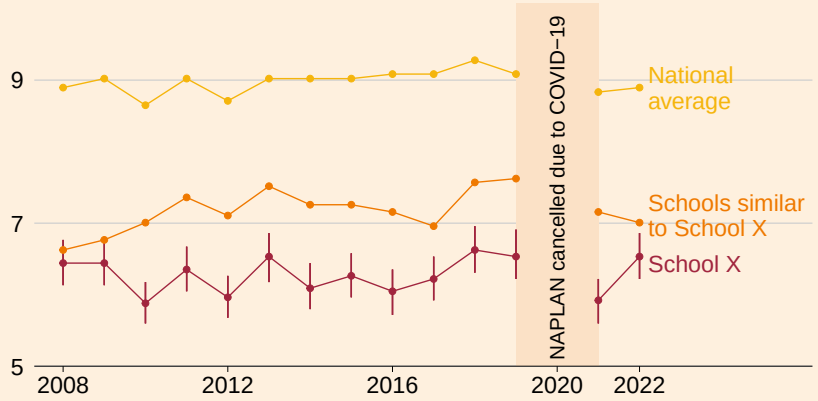
The characteristics of the Australian student population are also changing. Teachers report difficulties supporting students with mental health problems, complex behavioural challenges, or disability.[9] For example, from 2009 to 2018 there was a 40 per cent increase in the

6. Values adjusted to 2021-22 dollars using the General Government Final Consumption Expenditure (GGFCE) chain price deflator. See Productivity Commission (2024, tables 4A.1 and 4A1.29). Some of the rise in per-pupil funding is attributable to an increase in proportion of students at government schools from equity cohorts – such as students with a disability. See Productivity Commission (ibid, tables 4A.9-12). These students attract extra funding.
7. Hunter et al (2022); Rickards et al (2021); and NSW Teachers Federation (2021).
8. The Department of Education (2022); and Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (2020).
9. See, for example, Social Research Centre (2023).

Box 1: Students in consistently under-performing schools miss out the most

There are 145 schools in Australia where Year 9 NAPLAN reading and numeracy results have been at least 1.5 years behind the national average every year since 2008.[a] At one of these schools – a large, outer-metropolitan, government school – the average Year 9 student has been reading at about a Year 6 level since 2008 (see School X in Figure 1.1). These students are nearly one year behind students in schools serving students with similar backgrounds, and more than two years behind the national average. The school's numeracy results are also persistently low.

Figure 1.1: The Year 9 reading results of one large school (School X) that is consistently underperforming
Equivalent year level of achievement in NAPLAN



Notes: NAPLAN scale scores converted to equivalent year levels using the methodology in ACARA (2022a). Vertical lines on School X's mean scores show the 90 per cent confidence interval.

Source: Grattan analysis of ACARA (2023c).

a. Grattan analysis of ACARA (2023c).

number of students with an identified disability regularly attending mainstream classes.[10]

The increasing expectations on schools and the complex challenges that many face make it harder for schools to improve.

1.3 Great principals are essential, but they should not have to be 'superheroes' to improve schools

Principals can have a big impact on students' achievement, as well as students' and teachers' experience at school. A highly effective principal can raise typical student achievement by up to seven months in a single year, and even more in disadvantaged schools.[11] But the opposite is also true: ineffective principals can lower achievement by the same amount.

Schools are complex organisations to run, let alone improve. The average secondary school principal manages a budget of more than $15 million, which is more than the turnover of 98 per cent of Australian businesses.[12] They are also responsible for managing, on average, 106 staff.[13]

And the challenges for principals in Australia's many small schools can be just as significant – about 30 per cent of primary schools have fewer than 10 full-time teachers.[14] Those schools are expected to deliver the same quality of education as bigger schools, but with a tiny fraction of the resources.

10. Hunter et al (2022, p. 11).
11. The seven months estimate is from a study that used achievement in standardised maths tests: Branch et al (2013). See also: A. Harris et al (2023) and Leithwood et al (2020) and literature cited in Grissom et al (2013).
12. Grattan analysis of ABS (2023a) and ACARA (2022b). Business counts are as of the end of 2020-2021 *financial* year. School budgets are from the 2021 *calendar* year.
13. Grattan analysis of ACARA (2023d).
14. Grattan analysis of ACARA (ibid).

Principals' responsibilities include setting their school's strategic direction, overseeing the curriculum and teaching approach, building teachers' professional skills, keeping students safe and ensuring their individual learning and well-being needs are seen to, managing the school's budget and facilities, engaging the local community, and helping students pursue post-school pathways.[15]

Principals often feel isolated and overburdened by these responsibilities.[16] Nearly half of principals who responded to one survey triggered a 'red flag' alert, indicating serious mental health concerns, such as risk of self-harm.[17]

In one Australian study, researchers interviewed 50 principals about the pressure of the role.[18] Their reflections included:

> You are left in a situation where the buck really does stop with you, from a school level up and system down. When I ask for help, it is usually that it is up to me; it is quite lonely and intimidating.
>
> (Government primary school principal, WA)

> It can be lonely, and you're certainly not in the job to make friends. You're there to make the best school and the best local community that you can, and the pressures that come with that can be extremely overwhelming from time to time.
>
> (Government early childhood principal, ACT)

Australia relies too much on superhero principals to improve schools, one at a time. Those principals who do manage to improve their schools significantly, often do so at great personal cost.[19] This can leave principals burnt out by the effort and reluctant to do it again.

15. See, for example: AITSL (2019), Victorian Department of Education and Training (2016) and Angus et al (2007, p. 54).
16. Dinham et al (2019); and Deloitte (2017).
17. See et al (2023, p. 42).
18. Dinham et al (2019, pp. 190–191).
19. McKay and Mills (2022); and Maxwell and Riley (2017).

1.4 Teachers are struggling and students miss out too

Many teachers are also struggling with the status quo.

In a 2022 Monash University survey of more than 5,497 Australian teachers and school leaders, just 46 per cent of teachers said they felt satisfied with their role, down from 66 per cent in 2019.[20] Teachers point to a heavy workload, too much administrative work, ineffective leadership, and poor student behaviour as key obstacles to their job satisfaction.[21] And in a 2021 Grattan Institute survey, 74 per cent of the 5,000 teachers surveyed said not having enough support to help students with complex needs was an issue or major issue at their school.[22]

Individual teachers can't fix these problems on their own, and many work in schools where principals can't fix these problems either.

Students feel the effects. Many students, particularly in disadvantaged schools, lack access to rigorous academic subjects, high-quality careers guidance, and a broad set of enrichment experiences.[23] Most students who are behind in their learning in Year 3, stay behind right through school.[24] This is not surprising, given many schools struggle to implement effective approaches to help students catch up,[25] and provide specialist support for students with additional needs.[26]

1.5 Our current models for school improvement aren't up to the challenge

Australian policy makers have experimented with different approaches to school improvement. These have included increasing school autonomy with the goal of freeing up principals to better respond to their local communities, creating collaborative networks of schools to tackle common challenges, increasing central education departments' influence over schools' operations, and boosting the regional arms of education departments to provide schools with more support.

Within each state and territory, a combination of these approaches is in place.[27] These combinations have varied over time as policy makers have sought to find ways to boost school improvement. While each model has a role to play, none address the underlying structural challenges that hinder school improvement across the system.[28]

School autonomy has increased the burden on principals, without enough payoff

State government policies over recent decades have delegated many decisions to individual principals, such as designing a teaching and

20. Longmuir et al (2022, p. 18).
21. Longmuir et al (2022, p. 19) and AITSL (2023). See Hunter et al (2022) for a more detailed discussion of teacher workload.
22. Ibid (p. 16).
23. Sullivan et al (2013) and Groves et al (2023). Redmond and O'Donnell (2021) found that in low-income suburbs, one-third of Australian children aged 12 and 13 do not take part in any co-curricular activities. Research from O'Donnell and Barber (2021) shows that these activities are especially beneficial for disadvantaged students.
24. Williams et al (2023, p. 7) estimate that between 2008 and 2015, only 29 per cent of students who were low-achievers in Year 3 numeracy caught up to perform above the national minimum standard in Year 9. In reading, just 21 per cent caught up. Students whose parents did not finish high school were six times as likely to remain consistently low-achieving through school.
25. In one recent survey, two in five secondary teachers reported low confidence in their school's approach to helping students who fall behind. More felt this way in government and rural schools. See Weldon et al (2022).
26. Commonwealth of Australia (2023a).
27. See, for example, discussion in Gurr et al (2022) about different approaches in place simultaneously in Victoria.
28. There is limited published research evaluating the impact of Australian states' and territories' different approaches to school improvement. This section brings together the available evidence with Grattan's analysis of extensive, ongoing consultation with teachers, principals, and education policy makers.

learning program, hiring staff, and increasing discretion over how they use their school budget.[29]

The intention is to increase principals' freedom to decide what is best for their school. But unless principals have the right resources and expertise in their school, this freedom can make their job harder, leaving them to run their schools as 'autonomous islands'.[30] And encouraging schools to devise local solutions often leaves too much on a principal's plate,[31] and squanders opportunities to solve improvement problems that are common to most schools.

Relying on superhero principals to change one school at a time is an ineffective way to spread success. It is also a fragile improvement model. Even when progress has been made, things can quickly unravel when a principal moves on.[32] This is a particular challenge in disadvantaged schools, which tend to have higher principal turnover, making it harder to embed long-term change where it's needed most.[33]

29. In Western Australia and Queensland, for example, governments introduced a program of independent public schools: government schools with high degrees of autonomy to – for example – manage and use their budget, recruit teachers, contract support staff, design their curriculum, and determine their professional development days. See Western Australian Department of Education (2023), Queensland Department of Education (2018) and Trimmer (2013).
30. Bracks (2015, p. 6).
31. For example, in 2012 NSW granted schools significant autonomy to make local decisions and have a greater say over how they allocated resources. While many principals welcomed the flexibility to make local decisions, most felt the reform increased the administrative burden on schools. See Griffiths et al (2020). The NSW government has since pulled back on the reform, and moved to a model of greater centralisation. See Gavin and Stacey (2023, p. 520)
32. See discussion in Moreno (2020, p. 46).
33. See, for example, Heffernan (2021).

Collaborative networks of principals are too loose to coordinate improvement efforts effectively

Schools are often grouped into loose collaborative networks in the hope that this will help them tackle challenges collectively.[34] Principals of nearby schools meet regularly in these networks to discuss and reflect on common problems. These informal networks can be a valuable place to share tips and encouragement and can sometimes lead to coordinated efforts across schools.[35] But there are several practical reasons why even the best peer-to-peer networks are not well-suited to systematically improving a group of schools.

Schools often take diverging approaches, leaving little room to act together. For instance, two schools may want to work together to improve their English results. But if they study different novels and have different approaches to curriculum planning, pedagogy, and assessment, they will lack the common language needed for meaningful collaboration. As a result, collaboration can add to workloads with little to show for the hard work.

Loose collaborative networks are also poorly suited to turning around schools because they do not give the network's best schools the authority or funds to spend the sustained time needed to lead change in a struggling school.

Further, these networks rely on the willingness of principals to participate. Sometimes this works, but if nearby schools compete for enrolments and staff, principals may see each other as competitors, not collaborators.[36]

34. See, for example, Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership (2022) and J. Chapman et al (2007).
35. Singhania et al (2020), Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan (2016) and Suggett (2014). See also Hargreaves (2012, p. 4) for a discussion on how 'structural integration' supports deep collaboration between schools.
36. See, for example: Gobby et al (2018) and Jensen et al (2023, p. 8). See also discussion in C. Chapman and Muijs (2014, p. 390) in reference to

Education departments find it difficult to give schools precise and practical support

Education departments – and Catholic Education offices[37]– have the organisational heft needed to address many of the challenges that are too big for stand-alone schools to solve. But they face political and structural barriers to providing the kind of tailored, practical support principals need.

Many operate a vast number of schools. The Queensland, Victorian, and NSW departments, for instance, operate between 1,200 and almost 2,200 schools each.[38] Some Catholic Education offices also operate large numbers of schools.[39] Attempting to cater for so many schools makes it hard for these departments to create detailed operational policies and provide practical help that is precise enough to be useful to a time-poor principal. Further, the distance between schools and departments means even well-designed improvement initiatives can fall flat.[40]

Departments also come under pressure to ensure the advice they provide is acceptable to a diverse range of schools and stakeholders. The pressure to balance competing interests and avoid political risk can lead to conflicting policies, a watering down of advice to schools, or a reticence to provide any advice at all. This can hamper principals' school improvement efforts.[41]

And even if government guidance is intended as a suggestion, in practice it can be strictly applied by risk-averse principals and departmental staff.[42]

The exhausting dance of making vague and sometimes conflicting policies work on the ground adds to principals' administrative workloads and leaves them with less time to focus on improving student learning.[43]

Education departments also face significant difficulties in closely monitoring the progress of improvement efforts in schools, given the large number of schools for which they are responsible.[44] And when principals and teachers do raise valid concerns, it can be hard for departments to change tack quickly or allow exceptions in cases that warrant them.

school-to-school collaboration in the English context at the turn of the century. More formal arrangements – in which schools benefit from shared executive leadership and common governance – can focus collaboration and incentivise geographically proximate schools to coordinate their efforts. See, for example, Dimmer (2017, p. 147).

37. For brevity, the rest of this report refers to both Catholic Education offices and state and territory education departments as simply 'education departments'.
38. Government departments in NSW, Victoria, and Queensland run 2,151, 1,554, and 1,248 schools respectively. See ABS (Table 35b, 2023b).
39. Catholic Education offices in Melbourne, Perth, Sydney, and Brisbane run 296, 158, 147, and 146 schools respectively. See Melbourne Archdiocese Catholic Schools (2023, p. 12), Catholic Archdiocese of Perth (n.d.), Sydney Catholic Schools (2024) and Brisbane Catholic Education (n.d.).
40. Whitty et al (1998).
41. See, for example, discussion in Powell and Graham (2017, pp. 224, 228) about 'lack of clarity' and 'conflicting priorities' in Commonwealth, state, and territory and Catholic Education offices' policy documents on student well-being. See also discussion about governments' contradictory guidance on teaching reading in Hunter et al (2024) and Del Rio and Jones (2023, p. 40).
42. See, for example, Suggett (2015, p. 14) and Trimmer (2013, p. 182). For example, a principal may wish to introduce a new behaviour policy to create calmer classrooms and lift expectations for learning. But in setting consequences for poor behaviour, a principal may be constrained by departmental guidance that cautions against temporarily removing students from class or advises schools to provide 24-hours' notice for an after-school detention.
43. See, for example, discussions in Heffernan and Pierpoint (2020) and Heffernan (2018).
44. See, for example, the challenges of departments maintaining a tight feedback loop with schools: OECD (2023, p. 30).

Regional staff are stretched thin and must contest with high levels of school autonomy to implement change

Most government education departments employ regional staff that provide support to schools in a particular geographical area. Ideally, regional staff – and in particular principal supervisors – would provide the kind of shoulder-to-shoulder support that principals need. But they are frequently stretched too thin.[45]

Most principal supervisors, often former principals, support about 20 to 30 schools, but some support much more. They broker help from a regional office that has support staff, such as well-being coordinators and attendance officers. But with so many schools to oversee, supervisors tend to focus on supporting schools facing acute crises, such as a collapsed roof or a serious medical incident.

A supervisor's mix of schools makes it difficult too – they will often have a combination of primary, secondary, and specialist schools operating under very different conditions.

And while supervisors can offer improvement advice to individual principals, high levels of school autonomy in some states and sectors can make it very hard to be directive, especially in relation to teaching and learning approaches. This can thwart supervisors' attempts to coordinate efforts across several schools, and to implement the urgent changes required in under-performing schools.

45. See, for example, Victorian Auditor-General's Office (2020, p. 25).

1.6 Multi-school organisations can improve the odds of school improvement

There is another way to support school improvement that Australian governments are yet to try.

Multi-school organisations (MSOs) are strong 'families' of schools, grouped together under the operational control of an executive leader, such as a high-performing former school principal. The schools in an MSO share joint governance and accountability.[46] The 'formal' bonds between an MSOs' schools make MSOs distinct from the loose collaborative networks described in Section 1.5.

Schools in an MSO benefit from precise guidance and substantial support to enact a common blueprint for running an effective school. For example, schools in an MSO frequently use common curriculum and assessment materials, and run shared teacher induction and professional learning.[47]

The authority of an MSO's executive leadership to provide this guidance and support distinguishes MSOs from the relationship between stand-alone schools and education departments or their regional arms. The coordination required to implement a common blueprint is hardwired into the MSO structure thanks to the formal bonds between the schools and their executive leadership.[48]

Schools in an MSO maintain a strong sense of identity connected to their local community.[49] Students and teachers feel a connection to their school, but also see they are part of something bigger.

Grouping schools into MSOs creates a 'Golidlocks' structure for school improvement (see Figure 1.2 on page 15). Running at least 10

46. Bauckham and Cruddas (2021).
47. See, for example, Cirin (2017, p. 38).
48. Cruddas (2023).
49. See, for example, Barnes (2020, p. 177)

schools, the size of MSOs is 'just right' to ensure the MSO head office understands the types of challenges each of their schools face, while having the authority and organisational heft needed to address those challenges.

But while the MSO structure can boost the odds of school improvement, it does not guarantee it.[50] Governments must still establish clear policy goals for education and strong accountability frameworks to ensure all MSOs take advantage of their structure to improve the schools they run.[51] But when they do, the results are impressive.

To investigate the opportunities for school improvement created by MSOs, Grattan Institute researchers conducted case studies of six high-performing MSOs in England and New York City (see Box 2).[52] To investigate less formal structures, Grattan researchers also visited an organisation supporting – but not directly operating – a group of government schools in New York City.

The MSOs we profile in this report serve diverse families of schools. They helped new schools find their feet, propelled good schools to become great, supported exceptional schools to maintain excellent standards of education, and turned around schools with a history of under-performance. Their schools ranged from highly disadvantaged schools, to schools in more affluent areas and even different school sectors – one of the MSOs we studied includes a mix of government and independent schools.

50. The best MSOs in England and New York City have greatly improved the achievement rates of their disadvantaged students, but some MSOs perform less well. See, for example, Raymond et al (2023), Lucas et al (2023), D. Harris and Chen (2022), Eyles and Machin (2019), Hutchings and Francis (2018), Andrews (2018), Bernardinelli et al (2018), Cohodes (2018), Andrews (2017), Cohodes et al (2016) and Hoxby et al (2009).
51. Freedman (2022); Carter and McInerney (2020); Greany (2019); and Menzies et al (2018).
52. See Appendix B for a summary of our case study methodology.

Box 2: Multi-school organisations in England and New York City

We chose England and New York City as locations for our research because MSOs in both systems educate large numbers of students in free, government-funded schools.

The MSOs we visited in England were all multi-academy trusts – charities which run a group of schools under a single contract with the government. Schools in multi-academy trusts do not generally charge student fees.

Multi-academy trusts have become an important part of government schooling in England. As of January 2023, about 47 per cent of English students were educated in multi-academy trusts.[a] The English government now sees multi-academy trusts as 'the best long-term formal arrangement for stronger schools to support the improvement of weaker schools'.[b]

In New York City, charter management organisations have run fee-free, government-funded schools since 1999. They educate about 15 per cent of the city's students in public schools, many of whom are economically disadvantaged and from minority groups.[c]

As well as charter management organisations, Grattan visited an MSO in the Catholic sector, and an organisation providing support to traditional government schools without formally running them.

See Appendix A for more details.

a. See Department for Education (2023a, p. 40). Proportion of students based on state-funded (i.e. government) schools only.
b. Department for Education (2016a, p. 57).
c. See New York City Charter School Center (2023a), noting the demographic breakdown does not distinguish between stand-alone charter schools and schools run by a charter management organisation.

To select the case studies, Grattan researchers sought out examples that took advantage of the MSO structure to improve schools.[53] Only MSOs demonstrably adding value to student results were considered. The case studies varied across important dimensions, including size, geographic spread, and school improvement approach (see Table 1.1 on page 16).

For each case study, the Grattan team conducted interviews and focus groups with staff in the head office and in schools, analysed publicly available student data, and reviewed documentation such as school improvement strategies and curriculum materials. In all but one MSO, Grattan researchers spent two days onsite and visited at least two schools.

1.7 The structure of this report

This report outlines the benefits of MSOs – as illustrated through Grattan's case studies – and argues that Australia should trial MSOs.

Chapter 2 describes one MSO – Star Academies in England – and provides a practical example of what the MSO model makes possible.

Chapter 3 explains how MSOs maximise the impact of the best educational leaders: they attract and develop great leaders, empower them to run more schools, and remove many of the distractions that impede their effectiveness.

Chapter 4 shows how MSOs are school-improvement specialists: they 'own' the school improvement challenge, have a detailed vision for improvement, are the right size to deliver that vision, and can be held accountable if they fail to improve schools.

Chapter 5 details how MSOs have delivered meaningful innovation across the school education sector.

Chapter 6 recommends trialling MSOs in each Australian state and territory.

53. A limitation of our purposive sampling approach is that we could not explore the features that distinguish more and less effective MSOs. For discussions on these features, see Cruddas (2023), Carter and McInerney (2020), Greany (2019) and Menzies et al (2018).

Figure 1.2: Multi-school organisations are the 'Goldilocks' structure to improve schools

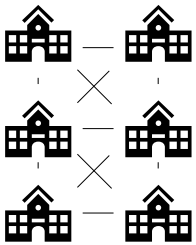
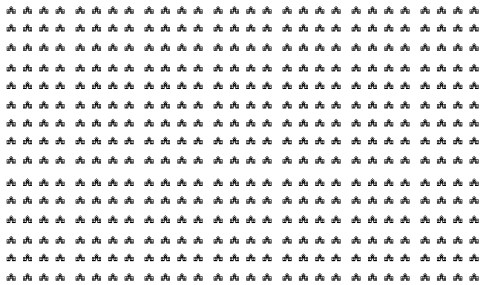
STAND-ALONE SCHOOL Too small	MULTI-SCHOOL ORGANISATION Just right	EDUCATION DEPARTMENT Too big
 'Owns' challenges on the ground, but lacks the organisation heft to address all of them Highly dependent on the personal sacrifices of heroic principals Successes in standalone schools are hard to spread across the system	 Tight feedback loop  Has operational control of a manageable number of schools which helps it know schools intimately, and 'own' and address challenges on the ground Alignment, resource-sharing, and collaboration are hardwired into the formal structure	 Struggles to 'own' challenges on the ground, or provide precise and practical support because it runs too many disparate schools and contends with competing interests 
Example task: Schools need to provide a strong induction program for new teachers, including coaching and training.		
A teacher gets two hours a week to cobble together an induction program. There are only three new teachers starting, so the return on investment is minimal.	An expert in adult learning – based in one of the MSO's schools – is seconded to the head office four days per week to design a bulk induction program. It is specific to the MSO's teaching and learning approach. Inductees work with a coach who floats between schools and gives precise feedback.	A government department or Catholic Education office designs a large induction program. It is high-level and generic because of standalone schools' different teaching and learning approaches.

Table 1.1: The seven organisations that Grattan visited

Name	Description
England	
United Learning Trust	• The largest MSO in England, with 97 schools, comprising 85 fee-free government schools (35 primary, 46 secondary, and four combined primary and secondary schools) and 12 independent schools (which do charge fees) • Traces history to the foundation of a group of Anglican girls schools from 1884 onwards • Has taken on more than 50 turnaround schools
Dixons Academies	• Began in 1990 by opening one of 15 schools chosen by the English government to be new innovative fee-free schools, autonomous from the traditional local government-run school systems • Now runs 17 schools in England's north: three primary, 11 secondary, two combined primary and secondary, and one senior secondary • 10 of these schools are turnaround schools
Star Academies	• 33 schools: 10 primary, 22 secondary, and one combined primary and secondary • Grew from high-performing Islamic faith schools • Has since taken on 14 turnaround schools
New York	
KIPP NYC (Knowledge is Power Program New York City) Public Schools	• Opened in 1995 with one school in the Bronx • Now runs 18 schools: nine elementary schools, eight middle schools, and one high school* • Implemented a model of greater alignment between schools • Part of the national umbrella network of 275 KIPP schools
Success Academies	• Opened its first school in 2006 in Harlem • 53 schools: 34 elementary schools, 16 middle schools, and three high schools • The highest-performing MSO in New York City • Focuses on opening new schools, and replicating its proven model in those schools
Partnership Schools	• Opened in 2013, when the Archdiocese of New York granted full operational control of six of its schools to a charity called the Partnership • Now runs 11 Catholic elementary schools in New York and Cleveland
New Visions for Public Schools	• Began by running small schools, and now provides support to 71 government middle and high schools in New York City • Does not govern the schools, making it a less formal arrangement than the six MSOs

*Notes: *In New York, elementary schools serve students from Prep through to Years 4, 5, or 6. Middle schools serve upper primary students (Years 4 to 6) through to lower secondary students (Years 7 and 8). High schools serve students in Years 9 to 12.*

2 A look inside a high-performing multi-school organisation

Star Academies (Star) is one of the six high-performing MSOs visited by Grattan. It is among England's top-performing multi-school organisations. Since its early success with an all-girls Islamic school, Star has opened schools from scratch and taken on 14 challenging government turnaround schools.

Star now educates more than 23,000 students in 33 schools spread across five regions. This includes 22 secondary schools, 10 primary schools, and one combined primary and secondary school.[54] The schools are a mix of Islamic faith-designated schools, and secular schools. All are government-funded; no Star school charges fees or selects students based on academic merit.

Over time, Star has systematised its approach to school improvement, and used its size and structure to create opportunities for staff and students that would be near impossible in a stand-alone school. Today, Star seeks to give back to the education system and improve the quality of education for children attending other schools.

2.1 Star Academies' origins

The first Star school was founded in Blackburn, Lancashire, in 1984. Blackburn is a socially disadvantaged town in the north of England. A textile hub during the Industrial Revolution, its economy was hit hard by the decline in Britain's cotton industry. Blackburn remains an area of high deprivation: in the 2021 Census, it was ranked the 10th most income-deprived area out of England's 316 local government areas.[55]

In this context, Star's founding school – Tauheedul Islam Girls' High School – has achieved impressive results. It became a fee-free government school in 2006.[56] In 2007, 82 per cent of its students passed five or more General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) exams, compared to 47 per cent of students nationally.[57] And in 2023, 94 per cent of its students scored a strong pass in the GCSE English and Maths exams, compared to 45 per cent of students nationally.[58]

2.2 Star Academies' impact

Building on this success, Star's mission is to create outstanding schools that promote educational excellence, character development, and service to communities. Star is committed to improving the life chances of young people facing disadvantage. In the words of its Chief Executive:

> Ultimately the mission is to make a difference in the lives of young people. We go where we are required, to the toughest areas. And if we're successful then we've created opportunity and we've given someone a lifeline.

Thirty-one per cent of Star students are economically disadvantaged (compared to about 24 per cent nationally), and 39 per cent have English as an additional language (compared to 20 per cent nationally).[59]

54. Grattan analysis of Department for Education (2023b).
55. Office for National Statistics (2021).
56. Scott (2006).
57. Department for Education (2007). GCSE exams are nationally comparable exams which students typically sit at age 16 when they are in Year 11: the final year of compulsory school education in England. Students typically sit GCSE exams in at least five subjects.
58. Grattan analysis of Department for Education (2023c). A strong pass is a grade 5 or higher out of 9.
59. Grattan analysis of Department for Education (2023b). Disadvantaged students are those who were eligible for a free school meal at any time in the past six years, and children who are looked after (for example, adopted or in state care).

Star has had remarkable success in helping children succeed. In 2023, it was England's top-performing MSO, measured by the value added to students' learning.[60] Star's 2023 Year 11 cohort were, on average, about 14 months ahead in their learning compared to Year 11 students nationally who had a similar Year 7 starting point.[61] Star's disadvantaged students in this cohort made on average 18 months more learning progress between Years 7 and 11 than disadvantaged students nationally. Star students frequently land a spot at top-tier universities, and 9 out of 10 Star students go on to education, employment, or training (compared to fewer than 8 in 10 nationally).[62]

Star's schools have a reputation for excellence. Schools in England are inspected by teams of independent, trained inspectors who judge the school's overall quality as either 'outstanding', 'good', 'requires improvement', or 'inadequate'.[63] Schools in the latter two categories are considered to be under-performing, and may be required to join a multi-academy trust or switch to a different one.

Star has strong inspection results: about 50 per cent of its schools have been judged 'outstanding', compared to only about 18 per cent of schools nationally.[64] Its first school, Tauheedul Islam Girls' High School, has been judged 'outstanding' at four consecutive inspections.[65] All under-performing schools that have joined Star have received improved grades on inspection (see Figure 2.1 on the following page).

2.3 Star Academies' school improvement strategy

As Star grew and sought to spread its success, it distilled lessons learnt into a formal school improvement strategy.

The strategy sets a clear goal for Star schools to work towards 'Star Excellence'. Tauheedul Islam Girls' High School is an example of a school achieving 'Star Excellence', meaning it is in the top 5 per cent of schools nationally for student achievement, progress, and attendance, among other things.

Star places its schools on a continuum of four 'categories' on the path to Star Excellence (see Figure 2.2 on page 20).[66] These categories are accompanied by specific, and often intensive, supports provided by the head office team.

All Star schools receive universal support, including exemplar curriculum and assessment materials, whole-of-organisation curriculum masterclasses, guidance and practical help to assist and extend students who have additional needs, and detailed data dashboards.

Star schools also get targeted support tailored to their needs. For the schools needing the most support, the principal's supervisor is on-site at least one day per week. For schools approaching Star Excellence, support is lighter touch.

Eligibility for a free school meal is based on having a low income. See Department for Education (2023d).

60. Grattan analysis of Department for Education (2023c).
61. Progress determined by comparing students' GCSE grades to grades achieved by students who had similar levels of prior attainment in standardised Year 6 exams. Conversion of progress in GCSE grades to months of learning is a estimate using benchmarks reported in Hunt et al (2022).
62. Grattan analysis of Department for Education (2023e).
63. 'Inadequate' grades are further split between 'special measures' (the lowest grade) and 'serious weaknesses'. The 'special measures' category is used when inspectors determine that the school's leaders have not demonstrated the capacity to improve the school. See Ofsted (2023a, p. 4).
64. See Ofsted (2023b).
65. Ofsted (2010); Ofsted (2012); Ofsted (2014a); and Ofsted (2022a).
66. The categories broadly relate to the four inspection grades, but include additional Star-specific performance indicators.

2.4 How being a multi-school organisation helps Star improve its schools

Star's school improvement strategy is made possible by the MSO model. With the shared resources and expertise of 33 schools, Star can tackle challenges that would be very difficult for a stand-alone school to overcome.

Star's sophisticated organisational structure (see Figure 2.3 on page 22) means that leaders in schools can call on experts who have a deep knowledge of the school's context, and share a commitment to Star's mission and vision for improvement.

Teaching and learning

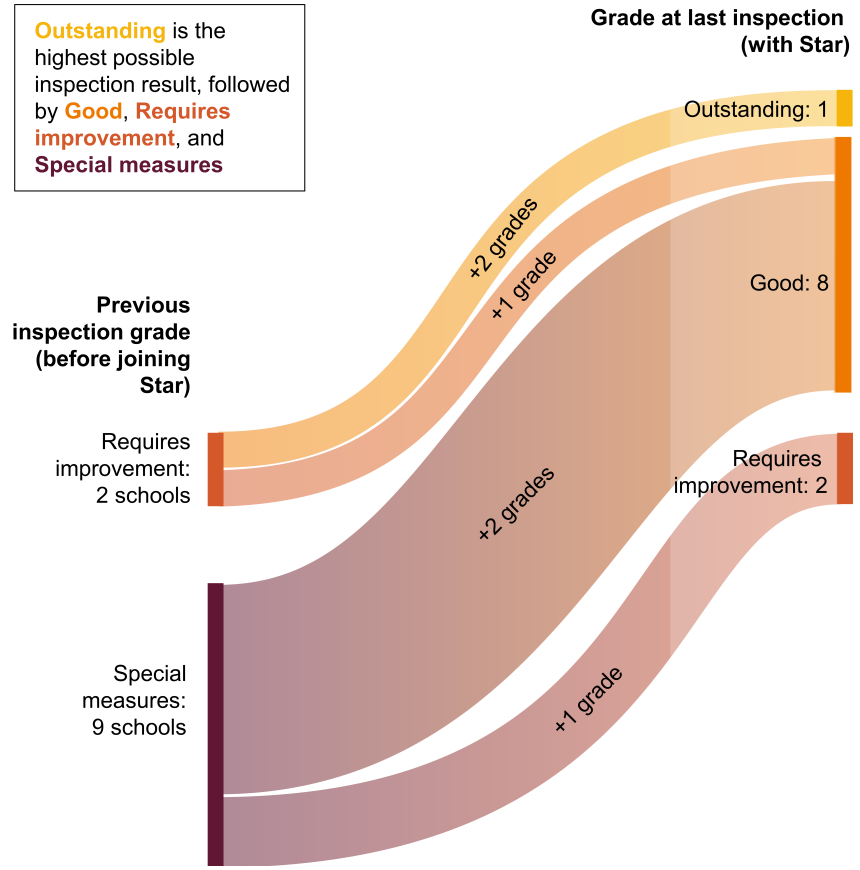
High-quality curriculum and assessment are pivotal to Star's school improvement strategy.

Star aims to teach students about the world around them. For example, in Year 5, students compare two pieces of 19th Century Romantic music. And in Year 6, students investigate the history of the Mayans.

Each Star school's curriculum is reviewed twice a year. Schools found to need help get it.[67] Schools adopt and adapt high-quality curriculum materials and assessments, including:

- long-term curriculum plans, which detail the sequence of topics taught for each subject in each year level;
- unit plans, which detail what students will learn in each lesson, explain how to address misconceptions, and suggest adaptations for students who have additional needs; and
- exemplar lesson materials, such as handouts, presentations, and quizzes.

Figure 2.1: The 11 'turnaround' schools that joined Star have all improved their inspection grades

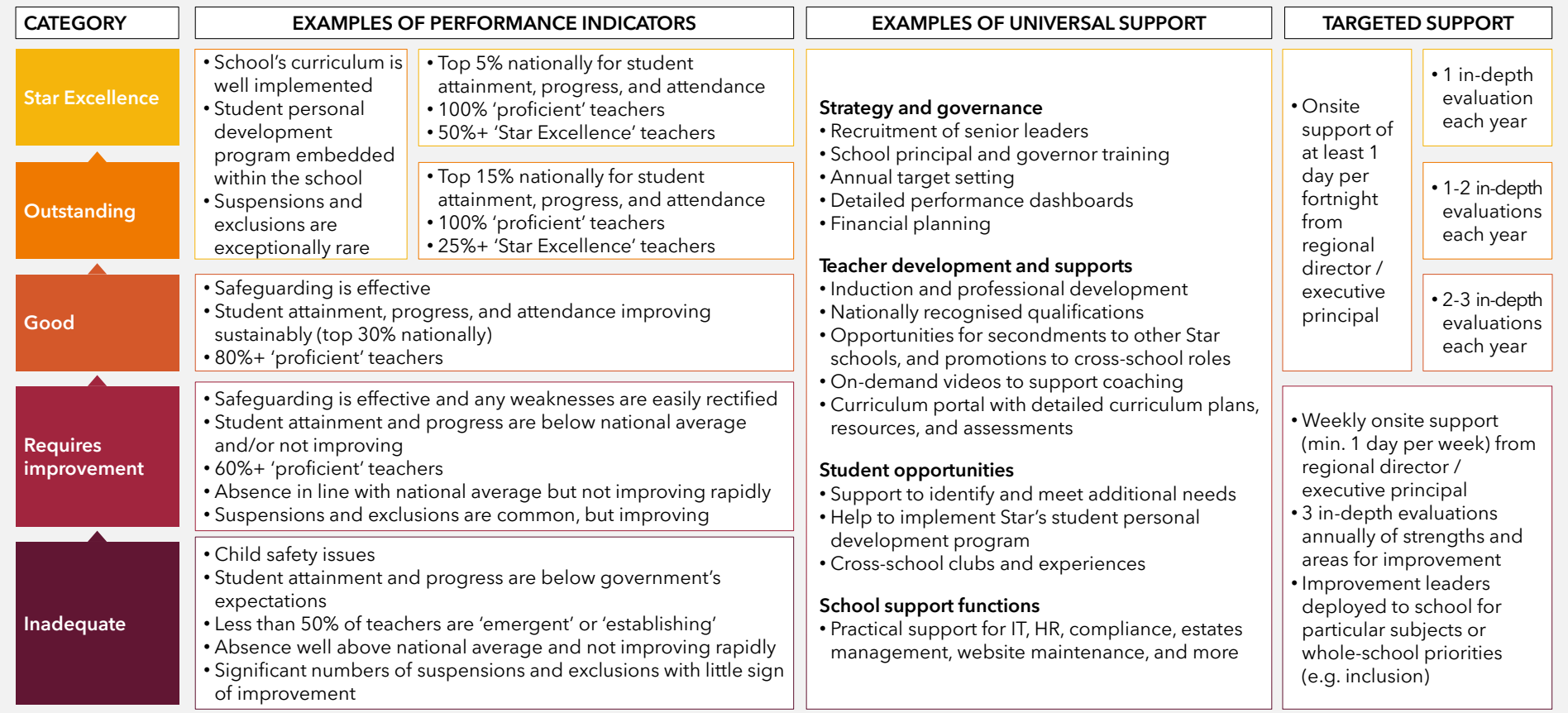


Notes: Star has taken on three further turnaround schools which are yet to be inspected. See Ofsted (2023c) for details on the inspection process.

Source: Ofsted (2023b).

67. Star Academies (2022a, p. 5).

Figure 2.2: An example of how Star tailors its support to schools' needs



Notes: Teachers at Star progress on a continuum from 'emergent', to 'establishing', to 'proficient', to 'Star excellence'. 'Safeguarding' refers to a school's ability to look after students' welfare and mitigate risk of harm. The in-depth evaluations involve school and head office leaders scrutinising school data and reports from independent quality assurers who are commissioned by Star to visit schools and evaluate them against Star's quality framework.

Source: Adapted from Star Academies (2022a).

The availability of these materials reduces teachers' workload and increases their effectiveness in the classroom. One beginning teacher told us how these materials enhanced her teaching and enabled her to coordinate extra-curricular activities:

> It definitely gives you the time to focus on those adaptations to make sure they're right for your group, and also to focus on things like feedback and marking. Had we not had the centrally pooled resources to alleviate time spent planning, I might not have been able to offer the Duke of Edinburgh Award program. It's also about not feeling that you have to go home and spend three hours in the evening planning lessons.

The shared curriculum makes it possible for all Star schools to use common assessments to track student progress. This enables Star to benchmark results, so leaders know how their students are progressing compared to students in other Star schools.

Common assessments also help Star's head office team identify particularly strong practice – such as a Humanities department with above-the-odds results – and find out what is driving that success.

Common curriculum and assessments also anchor staff professional development. For example, English teachers from across the schools can discuss how they will unpack a particular passage in *Macbeth*, including what went awry last time they taught that lesson. Primary school teachers teaching the same unit on volcanoes can compare how they plan to explain difficult vocabulary, such as 'caldera' and 'geyser', and share exemplary student work to show as a model in their class.

Being an MSO has helped Star design and implement a comprehensive reading strategy across its 22 secondary schools. The strategy includes daily 20-minute read-alouds by home-room teachers, to improve students' vocabulary and reading fluency (students follow along with their own copy of the book). The strategy ensures that, by graduation, every student will have read 24 books through the daily read-alouds. To support this strategy, Star purchased class sets of books, and created pacing guides and discussion prompts for teachers.

Star has selected assessments and designed dashboards to monitor the impact of the reading strategy. Leaders told us that reading a common set of books had fostered a love of literature and created a sense of community across Star schools.

The early results are promising: within one year, the percentage of fluent readers rose by 6 percentage points. Among students with special needs or a disability, the percentage of fluent readers rose by 9 percentage points.[68]

Teacher and staff opportunities

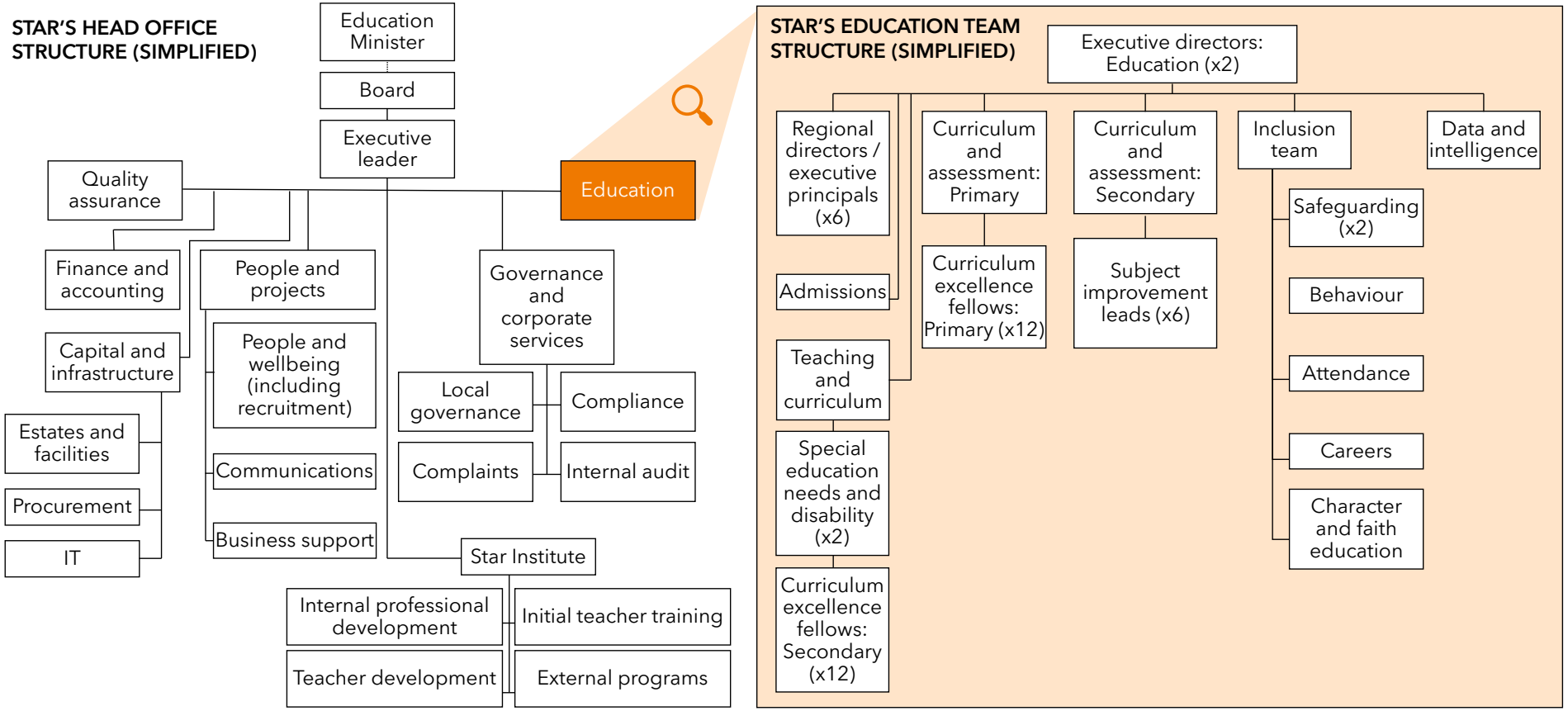
Running a group of schools also enables Star to offer more opportunities to staff. Staff benefit from a range of hands-on professional development opportunities that a stand-alone school would be hard-pressed to deliver. This includes induction programs, specialist training for middle leaders, and training for non-teaching staff.

Teachers attend organisation-wide curriculum excellence masterclasses for all subject areas. School office staff can get training on talent acquisition or website design.

The MSO structure has also created opportunities for career progression at Star. Now more schools benefit from Star's most skilled practitioners: a stellar Maths teacher can take up a part-time secondment to Star's head office to develop curriculum materials and assessments for use across all Star schools; a principal might be promoted to a regional director or executive principal role to work closely with five Star principals; and a talented groundskeeper might take on a regional site manager role, responsible for overseeing facilities at several schools.

68. Star Academies (2023, p. 4).

Figure 2.3: Star's shared head office team provides practical, high-dosage support to schools in a range of areas



Notes: This is a simplified representation of Star's organisational chart. 'Safeguarding' refers to the school's ability to look after students' welfare and reduce the risk of harm.
Source: Star Academies (2023). Provided to Grattan on request.

Student opportunities

Students also benefit from Star's size and the aligned practices across its schools. Star can offer them opportunities across its 33 schools that each school may not have been able to offer alone.

Star's ambitious curriculum ensures students encounter a breadth and depth of academic knowledge, no matter which school they are in.

The MSO model also creates rich opportunities outside the classroom. All Star schools have a leadership focus, which pushes students to grow as leaders, engage in school life, and give back to their local community. This includes a variety of opportunities that are often not available in a stand-alone school, such as Star-wide sports competitions, creative and performing arts events, and career and enterprise programs.

Social action initiatives are an ingrained part of school life at Star. In the 2022-23 academic year, for example, Star students raised more than £466,000 for charities and social causes.[69] Collectively, Star students spend about 150,000 hours each year volunteering in their communities.[70]

During the pandemic, Star's size helped it loan 5,000 devices to disadvantaged students so that they did not miss out on learning.[71] It also trained 135 staff in mental health first aid, and 100 pastoral staff to provide extra bereavement support to students.[72]

2.5 How Star is advancing education beyond its schools

Star has helped improve education beyond the 33 schools it directly runs.

69. Data provided by Star Academies.
70. ibid.
71. Star Academies (2021a).
72. Star Academies (2021b).

Star runs School-Centred Initial Teacher Training: a 12-month, employment-based program to become a qualified teacher for career changers and graduates from non-teaching degrees. Since 2017, 246 trainees have become qualified teachers with Star's support.[73]

Star is also a founding member of the National Institute of Teaching, which will offer a two-year program for 2,000 beginning teachers, and a development program for up to 650 National Leaders of Education, between 2022 and 2025.[74] As part of its involvement, Star will help to develop the curriculum, host trainee teachers and leaders, and provide its data for longitudinal research on what interventions best boost students' learning.

2.6 An example of Star's school improvement – turning around Bay Leadership Academy

Bay Leadership Academy joined Star in the 2018-19 academic year. Within three years, the school had made substantial improvements.

Bay Leadership Academy is in Morecambe on England's north-west coast. It is an area with a very high crime rate and several selective schools that attract academically capable children from aspirational families away from non-selective government schools.[75]

Bay Leadership Academy is a no-fee, non-selective government school that serves 705 children aged 11 to 18 who are mostly from working-class backgrounds. About 46 per cent of its students are disadvantaged, which is nearly twice the national rate, and 40 per cent start at Bay Leadership Academy behind in their learning, compared to about 22 per cent nationally.[76]

73. As of the the 2023-24 academic year, a further 67 teachers are doing initial teacher training with Star. Data provided by Star Academies.
74. Whittaker (2021).
75. In 2022, Morecambe had about 110 incidents of crime per 1,000 residents: double the average in England's north-west. See CrimeRate (2023).
76. Grattan analysis of Department for Education (2023b).

Before joining Star, Bay Leadership Academy had entrenched under-performance – the schools inspectorate had never graded it as 'good'. It had a poor reputation, and few families wanted to send their children there. Student behaviour was unsafe, and curriculum and assessments were ad hoc.

The school's governors knew it needed to change. One told us:

> It was obvious that the school needed to join a family of schools, not these soft federation things where people just go to meetings and chat to each other. We needed a structure where somebody at the top had really clear expectations about what was going to happen.

After joining Star, the school rapidly improved. An interim principal was appointed, with a brief to raise student and teacher expectations. Star's behaviour policy was implemented.[77] It clarified the 'red line' behaviours that would not be tolerated. Examples include racist language or behaviour, bullying, truancy, and refusing to hand over a mobile phone. Star appointed an expert to set up the School Inclusion Centre, which gives targeted support to students who consistently behave poorly.

When it joined Star, the school was not a physically inviting place to learn. Star provided financial support, and helped give the school a face-lift and make it a safer environment for students.

Teachers also received more support. On advice from Star leaders, the school reduced the variety of subjects each teacher taught, so they could deepen their curriculum expertise. Teachers who were previously planning mostly on their own, could now use Star's curriculum and assessments and adapt them to their students. Heads of departments were provided with detailed insights from the Star data team, to help them determine which students needed more support and key topics for staff professional development. Star's head office arranged training for the school's leaders on curriculum and coaching.

By 2022, the school had improved markedly despite the pandemic, though there is work ahead to maintain stable results and reach Star Excellence. It received its first ever 'good' inspection result in 2022.[78] In the 2017-18 academic year – before the school joined Star – just 9 per cent of students entered the English Baccalaureate: a broad set of academically challenging subjects that keep students' options open for future studies and careers.[79] By 2023, 69 per cent of students at Bay Leadership Academy had entered the English Baccalaureate.[80] Parents now queue up on open day and the school gets more applications than it has places.

The atmosphere at the school has changed too. Staff and students feel like they are part of something bigger. Discussing the impact of the Star Awards night – an event which brings the 33 schools together to celebrate demonstrations of Star's values – one Bay Leadership Academy teacher told us:

> When my student won the Star Art student award, it was a really proud moment for the school. Because we're part of Star, that's now recognised nationally. This gives students a sense of pride and determination to push themselves.

Bay Leadership Academy now also contributes back to Star. For example, some of its teachers have been filmed in short videos used for professional development for teachers within and outside Star. And the Science Department has also worked on refining the Star-wide Science curriculum.

77. The policy can be found here.

78. Ofsted (2022b).
79. The English Baccalaureate (or EBACC) includes studies in English Literature and Language, Maths, the sciences, Geography or History, and a foreign language. Nearly 40 per cent of students enter the EBACC nationally.
80. Grattan analysis of Department for Education (2023c).

3 Multi-school organisations can make a big difference for principals, teachers, and students

High-performing MSOs, such as Star Academies in England, can take advantage of their 'Goldilocks size' and the coordination possible through the MSO structure to make schools a better place for principals, teachers, and students.

MSOs can spread the impact of an education system's best leaders across more schools, and take a load off time-poor principals. They can provide practical support for teachers, and offer greater opportunities for professional enrichment and rewarding career paths. For students, MSOs can coordinate and build on individual schools' efforts to provide specialist support in areas such as disability and inclusion, and offer a broader range of academic and extra-curricular opportunities.

3.1 Multi-school organisations can improve school leadership

Great leaders make schools great. But Australian principals juggle too many distractions to lead improvement effectively, and the status quo does not make the most of the country's best principals.

MSOs can extend the reach of the best principals, and create new roles to attract highly capable leaders from other sectors in a way that stand-alone schools cannot.

They can also nurture great talent by establishing a clear pipeline to leadership for teachers and non-teaching staff.

MSOs shoulder principals' administrative burdens so principals are free to focus on instructional leadership. They give principals help during acute crises, and provide stability to schools experiencing leadership turnover.

3.1.1 Multi-school organisations can extend the impact of one-of-a-kind leaders

MSOs can harvest the untapped potential of a country's best school leaders. The emergence of MSOs in England and New York has helped a crop of transformative leaders flourish; leaders whose influence is now reaching many more students than it otherwise could.

For example, Grattan researchers interviewed a passionate special education and disability coordinator who worked across their MSO's 17 schools to improve inclusion. We met numerous expert teachers who had taken promotions to lead improvement in their subject area across multiple schools, refining curriculum materials and running professional development for teachers. And we spoke to a former school business manager who had taken a promotion to head up 'back-office' functions across several schools.

The MSO structure not only affords new opportunities to extend the impact of exceptional leaders already working in schools. It also helps groups of schools to attract and nurture great leaders. MSOs create new roles, such as chief financial officers and chief people officers. These roles create opportunities to bring in high-calibre candidates from outside the school sector.[81]

Because they run groups of schools, MSOs can also establish a clear talent pipeline. Leaders in the MSOs Grattan visited had opportunities to shadow colleagues in other schools, receive mentoring and undertake secondments, and participate in multi-year development

81. Andrew (2017).

programs and principal residencies. This stands in stark contrast to Australia, where school leaders are often ill-prepared for the role.[82]

MSO leadership development programs are aligned to the MSO's blueprint for excellent schooling. This gives emerging leaders the chance to go deep on how to implement and adapt the blueprint in their school. Box 3 explains the approach, and careful succession planning, of Dixons Academies Trust in England's north.

3.1.2 Multi-school organisations can reduce the burden on principals and support them in crises

An MSO's central team can alleviate the pressure on principals by providing practical support in areas such as human resources, financial planning, compliance and risk, estates management, and information technology.

Principals across the MSOs we studied described how this support allowed them to spend more time visiting classrooms, working directly with their teachers, and engaging more deeply with their local community.

This was the case at St Charles Borromeo, in Harlem, New York, one of 11 Catholic schools operated by Partnership Schools. St Charles Borromeo's student population is highly diverse. Before joining Partnership Schools in 2018, St Charles Borromeo had poor results and declining enrolments. With the help of Partnership Schools, its enrolment has more than doubled. Results in the 2023 New York State Tests show that – despite disruption from the pandemic and welcoming many new students – the school is heading in the right direction.[83]

A key factor behind its success was how principals could rely on Partnership Schools' central team for support. St Charles Borromeo's principal, who had been at the school before it joined the MSO, explained:

> As the principal, I now get support. I'm no longer in charge of the boiler. If there is a flood, somebody else takes care of it. I'm not having to be HR, and facilities, and the vision, and academics, and the culture – I'm not stretched that thin any more. I have a working knowledge of everything that's going on, but I don't have my hands in everything. That's one of the many blessings of being part of Partnership Schools.

Box 4 on page 28 describes in more detail how Partnership Schools' central team empowers principals.

Principals across the MSOs we visited stressed that support from their MSO's head office not only freed them up to focus on teaching and learning, it also helped them with the 'things that keep leaders up at night'.

We heard several examples of principals confronted with hard issues – such as acute student behavioural problems, a difficult complaint from a parent, or a challenging employee-relations issue – and how being in an MSO meant there were always specialists on-hand who knew their school's context and understood the MSO's blueprint for running an effective school. Because they worked for the same organisation as the principals – and had shared an understanding of what it takes to run an effective school – these specialists were motivated to find a workable

82. For example, about 30 per cent of 230 Australian principals surveyed had *never* received instructional leadership training (compared to 18 per cent across OECD countries). See OECD (2019, Table 1.4.28).

83. The school's pass rates in the New York State Maths and English tests are respectively eight and six percentage points higher than before the pandemic. Data provided by Partnership Schools.

Box 3: Attracting and nurturing talent at Dixons Academies Trust

Founded in 1990, Dixons runs 17 schools in England's north, 10 of which are turnaround schools. Almost 40 per cent of Dixons' 14,000 students are disadvantaged.[a]

Dixons' mission is to 'challenge educational and social disadvantage in the north'.[b] It sees 'investing in the professional growth of colleagues' as one of the best ways to accomplish that mission.[c]

Dixons has to think carefully about how it attracts and develops great teachers and support staff because, as one leader told us: 'working in the north, we don't have the luxury of appealing to a great glut of talent – we have to nurture our own'.

In designing its talent strategy, Dixons sought to make the most of the MSO structure. Its aspiration was for staff to be able to chart their career at Dixons, from graduate to leader. A leader explained:

> The multi-academy trust model allows multiple opportunities in multiple different schools. For example, the principal of Dixons Cottingley Academy began with us as a newly qualified teacher.

Dixons' approach starts with recruiting staff aligned to its three values: work hard, be good, be nice. Dixons' central team plays a significant role in expanding the candidate pool. That team has designed and overseen a strategy that includes building a careers website and running social media campaigns, which help fill more than 300 roles across the MSO each year.

Dixons has been able to attract high-calibre candidates in a way stand-alone schools could not. It has, for example, an experienced chief people officer who previously led employee development and engagement at Aldi.

Dixons' size and alignment on what effective practice looks like creates development opportunities for staff. New staff get whole-of-organisation onboarding, and all staff – leaders, teachers, and non-teaching staff – are entitled to frequent coaching.

Dixons has established a Centre for Growth, through which it pools resources to offer professional development, such as a two-year leadership program for anyone new to senior leadership (about 30 staff members a year). One leader told us that an advantage of Dixons running its own program is that it can 'get into the detail of implementation', including training senior leaders in the specific aspects of leadership at Dixons:

> Rather than each school working out what to do for professional development, Dixons can design something with deep credibility and ensure the most effective practitioner has the greatest impact across the organisation.

This creates job opportunities that aren't available elsewhere. As one leader, who now runs professional development across Dixons, explained:

> Before, if I wanted to influence professional growth across multiple schools, I would have had to leave my job.

The benefits are clear. Dixons has a secure pipeline of talented leaders. Dixons Trinity Academy, which opened in 2012, has had 10 of its teachers go on to become principals.

a. Grattan analysis of Department for Education (2023c).
b. Dixons Academies Trust (n.d.).
c. Dixons OpenSource (2021).

Box 4: The practical support principals get at Partnership Schools

At Partnership Schools in New York, principals can count on shoulder-to-shoulder support from a central team. That team does the legwork on tasks that would otherwise consume the time principals have to coach teachers, lead professional development, and engage with the school community.

The role of Partnership Schools' central team has shifted as the MSO matured and responded to emerging priorities (such as the COVID-19 pandemic). When Grattan visited, key areas of back-office support included:

- budgeting and finance
- payroll
- aspects of talent acquisition (including writing job advertisements, screening applicants, and writing contracts)
- aspects of professional development (induction, curriculum workshops, training for non-teaching staff and leaders)
- student enrolment, high school placement, and scholarships
- some aspects of purchasing (e.g. curriculum materials)
- estates and building management
- reporting to and liaising with key stakeholders (e.g. the Catholic Diocese, City of New York, and philanthropists).

This support is tailored to Partnership Schools' priorities and the needs of principals and schools. As one principal put it:

> Each school is different and so the support we get is not a plug-and-play model.

On teacher recruitment, for example, some principals might lean heavily on the central team's support, while others might decide to be closely involved in all stages of the process, including screening incoming applications.

Principals told Grattan that they felt empowered by this approach. One principal explained that she valued 'getting to make the day-to-day decisions and being the vision carrier, while the central team takes care of all the ticky-tacky stuff'.

The principal summarised the benefits of this approach:

> Being free of these operational things allows me to be in the classroom more and to be more present with the community.

Another principal explained how the central team's practical support gave her more time to coach teachers, one-on-one: something she was very passionate about. Time saved on administrative work enabled her to help out with lesson plans, observe more classes, and provide regular feedback.

Teachers also noticed the change. A teacher, who had been at their school for 26 years, said:

> One change is I actually get to see more of my principal. She was always busy with other things, but now I'm getting more of her time to go over lessons.

solution to complex challenges. This meant they avoided 'bouncing' issues back to the school and took responsibility for the consequences of a decision (like accepting that introducing a new behaviour policy may result in an initial increase in parent complaints).

Principals frequently cited the pandemic as an example of a crisis in which their MSO's support was critical.[84] The English MSO United Learning, for example, distributed laptops to students, had technology specialists help schools pivot to teaching online, and distilled the emerging health advice for schools. A leader at United Learning told us:

> Scale and capacity are crucial, and during COVID it was visible in all sorts of ways. There were people who were actually thinking, 'What's going to work with this new way of teaching? What are the curriculum changes that we need to do this?' They produced lots of video lessons and made sure that we had the resources in place.

3.1.3 Multi-school organisations can provide stability when there is a change of principal

Principal turnover can cause significant instability for schools, especially disadvantaged schools where turnover is more frequent.[85] It can also be a major challenge for school improvement, which requires sustained effort.[86]

MSOs can help reduce this instability. The MSOs Grattan visited were committed to institutional longevity and maintaining a through-line between successive principals. Incoming principals did not have to start from scratch, and could be inducted into the MSO and get support from the MSO's central leadership team.

Dixons Cottingley Academy in England is a prime example. A teacher who had been at the school for 27 years told us:

> We've gone through lots of change. We had lots of problems with multiple principals coming and going, which created massive instability. When Dixons came in, the change was almost overnight and lots of those initial problems were solved through stability.

Dixons Cottingley Academy has had three principals since it joined Dixons in 2018. These leadership changes occurred because, as the school stabilised, its leaders were redeployed to add capacity to other Dixons turnaround schools. Dixons Cottingley Academy staff told us that, despite the turnover, there was a clear through-line between successive principals.

3.2 Multi-school organisations can enrich the job of teaching

MSOs can also enhance teachers' effectiveness and sense of professional fulfilment. Thanks to their size and alignment on what effective teaching entails, MSOs can equip teachers with resources that make the job more manageable and reduce the isolation that specialist staff sometimes feel. MSOs' size also enables them to run relevant, hands-on training, and their multi-school structure creates richer career paths for teachers and non-teaching staff.

3.2.1 Multi-school organisations can give teachers practical support to do their jobs

MSOs help teachers be more effective by equipping them with the tools they need for effective teaching.

Each of the MSOs Grattan visited had high-quality curriculum materials and assessments that teachers could adapt and adopt. Teachers

84. The positive reflections Grattan heard support research conducted during the pandemic with 80 schools that were part of multi-academy trusts. See Mujis and Sampson (2021).
85. Heffernan (2021).
86. While estimates vary, researchers suggest it takes at least three years of concerted school improvement effort before a pay-off in better academic results. See, for example, Hallinger and Heck (2011), Huberman et al (2011), Bellei et al (2016) and Fullan (2001).

Grattan spoke to said having these materials meant they could focus on tailoring instruction to the students in their class.

One teacher at Partnership Schools in New York said the central team 'gives us what we need – everything is right there'. Box 5 on the following page provides further details on the curriculum support teachers receive at Partnership Schools.

Teachers who were the only teacher at their school for a particular subject emphasised to Grattan the benefits of sharing the curriculum planning load across schools. One teacher at Dixons Trinity Academy spoke of the confidence she gained from being one of several Relationships, Sex, and Health Education (RSHE) teachers within the MSO:

> It's been invaluable to have Dixons' support. The government guidance is, for example, that by the end of Year 11 all students need to know about contraception, and that needs to be taught in an age-appropriate manner in Years 7, 8, 9, and 10. And that's all it says. As the sole person in charge of it at a school, that's quite daunting, because you need to get it right.
>
> Being able to have a meeting with 12 other professionals from Dixons just means you've got so much more confidence that you're doing it right. And sharing actual resources – like 'this is what we used in Year 9 to teach this topic' – means you don't have to plan it all yourself.

3.2.2 Multi-school organisations can improve professional development and career progression

MSOs can offer teachers and non-teaching staff bespoke training, career opportunities, and pay progression that a single school – with its limited staff roster and budget – cannot.[87] In the MSOs Grattan visited, teachers could plan out their entire career – from trainee teacher through to school leader.[88]

These career pathways are possible through the secondment and shadowing opportunities frequently offered by MSOs (see Section 3.1.1), particularly ones that are geographically concentrated.[89] Analysis of England's teacher workforce database showed that teachers were about 1.3 times more likely to be promoted if they worked in a large multi-academy trust.[90]

Students also stand to benefit from the ways MSO manage their teaching workforce. While research in the US finds that teachers typically shift to more advantaged settings when they change schools,[91] one study found that teachers working in England's multi-academy trusts tend to change to schools with more disadvantaged students.[92]

3.3 Multi-school organisations can expand opportunities for students

The MSO structure enables more students to benefit from the best classroom practice occurring across the MSO's group of schools. And an MSO's size helps them to provide students with specialist support and school experiences that are difficult for stand-alone schools to offer.

87. Eighty-two per cent of primary school principals and 76 per cent of secondary school principals reported that staff training at their school had improved since joining a multi-academy trust. See Department for Education (2021a, pp. 24–25).
88. See discussion in Allen and Sims (2018) about how multi-school organisations can support teachers to map out a career in schools.
89. Worth (2017).
90. Large multi-academy trusts are those with 12,000+ students (all three of Grattan's English case studies fit into the category). See Andrews (2019, p. 12).
91. Hanushek et al (2004).
92. Worth (2017).

Box 5: Adopting high-quality curriculum materials across all Partnership Schools has improved teaching

When Partnership Schools was granted control of its seven New York schools, ensuring consistency and quality of curriculum across all schools was a top priority. The Partnership's Vice President of Academics told us: 'We think of curriculum as our key lever for changing outcomes at scale.'

One principal said that, before Partnerships Schools arrived, choices of curriculum materials often came down to which vendor 'was the best salesperson', and the quality of curriculum planning varied across each school. Teachers across the organisation's schools now use shared curriculum materials and follow a common pacing guide.

Partnership Schools has sought out externally developed materials that are rigorous and at grade-level. Once the materials are selected, the curriculum team in Partnership Schools' head office develops supporting resources (such as pacing guides and supplementary questions), and runs organisation-wide professional development (sometimes bringing in curriculum-specific experts) to help teachers to adapt and use the materials in their classrooms.

Without common curriculum materials this coordinated support would not be possible. The MSO model helps, because individual schools don't have the capacity to do this kind of work. As one Partnership Schools principal told us:

> Unless you're in the weeds, you don't know. Principals would purchase a Math program without a solid rationale. By contrast, a central office researching the curriculum can dissect it and provide resources to go along with it. For example, our network team created exam-style questions for each unit in Math.

This takes a load off curriculum leaders in schools too. Now, a central curriculum specialist paces out the curriculum from kindergarten to Year 8, in each subject for all schools. Previously, curriculum leaders in each school would have duplicated this work.

For teachers, the common curriculum gives them a shared foundation and means that meetings can focus on the specifics of how to improve teaching practice. One teacher told us:

> When we chat, we're all at the same level. We can chat about a particular chapter we're at. Partnership Schools has brought in a cohesiveness that allows us to talk to teachers outside our building.

Another teacher said:

> The pacing guide that we follow means that all Partnership Schools' teachers are at the same point. We can say, 'I did it this way and it worked; I did it this way and it didn't work'.

Now, common curriculum materials are a key part of Partnership Schools' improvement strategy. One leader told us that if a school wants to join the Partnership, adopting common curriculum materials is a 'non-negotiable' and the 'first order of business'.

3.3.1 Multi-school organisations can enrich the academic experience for students

The MSOs Grattan visited lived by the mantra ‘every lesson counts’.

United Learning, England’s largest multi-academy trust with 97 schools spread nationally, takes seriously its mission to ensure that each of the 2,290 school days students have in their 12 years of school are filled with rich learning opportunities.

United Learning has developed curriculum materials for use across its schools, including teacher guidance packs, quizzes and assessments, and classroom resources (including activity booklets and PowerPoint slides like those shown in Figure 3.1 on the next page).

United Learning has carefully planned the curriculum so that students develop deep, broad, and interconnected knowledge as they move through school. For example, students learn about Islam in Year 3 Religion and Worldviews, before studying the early Islamic civilisation in Year 4 History; they study food chains in Science at the same time as investigating the effects of over-fishing in Geography; and they use knowledge of forced migration, learnt in Geography, when learning in Art about artists such as Auerbach.

This kind of sophisticated curriculum planning is out of reach for most stand-alone schools. United Learning’s Director of Curriculum told us:

> I don’t think individual schools can do the level of curriculum thinking that we can do. We have people who can spend time on it, and we can test it in our schools.

This type of curriculum planning is also tough for education departments. It requires a high level of coordination between schools (on, for example, instructional approaches, subject offerings, and timetables) which is easier in MSOs thanks to their ‘Goldilocks’ size and their authority to run a family of schools.

3.3.2 Multi-school organisations can make learning environments safer

MSOs can help spread effective approaches for creating safe and orderly learning environments.

When what is now called Dixons Cottingley Academy joined Dixons, disruptive student behaviour was a substantial challenge. An inspection of its predecessor school found ‘high levels of disruptive behaviour over time’ and that students ‘do not enjoy coming to school due to poor behaviour’.[93]

To turn this around, Dixons brought in leaders from its high-performing schools to implement tried-and-tested strategies to settle behaviour. Line-ups – which involve students assembling in lines at the bell to be escorted quietly to class – were a key strategy.

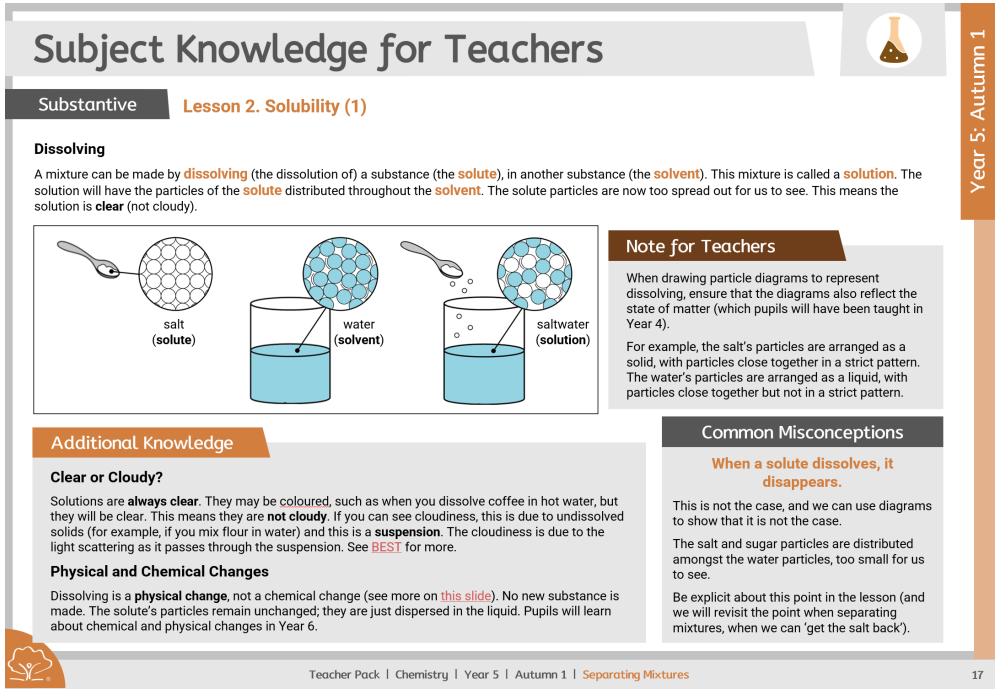
Line-ups help create calm transitions between break times and class, ensure lessons start on time with the whole class together, and reduce corridor noise for classes that have already started.

But line-ups are difficult to embed in a school – the strategy’s success hinges on the consistency that comes when all staff buy in and are on the same page. Dixons sent Cottingley Academy staff to other Dixons schools to see line-ups in action, and leaders who had implemented line-ups ran training sessions with the teachers.

The MSO model was crucial to the strategy’s success. A key factor was that 7 of the 10 staff in Dixons Cottingley Academy’s senior leadership team had worked at other Dixons schools, and seen line-ups work in practice. This meant they knew what would help the strategy succeed, and what might derail it. Today, Dixons Cottingley Academy leaders help other schools implement line-ups and improve behaviour.

93. Ofsted (2014b, p. 5).

Figure 3.1: England's largest MSO, United Learning, has developed high-quality curriculum materials
Examples of materials from United Learning's curriculum



Subject Knowledge for Teachers

Year 5: Autumn 1

Substantive

Lesson 2. Solubility (1)

Dissolving

A mixture can be made by **dissolving** (the dissolution of) a substance (the **solute**), in another substance (the **solvent**). This mixture is called a **solution**. The solution will have the particles of the **solute** distributed throughout the **solvent**. The solute particles are now too spread out for us to see. This means the solution is **clear** (not cloudy).

Note for Teachers

When drawing particle diagrams to represent dissolving, ensure that the diagrams also reflect the state of matter (which pupils will have been taught in Year 4).

For example, the salt's particles are arranged as a solid, with particles close together in a strict pattern. The water's particles are arranged as a liquid, with particles close together but not in a strict pattern.

Additional Knowledge

Clear or Cloudy?

Solutions are **always clear**. They may be coloured, such as when you dissolve coffee in hot water, but they will be clear. This means they are **not cloudy**. If you can see cloudiness, this is due to undissolved solids (for example, if you mix flour in water) and this is a **suspension**. The cloudiness is due to the light scattering as it passes through the suspension. See BEST for more.

Physical and Chemical Changes

Dissolving is a **physical change**, not a chemical change (see more on this slide). No new substance is made. The solute's particles remain unchanged; they are just dispersed in the liquid. Pupils will learn about chemical and physical changes in Year 6.

Common Misconceptions

When a solute dissolves, it disappears.

This is not the case, and we can use diagrams to show that it is not the case.

The salt and sugar particles are distributed amongst the water particles, too small for us to see.

Be explicit about this point in the lesson (and we will revisit the point when separating mixtures, when we can 'get the salt back').

Teacher Pack | Chemistry | Year 5 | Autumn 1 | Separating Mixtures 17

Example of information to help a teacher teach a Year 5 Science unit

Example quiz from a Year 5 Science unit

Question 2

Q Which two of the following statements about dissolving in water is true?

A The solid that is dissolved in the water no longer exists. ✗

B The solid that is dissolved is still in the water. The particles of the solute are now dispersed throughout the water. ✓

C The solution will look cloudy after a solid has dissolved in the water. ✗

D The solution will look clear after a solid has dissolved in the water. ✓

Source: United Learning (2023).

One Dixons Cottingley Academy teacher told us:

> People in senior leadership positions fully believed in the mission. That's what the teachers needed: a leader who's not flimsy and like, 'I hope this works', but instead like, 'I've seen this work – this is what we're doing'. The current principal came from another Dixons school. Being a part of Dixons means that you can take someone who's already seen it work and can come in with that mentality.

Used well, the MSOs structure can also provide more structured support for students after an acute behavioural incident. In Australian schools, students who seriously misbehave may remain on school grounds but not attend class (an 'in-school' suspension) or be sent home for several days (a regular suspension).[94] Some MSOs Grattan visited offer alternatives that aren't as disruptive to students' learning but still deter students from serious misbehaviour (see Box 6).

3.3.3 Multi-school organisations have the capacity to provide students with specialised support

Grattan's case study MSOs made use of their organisational heft to give students the support they need.

KIPP NYC Public Schools, for example, has hired student support specialists to work across its 18 schools.

In this New York-based MSO, more than 1,500 students (about 20 per cent) have specialised learning needs and are on an individual education plan. To support these students, KIPP NYC Public Schools has a shared services team that works across its schools and includes two school psychologists, two directors of social work, and four experts in literacy and numeracy intervention.

94. Victorian Department of Education (2021); Queensland Department of Education (2020); and NSW Department of Education (2023).

Box 6: Improving student behaviour at Hurlingham Academy

Before joining United Learning, student achievement at Hurlingham Academy (Fulham, London) was in the bottom 20 per cent nationally, and challenging behaviour was a big problem.[a]

After joining, the school adopted strategies suggested by United Learning to minimise disruptions and maximise learning time. For example, students who seriously misbehave in class may be moved to a separate room to complete lessons under supervision. There they keep up with what classmates are learning thanks to United Learning's bank of pre-recorded lessons. This approach would be near-impossible for a stand-alone school.

Being part of an MSO also enables 'managed moves', where students who persistently behave unsafely are sent temporarily to a nearby school. This offers students a fresh slate and supervised time away from negative influences. Managed moves can happen between stand-alone schools, but the MSO model means coordination is easier and learning is less disrupted because the schools follow a similar curriculum.

With United Learning's support, the hard work Hurlingham Academy put in to improve behaviour is paying off. It is now in the top 4 per cent of schools by value-add to students' achievement.[b] A recent inspection found that:

> Pupils are respectful and attentive during class. They appreciate the clear and consistent behaviour systems in place. This means lesson time is not lost due to low-level disruption.[c]

Now the principal is spreading success further, leading two nearby United Learning turnaround schools as an executive principal.

a. FulhamSW6 (2015).
b. Grattan analysis of Department for Education (2023c).
c. Ofsted (2023d, p. 2).

The psychologists and social workers help schools improve their whole-school well-being model, provide more intensive support for challenging individual student cases, and lend a hand with paperwork (such as behaviour support plans or compliance-related matters required by the city's department of education). The specialists support about four schools each and are in each school at least fortnightly (or weekly in the case of the MSO's elementary schools). They coach teachers, and adapt curriculum materials to better meet the needs of students requiring extra support.

The Director of the Student Support Services team – who has been in the organisation for 15 years – told us this support would not have been possible when he joined KIPP NYC Public Schools. The reason, he explained, was that 'everyone was doing something different' and there was little common practice between schools within the MSO. When he was appointed to coordinate special education, he 'couldn't review data because everyone had different datasets'. Now, with common systems, aligned curriculum materials, and a shared approach to screening students, the specialists in his team can provide targeted support. He compared this to the challenges large government departments face running many hundreds of schools, where 'there are just too many schools to do this role with any level of impact'.

Box 7 on the next page explains how Star Academies also made use of the MSO structure to support students with special educational needs.

3.3.4 The multi-school organisation structure can be a foundation for rich experiences outside the classroom

Students in the MSOs Grattan visited also enjoy a broader array of extra-curricular opportunities.

The Success Academy MSO in New York, for example, offers its 20,000 students a wide range of electives, clubs and teams, including chess, debate, visual and performing arts, basketball and soccer.

Its size and alignment between its 53 schools enable highly effective teaching and coaching for these electives. For example, more than 40 soccer coaches follow a program designed by some of New York City's best junior soccer coaches. The program includes a suggested sequence of skills and practice drills, and rubrics to support students' development. The result is that a well-designed soccer program is available to all students, not just those who have a specialist coach at their school. About 85 per cent of participating students are from low-income households.[95] Some have gone on to play in national tournaments and pre-professional teams.

3.3.5 Multi-school organisations can provide continuity for students when they move schools

MSOs often include both primary and secondary schools, which enables them to provide stronger transitions for students.

For example, when Success Academy opened its first high school, it noticed learning gaps that it had previously missed. One leader told us:

> As our students are now getting to middle school and high school, we're starting to get a lot of data on what we do well and what we need to do better.

This has prompted Success Academy to rewrite its primary school Maths curriculum to fill gaps in students' problem-solving abilities.

There are also benefits in the MSO model for students who change schools frequently.[96] For example, one student moved from a Dixons school in Leeds to a Dixons school in Manchester. The similar routines and curriculum between the schools made the change easier. The student told a Dixons leader, 'It's a real Dixons school. I knew what to expect and what to do. It's not been a huge change for me.'

95. Fondazione Milan (n.d.).
96. This could benefit Australia's highly mobile families: in the Northern Territory, 25 per cent of Indigenous students move schools in a given year. See Su et al (2023).

Box 7: How being a multi-school organisation helps Star Academies support students with special education needs

Star Academies in England has used its size to benefit the 1 in 7 students in its schools who have an identified special educational need.

The aim of Star's multi-pronged strategy – called All Stars Succeed – is for all students to be taught the full Star curriculum, so they develop 'the knowledge and cultural capital needed to succeed in life'.[a]

Star has adaptive instructional strategies for teachers to use to support students with additional needs. One example is 'turn-and-talk', in which students discuss a question in pairs before sharing back to the class. A suggested adaptation is to provide students with speaking frames and sentence-starters, to help them speak in pairs confidently and fluently.[b] These strategies benefit all students, but especially students with speech, language, and communication needs.

Star's exemplar curriculum materials support inclusion through offering students a range of entry points into a learning task. In a Science lesson on mitochondria, for example, students requiring extra support might label a diagram using a provided glossary, while students requiring a challenge create their own glossary. Having these on-hand helps teachers to make these adaptions in class.

Star students needing extra support are also placed in smaller classes. High-attaining students (with or without special education needs) might be in a class of 30, discussing the inferential meaning of specific verses in Maya Angelou's poem, *When Great Trees Fall*. Students who need extra support might be in a class of 12 with two teachers, reading the same poem but unpacking difficult vocabulary. Class groupings are also flexible: a student might be in a high-attaining class for Maths but in a smaller class for English. If they make strong progress in English, they may be moved to a class with more students.

Each Star student with additional needs has a 'Star Map': a document updated twice per academic year which includes the child's needs, information from screening assessments, and required adaptive strategies. Schools get substantial help to fill-in the Star Maps.

School-based special educational needs coordinators use centrally-curated checklists to diagnose needs, and a bank of specific adaptive strategies to plan how to respond to needs. In modern foreign languages classes, for example, Star suggests techniques such as introducing new vocabulary in sentences rather than as discrete words, and slowly enunciating the beginning and end of new words. These techniques support all students, and are particularly helpful for students with learning difficulties that affect their short-term memory.

Data on students' needs is aggregated in a central register. This register replaces the work schools were previously duplicating, and helps them comply with special education needs codes of practices. It also helps Star monitor the quality of special education provided in its schools, and be more forensic to its approach to supporting students.

On seeing aggregated data, for example, Star leaders noticed that compared to the national average, it had higher numbers of students identified with social, emotional, and mental health needs, but lower numbers of students identified with speech, language, and communication needs. This prompted leaders to scrutinise whether they were over-diagnosing the former, and whether some of these students would be better off with additional speech, language, and communication support.

a. Star Academies (2022b, p. 4).
b. A speaking frame gives students a model sentence structure with gaps for them to fill in. For example: 'A similarity between _____ and _____ is _____.'

4 Multi-school organisations are school-improvement specialists

The MSO structure increases the likelihood that schools will improve. Grouping schools into a formal 'family of schools' with accountable executive leadership creates more opportunities to support school improvement.

First, MSOs can have a precise strategy for school improvement, because they do not need to be everything to everyone. Instead, their strategy needs to work for a tightly defined group of schools which they are authorised – and expected – to improve.

Second, MSOs' 'Goldilocks' size enables them to know each school intimately, and fine-tune their school improvement strategy to each school's needs.

Third, MSOs have the operational control needed to realise their school improvement strategies and make changes that improve schools at pace.

Fourth, MSOs refine their school improvement strategy with each school they improve.

Finally, MSOs create better accountability for school improvement. Governments can hold MSOs to account in a way they often find hard to do for themselves.

4.1 Multi-school organisations can have a precise strategy for improving schools

MSOs have clear authority to improve the schools they run. This is because schools within an MSO are either set up from scratch by the MSO, elect to join the MSO, or join the MSO in dire circumstances, such as very low performance or low enrolments threatening viability.

This aspect of MSOs – that they run a well-defined group of schools with a mandate to improve them – empowers them to have a clear strategy for school improvement. Unlike government departments – which may be balancing the interests of more than a thousand schools and their stakeholders – MSOs do not need to 'please everyone'. They can instead draw a line in the sand and say 'this is what we stand for'.

Box 8 on the following page describes how the freedom to 'have a view' on a great model of schooling makes Dixons' school-improvement approach possible.

4.2 Multi-school organisations' improvement strategies can be responsive because MSOs know their schools intimately

MSOs' school-improvement strategies can be highly responsive to their schools' needs. In all of Grattan's case study MSOs, centrally-based leaders responsible for areas such as curriculum and people development felt they knew their MSO's schools in detail, and understood what would and would not work for them.

Teachers and principals at Partnership Schools described how – in comparison to a large diocese – the MSO structure enabled a tight feedback loop between themselves and the central team. One teacher told us 'I really love that they take feedback from us', and explained how Partnership Schools' central team had changed the maths resources they provided in response to teacher feedback that the curriculum was too cluttered. Another teacher said the central team had changed the order of units in the English curriculum after teacher feedback.

There was a strong sense that what made this feedback loop possible was the fact that the head office team were frequently in the schools, knew many teachers by name, and had intimate knowledge of teachers'

Box 8: At Dixons, improvement isn't left to chance – there is a vision for excellent schooling and a path to get every school there

Dixons has a specific view about the non-negotiable features of an excellent Dixons school, which it calls the Dixons backbone. Dixons is committed to 'aligned autonomy': principals align their school with what is detailed in the backbone and have autonomy over everything else.

The backbone is designed to be as spare as possible, outlining only the essential aspects of what makes a great Dixons school. But it is also specific, documenting tried and tested practices that have been successful across Dixons schools. The backbone includes the expectation that schools use the same screening tests to identify students who need extra help with reading, and that leaders go on weekly learning walks to observe classroom teaching and student engagement. The backbone is also a living document: components may be dropped if they outlive their usefulness, or added if they are proving successful in some schools and should be used in others.

Dixons' 'Morning Meetings' are an example of a specific practice used across all of Dixons' secondary schools. In every Dixons secondary school, the day starts with some teachers leading year-level groups for a 20-minute morning meeting in which they revise critical knowledge from a variety of subjects, strengthen school culture, publicly recognise students who have demonstrated school values, and reset expectations if necessary. During this time, teachers not involved in the meeting attend professional development sessions.[a]

Schools 'own' the Dixons backbone, but – with quality assurance by Dixons' head office – can adjust it to best suit their school community. Grattan researchers saw examples of this with morning meetings which, while standard practice, looked slightly different in each school.[b]

Because Dixons has a clear vision of what a great school looks like, it can also have a precise strategy to help schools reach that vision. Dixons' four-stage Academy Transformation Model sets out how a Dixons school can implement all the features of the backbone. The document is accompanied by a 300-point checklist of actions. For example, the checklist steps out actions to onboard and stabilise a school in its first year of joining Dixons, helping it align to the backbone as quickly as possible.[c]

The checklist can be tailored to the school; it is not a one-size-fits-all model. For example, schools implement 'data days' – student-free days that happen three times a year – differently depending on their context. During these days, Dixons teachers are expected to forensically examine student data and plan ways to address misconceptions and plug learning gaps.[d] The checklist encourages schools new to Dixons to adopt a data days model from an established Dixons school. The checklist also points leaders to exemplar intervention plans developed in established Dixons schools.

Being a part of an MSO means that any new Dixons leader has a clear path ahead already charted for them, and supports at their fingertips so they don't have to start from scratch.

a. See videos of the Morning Meeting and the concurrent staff practice.
b. See, for example, Dixons McMillan, Dixons Trinity Chapeltown, and Dixons Allerton.
c. See this video for further information on Dixons' Academy Transformation Model, including how it has codified resources to support schools' transformation.
d. See this video for a detailed explanation of what data days entail.

experiences using the curriculum in classrooms. We followed the superintendent – the principals' supervisor – on a visit to two schools. She knew which teacher taught which class and the room that class was taught in. Some students even knew her by name.

What enabled this way of working was that, in Grattan's case study MSOs, principals' supervisors are stretched across far fewer schools than their equivalents in Australia (see Figure 4.1). This means the MSOs' principals get more support, and there are fewer degrees of separation between schools and the head office team supporting them.

4.3 Multi-school organisations have the operational control needed to make their improvement strategies work

The governance arrangements of MSOs enable them to more effectively improve schools. When a school is in crisis, it is possible for MSOs to 'flood the school' with extra, experienced staff from its head office team or from within its family of schools. MSOs can also temporarily draw on their reserves to help another school with stretched finances.

The governance arrangements of MSOs also mean that the MSO can hold schools accountable for improvement. A leader of one of the MSOs in England told us:

> Our school improvement service isn't advisory really – if we think something a school is doing is not OK, we can insist that they change it. Ultimately, all a multi-academy trust is, is a group of schools with a common governance. But the common governance enables an enormous number of other things to happen.

By contrast, Grattan visited New Visions for Public Schools: a not-for-profit organisation supporting – but not directly responsible for – 71 public schools in New York City. One school coach there told us: 'A limitation of the model is that we don't 'own' the schools.'

4.4 Multi-school organisations get better with each school they improve

High-performing MSOs accrue institutional knowledge on how to lead a school turnaround.

One way they do this is by creating a cohort of seasoned leaders who have 'done it before' (see Box 9 on the next page). Their wisdom is captured and passed on, so MSOs do not have to start from scratch with each new turnaround school.

And, after some time, an MSO can develop veteran leaders who specialise in supporting schools at different stages of improvement. Dixons' deputy chief executive told us that some principals are great at stabilising a struggling school that just joined Dixons. Other principals have deep experience lifting the performance of a stabilised school, and taking it from good to great.

As MSOs grow, they can rely on an increasing number of high-performing schools to lend a hand to turnaround efforts. The MSO leaders Grattan met spoke of 'capacity givers': leading schools that can support the development of new schools that join the MSO, or can support MSO schools that have plateaued.

MSOs also get better at school improvement over time because their structure helps them refine best practice. Because MSOs run multiple schools, they can pinpoint what works in a way that groups of schools with unaligned practices cannot. In Grattan's case study MSOs, common data helped identify bright spots and refine the school improvement model. United Learning's Northampton Academy, for example, was making noticeable improvement in students' reading thanks to a whole-of-school reading approach it developed. The strategy is now being spread more broadly across United Learning schools.

Box 9: How one United Learning principal led a turnaround, and is now applying what he learnt in two new turnaround schools

Langford Academy is a primary school that serves a disadvantaged community in London. The school joined English MSO, United Learning, eight years ago. At the time, the school had a poor reputation. It had never been graded as 'good' or better by the schools inspectorate, and would only receive 15 applications for the incoming kindergarten class, despite having 45 places. Staff morale was low: as one teacher described, 'you would walk in and see that no one loved the school'. The building and finances were also in disrepair.

United Learning appointed a new principal, whose first priorities were improving student behaviour and staff morale, and ensuring the financial and occupational health of the school.

The principal told us that United Learning's support was 'very helpful'. On the operational side, staff from United Learning's central team took care of 'all the things that can distract a leader', such as fixing the windows, heating, and health and safety risks on the site. The finance team helped get the school's budget back in order, and the central team was able to provide some top-up money for essential building work. Human resources support also proved vital because not all staff bought into the new model. Human resources experts from United Learning could join in tricky conversations, check over draft letters, and be a point of call for the principal before or after any challenging discussions.

The principal was able to use United Learning's existing policy on student behavior, and had the support of the central team for more challenging student behaviour issues.

As behaviour improved, United Learning helped the school to refine its teaching practices. The school drew on United Learning's central team of early years advisors.

The school leaders visited another United Learning school – Hunningley Academy, in England's north – which had been graded 'outstanding' for its early years practice. They noticed small things, such as how the Hunningley Academy teachers arranged toys on shelves to encourage children to engage with more challenging materials (such as smaller Lego blocks, to work on fine motor skills). Langford Academy's principal told us it was 'useful to see this in practice', and the school's early years leader returned from the visit inspired.

United Learning is now capitalising on the principal's success, promoting him to lead turnaround efforts in two other schools as an executive principal. He is finding it easier, having done it before:

> You sleep easier at night the third time. The first time I was worried about everything. And by now I'm like, 'I'm not worried about that'. You learn what to sweat over and you learn what works well.

He can now help the leaders he manages as an executive principal, as they go through the same challenges. He is also able to bring experienced staff over from Langford Academy to work with the new turnaround schools he leads.

The principal has begun to identify the staff who have the potential to be change champions in his other schools. He told us that these are 'the things you learn, that I wouldn't have done at the start'.

4.5 Governments can hold multi-school organisations to account for improving schools

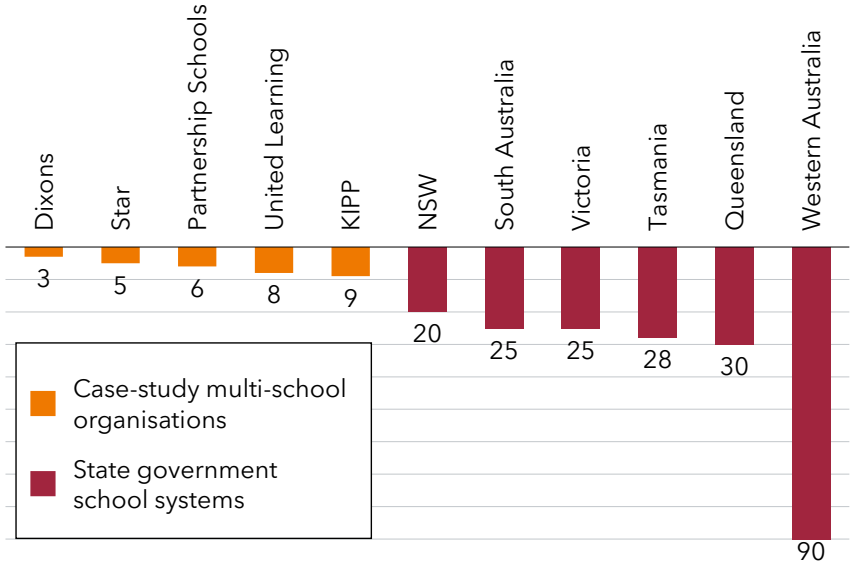
Governments in Australia are responsible for supporting schools to improve. But they are also responsible for setting the terms against which government schools' performance is periodically monitored. There is tension between these two responsibilities which means that, in effect, governments 'mark their own homework'.[97]

The English MSOs Grattan visited were held accountable by the government for students' results. These MSOs' sole responsibility was running excellent schools for the public benefit. Their reputation rested on this and it was how their success was measured. As England's Department for Education summarises:

> When weak schools join [multi-academy] trusts it is not just a matter of drawing on the expert support to help them improve, but rather the trust's leaders are responsible and accountable for whether they do, in fact, improve.[98]

Clearer accountability is possible when responsibility for running day-to-day operations is separated from other functions – such as system-wide policy setting, funding, and oversight. This is how service provision works in several other Australian public sectors, such as the operation of public hospitals and universities.

Figure 4.1: Multi-school organisations give principals more support
Approximate number of schools supported by a principal's supervisor



Notes: Australian examples use government school data only. In Western Australia, principals are technically direct reports to the Director General of the Department of Education. The figure reported here is the average 'span of control' of the state's Directors of Education, who are responsible for schools in a region. See Western Australian Department of Education (2021).

Sources: See, for example, Bloxham et al (2015), NSW Department of Education (2017) and Victorian Auditor-General's Office (2020). Approximate 'span of control' for a principal's supervisor in case study MSOs and state government school systems provided to Grattan on request.

97. While arrangements vary across the country (see Gurr 2007, p. 170), some governments commission independent reviewers to review government schools. But, compared to school reviews in England, these lack transparency and a rigorous focus on curriculum planning and classroom teaching practice. See Santiago et al (2011, p. 119) and Gurr (2007, p. 180). In England, there is a clear separation between the operation and evaluation of schools, unlike in Australia where Cuttance et al (1998, p. 158) say there is a 'reluctance for bureaucrats themselves to be evaluated or scrutinised, carrying as it might the risk of embarrassment'.
98. Department for Education (2016b, p. 8).

5 Multi-school organisations bring broader benefits to the system

All schools – not just MSO schools – benefit from the innovation of high-performing MSOs.

MSOs are in a strong position to solve the problems schools face. Because they run multiple schools, MSOs can take a systematic approach to identifying what works, and trialling solutions.

The MSOs Grattan visited have been at the forefront of advances in their education systems, including designing system-wide teacher training and development, creating high-quality curriculum materials and assessments, codifying improvement strategies, and building systems to manage student data.

5.1 Multi-school organisations are expected to add value beyond their schools

Raising standards across the sector was a key motivation behind establishing MSOs in England and New York City. For example, the documents which establish English MSOs say they are expected to:

> Advance for the public benefit education in the United Kingdom [and] carry out research into the development and application of new techniques in education. . . and to publish the results of such research.[99]

These expectations, coupled with an MSO's capacity, means MSOs are prepared to take risks to solve tough improvement challenges. In England, MSOs have agreed to attempt turnarounds in schools that have had poor results for decades. Before the establishment of England's MSOs, there was no obvious vehicle to take a gamble on these schools and help them improve.

MSO leaders want to add value to the broader system.[100] One leader at Dixons told us the organisation was committed to 'system generosity and giving back to the system'. She added that Dixons holds 'a foundational belief that if we know something, we should get it out there'.

5.2 Multi-school organisations have produced spill-over benefits which improve the wider education system

MSOs have a track-record of incubating useful advances in teacher training and development, curriculum and assessment materials, codifying effective school practices, and analysis of student data.

Teacher training and development

Many MSOs in England and New York City help to train prospective teachers, and offer professional development to teachers outside the schools they run.

All three of the MSOs Grattan studied in England help to deliver key government programs, such as initial teacher training, early career training, and the National Professional Qualifications (a suite of evidence-based qualifications for teachers and school leaders).

Grattan's case study MSOs are not alone. Of the approximately 170 accredited providers of initial teacher education in the UK, nearly 40 per cent are led by MSOs.[101] And of the 87 teaching school hubs designated by the English government to provide professional

99. Department for Education (2021b, pp. 13–15).

100. See, for example, Day and Taneva (2021, p. 3).

101. Grattan analysis of Department for Education (2024). Note that some of these providers are small MSOs, with fewer than 10 schools.

development to teachers throughout their career, 82 are headed by an MSO.[102]

This allows MSOs to lead improvement beyond their immediate schools. United Learning's Paddington Academy, for example, welcomes about 200 trainees through its initial teacher training program, and has worked with about 1,200 early career teachers. In the 2021-2022 academic year, United Learning also provided National Professional Qualifications to 607 teachers.

The result is that, today, MSOs play a crucial role in nurturing the next generation of teachers. Compared to traditional, stand-alone government schools, MSOs are more likely to employ new entrants to the profession.[103]

Curriculum and assessment materials

MSOs have also helped develop free or low-fee curriculum materials that are road-tested in schools. Two of the MSOs Grattan visited – Success Academy in New York City and United Learning in England – have published comprehensive curriculum materials for schools to adopt and adapt.[104]

Dixons, United Learning, and Star all helped Oak National Academy (Oak) in England get underway in 2020. Oak was rapidly established during the pandemic to provide remote learning support. Dixons, United Learning, and Star – alongside other English MSOs – recorded video lessons based on their curricula, and made these freely available online through Oak's digital platform.

Building on this work, Oak now offers 40,000 free lesson resources for teachers, and has delivered 150 million lessons via its online classroom.[105] Each week, on average, more than 100,000 students visit Oak's online classroom. One survey found that a quarter of teachers in England have used Oak's resources in the past six months.[106] And a recent evaluation found that 40 per cent of teachers using Oak said it decreased their workload, with an average time saved of four hours per week.[107]

Codifying and sharing effective school practices

Several of Grattan's case study MSOs have recorded and shared their effective school practices. Success Academy in New York has established the Robertson Centre, which provides free, on-demand resources and training for teachers across the sector. Similarly, Dixons in England has created OpenSource, a platform providing free, on-demand professional development. OpenSource has 180 videos (and counting) about Dixons' approach, and offers members bespoke coaching and guidance.

United Learning, Star Academies, and Dixons also run school hubs: schools designated by the UK government to share best practice in areas such as behaviour, literacy, and maths. With the help of government funding, the MSO hubs we visited welcome visitors from schools outside their MSO to observe great practice. Exceptional teachers are given time to coach other schools on the best ways to implement effective practice.

102. Culpin and Male (2022).
103. The 'new entrant' category mostly comprises teachers who became qualified in the past year, but also includes some teachers returning to the state-funded education system after working in an independent school or taking a break from teaching. See Niblett and Andrews (2019, p. 16).
104. New Visions for Public Schools in New York City has also published free curriculum materials and runs workshops to help teachers with these materials.
105. Oak National Academy (2023).
106. ImpactEd (2023, p. 15).
107. Ibid (p. 4).

Bespoke student data platforms

Our case study MSOs have also made improvements to the way student data is managed. New Visions for Public Schools in New York, for example, played a significant role in developing software to track students' progress through school.

The motivation to develop a better way to manage data started with New Visions' own data. In 2012, only 72 per cent of its students graduated on time. There was big variation across schools: some had almost all students graduate on time, but others had a rate below 50 per cent.[108]

When New Visions investigated, it noticed that some students were falling through the cracks because of New York State's complex graduation requirements. So New Visions piloted and rolled out a student data dashboard, alongside coaching on how to use it. Now, 92 per cent of students graduate on time in New Visions schools, and the data dashboard is used across New York City's public schools.[109]

108. Bryk and Greenberg (2020).
109. Data provided by New Visions for Public Schools.

6 What Australia should do

Australia should trial multi-school organisations, to give schools a better shot at improving.

Creating high-performing MSOs that can help drive school improvement will take time. But every year governments delay is another year principals, teachers, and students are stuck with the status quo.

6.1 Each school sector should trial multi-school organisations

State and territory governments and large Catholic Education offices should establish several trials of MSOs in the school systems they run. Independent schools should also seek opportunities to form a trial MSO with other independent schools. Sector leaders should also explore options to trial cross-sector MSOs (i.e. an MSO with a mix of government and non-government schools) in each state and territory.

The trials should follow 10 design principles (detailed in Box 10 on the following page). Critically, each MSO should start small – anchored by a very high-performing 'beacon school', from which to spread strong practice. Each trial MSO should aim to grow to at least 10 schools in a decade. Schools should opt in to the trials, and governments could earmark planned but yet-to-be-opened schools to join the trials.

6.2 The MSO trials should be largely funded through recurrent school expenditure

The trial MSOs should get the full amount of school-level funding to which they are currently entitled under existing federal and state-level school funding formulae.[110] Trial MSOs should also be eligible for grant funding for start-up costs, to support head office operations, and to turn around poor-performing schools. Depending on the success of the trials, in the longer term these costs could be at least partly offset by reorienting education departments towards policy and governance functions, and away from operational functions.

We estimate that additional funding of approximately $10 million would be needed for the first four years of each trial.[111] The total cost of each trial would be a tiny fraction of overall government spending on schools. The next section outlines the different costs involved.

Establishment funding

The federal government should offer each trial MSO start-up grants of up to $1 million.

These grants might be used by the trial MSOs to fund:

- MSO-wide professional learning to align teaching practices.
- Additional time-release for teachers to refine high-quality curriculum and assessment materials for use across an MSO's schools.
- MSO leaders visiting high-performing MSOs overseas.

110. Schools are currently funded through a combination of federal government funding and state/territory government funding (in addition to fees and contributions from parents). State and territory governments and Catholic Education systems have the ability to re-allocate federal government funding according to their own needs-based funding models.

111. Assumes the MSO has a total of one 500-student school in its first year, two schools in its second year (1,000 student in total) and three schools in its third and fourth years (1,500 students total). Assumes a one-off $1 million start-up grant, a one-off $500,000 turn-around grant, and about $8.5 million in head-office grants over the four years. Head office costs have been inflated using the method for indexing the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) – see Education (2023) – and forecasts from Commonwealth of Australia (2023b, Table 2.2, p. 58). Further assumptions underpinning the estimate are described in the subsections below.

Box 10: The 10 core design principles for multi-school organisation trials in Australia

The overall design

1. Each trial MSO should build up to at least 10 schools, but start small with no more than two schools.
2. Each trial MSO should be led by an executive leader, such as a standout school principal, with responsibility for running the trial MSO's schools.
3. Each trial MSO should be granted sufficient, meaningful autonomy to implement an effective model of school improvement.
4. In exchange for increased autonomy, each trial MSO should be subject to rigorous public evaluation.
5. Each trial MSO's schools should align on teaching and learning approaches (such as using common assessments), not just on school support functions (such as finance and technology).

Selecting the initial schools

6. At least initially, schools in each trial MSO should be from the same 'phase' (i.e. primary or secondary) and geographically close to one another (for example, no more than a 30-minute drive). This will facilitate coordination and support the establishment of best practice, before the trial MSO adds a school from the other phase or from further afield.
7. MSO trials should be opt-in, and seek expressions of interest from schools. Schools that express interest should be screened for their suitability (in accordance with the design principles detailed here). Governments could earmark planned but yet-to-be-opened new schools to join an MSO trial.
8. At least one of the initial schools in each trial should be very high-performing, to act as a 'beacon school' from which to spread strong practice.

Growth

9. Growth should be carefully managed so that a trial MSO only assumes responsibility for as many additional schools as it has the capacity to support and improve.
10. As each trial MSO grows, principals' direct supervisors should oversee a small number of schools only so that – if needed – they can provide each with a high dosage of support. A portfolio of about five schools per supervisor would be suitable.

Figure 6.1 on the next page provides an example of how the selection and growth principles might be applied for a trial MSO to grow incrementally to 10 schools in 10 years. If successful, the trial MSO should be supported to expand to more schools in the long term.

Figure 6.1: The trial multi-school organisations should grow carefully over 10 years
An example growth pathway for a trial MSO

	MSO growth	Mix of schools	Total schools
Prepare for growth	• Identify 'beacon school' and ready it to support another school	• 1 capacity giver	1
Year 2	• 'Beacon school' responsible for a newly opened school from the same phase (e.g. primary)	• 1 capacity giver • 1 capacity taker	2
Year 3	• Mid-performing school (from the same phase) joins the MSO	• 2 capacity givers • 1 capacity taker	3
Year 5	• 1 x low-performing school (same phase) • 1 x new school (from the other phase)	• 3 capacity givers • 2 capacity takers	5
Year 7	• 1 x low-performing school (same phase) • 1 x mid-performing school (from the other phase)	• 5 capacity givers • 2 capacity takers	7
Year 10	• 2 x mid-performing schools (any phase) • 1 x low-performing school (any phase)	• 7 capacity givers • 3 capacity takers	10
Possible future growth	The high-performing MSOs Grattan studied had between 10 and 100 schools.		

Head office operational costs

State and territory governments, and Catholic Education offices, should offer grants to offset the trial MSOs' head office costs. Grattan estimates that a trial MSO would need an annual grant of about $500,000 to $900,000 per 500-student school.[112] Over time, this could be found within existing education budgets.

Additional grants for trial MSOs that support poor-performing schools

Each trial MSO should be eligible for additional grants offered by state and territory governments, or Catholic Education offices, if they become responsible for poor-performing schools.

The English government recognises the additional costs associated with turning around poor-performing schools, and offers grants for multi-academy trusts to take on struggling schools. The average value of the grants is about $500,000.[113]

6.3 The federal government should fund rigorous evaluations of the trials

The trial MSOs should be subject to rigorous, independent public evaluations, in exchange for the autonomy they have to operate and improve their schools.

The federal government should fund these evaluations.

6.4 Governments should design a robust accountability framework for multi-school organisations

While the MSO structure is a powerful vehicle for school improvement, it does not guarantee it. Strong oversight and accountability will help ensure that the trial MSOs genuinely add value to their schools.

Australia should build on lessons from abroad, and develop a robust accountability framework to regulate MSOs. In England and New York, establishing stronger guardrails sooner would have reduced the risk of poor performance and financial mismanagement.[114] In some cases, this occurred because MSOs grew too quickly and fell into deficit. In other cases, unscrupulous actors sought to profit from the public purse.

This is a risk associated with service provision in all sectors, and cases of poor performance and financial misconduct have been documented in Australian public schools too.[115] Strong guardrails and a robust accountability framework are needed to protect students and the public dollar, and would help ensure that the trial MSOs do not provide an avenue for mediocrity and bad-faith actors.

Australia's accountability framework should include regular and rigorous reviews of the trial MSO schools and head office. The trial MSOs should be required to publish independently audited accounts in annual reports.

Governments should also develop an appropriate measure to assess each trial MSO's impact on key student outcomes. Once developed, the measure should be reported transparently, because the public has a right to know whether an MSO is making a difference to student learning in its schools.

112. Assumes between 5 per cent and 7.5 per cent of a school's total recurrent funding is needed to cover head office costs, which is broadly aligned to head office expenditure in multi-academy trusts (see, for example, Kreston UK 2024, p. 7). The upper estimate of a $900,000 grant for a 500-student school assumes 7.5 per cent of total recurrent funding for a school that has a combined income of $12 million from federal and state/territory recurrent expenditure. This, in turn, is based on a secondary school receiving $24,000 per student after applying additional loadings. See Productivity Commission (2024, Table 4A.29).
113. Grattan analysis of the UK's Department for Education (2023f). Average grant value adjusted to Australian dollars using the OECD's purchasing power parity conversion rates.
114. Green III and Connery (2019); and Perraudin (2017).
115. See, for example, Hiatt (2023), Bandaranayake (2014) and AAP (2013).

Appendix A: Multi-school organisations in England and New York City

This appendix provides additional detail on multi-school organisations in England and New York City.

A.1 England

The MSOs Grattan researched in England were multi-academy trusts, which have emerged in the past two decades.

Historically, England's local government bodies (called local authorities) ran government schools. In the early 2000s, academies were introduced – government-funded, no-fee schools which operate independently of the local authority.

Academies were initially set up to replace poor-performing schools and were opened by sponsors (typically voluntary bodies, individuals, churches, or business). The sponsors established trusts: private companies with charitable status which have a contract with the Secretary of State for Education (the minister responsible for the Department for Education) to run an academy.

To encourage innovation, trusts and their academies were given greater freedom to make their own decisions than local authority schools (for example, they do not have to follow the national curriculum, and can change the length of terms and set their own school hours). Trusts and their academies must still follow the law and guidance on admissions, exclusions, and special education needs and disabilities.[116]

Since 2010, the number of academies has increased substantially, because the government allowed all schools – not just poor-performing ones – to become academies, and encouraged trusts to open new schools (called 'free schools'). This was formalised in 2014, when the government encouraged the formation of multi-academy trusts – charities which run a group of schools under a single contract with the government.[117]

In 2014, the government also appointed eight regional directors, who are public servants responsible for approving the creation of new academies, and brokering poor-performing local government schools into effective multi-academy trusts.[118] For the most part, these regional directors are former school principals.

As of January 2023, about 47 per cent of students in the government school system are educated in a multi-academy trust.[119] About 41 per cent of government schools are in a multi-academy trust, but many trusts remain small (with five schools or fewer).[120]

The English government now sees multi-academy trusts as 'the best long-term formal arrangement for stronger schools to support the improvement of weaker schools'.[121] The government's view is that:

> Teachers and leaders in strong trusts can form communities of practice, sharing evidence-based approaches and benefiting from high-quality professional development to improve outcomes for children. Strong trusts also achieve economies of scale, sharing resources, centralising functions, and ensuring robust financial governance, in order to build resilience and save time and money to reinvest into education.[122]

116. For more detail, see Male (2022), Freedman (2022) and Eyles and Machin (2019).
117. West (2018).
118. Foster and Long (2017).
119. Department for Education (2023a, p. 37).
120. Lucas et al (2023, p. 4).
121. Department for Education (2016a, p. 57).
122. Her Majesty's Government (2022, p. 44).

A.2 New York City

In the US, public schools are operated by local government entities called school districts. The New York City school district is the largest in the country, educating more than one million students in 1,867 schools.[123]

Most schools in New York City continue to be operated by the school district, but some are organised and supported differently. Grattan researchers visited two types of MSOs which are independent of the school district – charter management organisations, and private school management organisations – as well as an affinity network, which is a group of district schools supported but not run by a charitable organisation.

Charter management organisations

Introduced in 1992, charter schools are government-funded schools operated by an arms-length, charitable organisation (as distinct from district schools, which are run by a government department).[124] Initially, most charter schools were stand-alone schools, but in 1999 charter management organisations – which operate multiple charter schools – emerged.[125]

Today, about 146,200 students in New York City (approximately 15 per cent) are educated in 274 charter schools.[126] Of these schools, 125 belong to a charter management organisation.[127]

In New York City, charter schools overwhelmingly educate disadvantaged and multicultural students – 81 per cent of students in charter schools are economically disadvantaged and nearly 90 per cent of students are black or Latino.[128]

Charter schools in New York City get about 80 per cent of the funding of traditional public schools. Some supplement this with philanthropic support.[129] Even after accounting for philanthropic funding, many charter schools do not have higher per-pupil expenditure than traditional public schools.[130] Charter schools cannot charge parents school fees, and must admit students through a lottery if they have more applications than available places.

Success Academies and KIPP NYC Public Schools were the two charter management organisations we visited.

Private school management organisations

Private school management organisations are independent entities that operate or help operate three or more private schools. New York City has had private school management organisations since the 1990s.[131] They get about 30 per cent of the per-pupil funding of district schools.[132]

For our case-study research, the Grattan team visited Catholic Partnership Schools – a private school management organisation that

123. New York City Department of Education. (2023).
124. Bulkley and Fisler (2003).
125. Farrell et al (2012).
126. New York City Charter School Center (2023a).
127. New York City Charter School Center (2023b).
128. Demographic data do not distinguish between students enrolled in a stand-alone charter school, or in a school that is run by a charter management organisation. See New York City Charter School Center (ibid).
129. Estimates of per-pupil government funding for New York City charter schools vary, and depend on whether the charter school is located in a public school building, owned by the Department of Education, or in private space. See discussions in DeAngelis et al (2018), Domanico and Smith (2017), Baker et al (2012), Jacobowitz et al (2004) and IBO (2010).
130. Maloney and Wolf (2017).
131. Squire (2015).
132. Stakeholder discussion.

was granted operational control of seven schools by the Archdiocese of New York City and four schools by the Catholic Diocese of Cleveland.

Affinity networks

In 2006, New York City introduced affinity networks: not-for-profits that provided instructional (and, later, operational) support for government schools. Schools could choose their preferred network provider.[133]

In 2013, affinity networks' school improvement role narrowed to become advisory, and line management of principals was transferred to the district superintendent (a public servant working for New York City's Department of Education).[134]

As part of our case-study research, the Grattan team visited New Visions for Public Schools, which provides support to 71 government schools and is the largest affinity network in New York City.

133. See further discussion in Elwick (2017), Shipps (2012) and Huebner (2005).
134. Hatch et al (2021); and Wall (2015).

Appendix B: Our case study methodology

Research for this report included case studies of six high-performing MSOs in New York City and England.

We selected exemplar MSOs to investigate what the MSO model can achieve when working well. We selected MSOs according to the following criteria. The MSO had to:

- produce strong academic results, especially for disadvantaged students.[135]
- be sufficiently large to realise the benefits of scale (at least five schools).
- make use of the MSO structure in compelling ways.

Based on these criteria and further screening interviews, we chose six MSOs. To investigate less formal structures, we also conducted case study research with New Visions for Public Schools, an organisation supporting – but not directly operating – a group of government schools in New York City.[136]

We sought to collect enough information at each MSO to be able to understand:

- how each MSO structured their organisation to support school improvement, including how they harnessed the collective resources of a group of schools to drive improvement.
- how MSO-wide policies and processes supported the work of, and were implemented in, schools.
- the impact of the MSO structure, including on: principal workload, support, and expertise; teacher knowledge, skills, and professional satisfaction; and student learning and access to extra-curricular experiences.

Before our on-site visits, we reviewed publicly available information, and documentation provided by each MSO. This included:

- MSO-wide policies or guidelines, on areas that included school improvement, behaviour management, curriculum and assessment, and supporting students with additional needs.
- organisational charts, which detailed an MSO's size, roles, reporting lines, and functions conducted by the head office or delegated to schools or clusters of schools.
- curriculum materials, including MSO-wide curriculum maps, unit plans, assessment schedules, and classroom materials.
- publicly available documentation including data from school inspections, annual reports, and strategic plans.

Grattan staff spent two days on-site at each MSO and visited at least two schools from each MSO.[137]

135. For this criterion, we primarily considered results in standardised tests, graduation outcomes (such as college acceptance rates), and supplementary measures such as student attendance, where available. We gave more weight to value-add measures (i.e. the progress students make) over raw achievement data. At the time of selecting schools, we relied primarily on pre-pandemic data, because newer data were unavailable at an MSO-level, and because the 2022 testing data were less reliable. For the MSOs which largely focused on turnaround schools, we considered the starting point of their schools and whether there was clear evidence of improved student learning.
136. Case study research at New Visions for Public Schools followed the same research methodology.
137. The only exception to this was Success Academy, where because of time constraints we could only visit one school.

Before and during on-site visits, we had meetings with:

- the head of the MSO or an executive leader (multiple times).
- central MSO staff leading key areas of the organisation, such as leads in curriculum and assessment, professional development, workforce strategy, student disability and inclusion, finance, technology, and estates and facilities management.
- principal supervisors.
- the principal of each school visited.
- classroom teachers from across year levels and subject areas (in focus groups).

Meeting staff at different levels and in different roles provided us with a range of views on how the MSO structure supported school improvement.

At each school, we joined leaders on a walk around classrooms to observe teaching and see defining features of the MSO's model in practice. These 'learning walks' lasted between 30 minutes and an hour, with opportunities to visit at least five classes in each school.

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