

# Harnessing Synergy, Maintaining Individuality:



## How Mercia Learning Trust Applies Aligned Autonomy to School Leadership

This article investigates how one multi-academy trust has applied the principles of aligned autonomy to increase leaders' freedom by sharing a vision, knowledge of effective provision and specialist resources to allow senior leaders to focus fully on improving outcomes for the pupils in their individual schools.

A clear understanding of shared values, common goals, key elements of an effective school and non-negotiable strategies will equate to effective alignment between school leaders. Allowing leaders to work independently to achieve these goals, but with suitable challenge, fosters autonomy.

Through robust alignment, greater autonomy can be developed, leading ultimately to success. These two seemingly juxtaposed concepts of alignment and autonomy, when applied with the correct balance, create a synergy of success.



### Who are Mercia Learning Trust?

Mercia Learning Trust (MLT) are a well-established multi-academy trust, based in the south-west of Sheffield, sandwiched between the city and the Peak District. The trust has been operating since 2013 and growing steadily ever since. At the time of writing, MLT consists of six schools – three primaries and three secondaries – one of

which, Mercia Secondary, was established and opened by the trust as a brand new school in 2018. Currently, around 4,500 pupils attend an MLT school and this is set to expand to around 5,000 pupils in the next two years.

Three of the schools that make up MLT have been judged by Ofsted to offer outstanding education and all but one school are over-subscribed, indicating the senior leaders within the trust are doing something very right. Woodlands Primary School is their latest success story; it was judged as requiring improvement in March 2018 but this was turned around to an overall judgement of good in February 2022.

But what exactly is their secret to success? This is where the powerful and empowering concept of aligned autonomy comes into play.



### What Is Aligned Autonomy?

Chris French, the CEO of Mercia Learning Trust, describes their approach as sitting in a sweet spot between a cookie-cutter, one-size-fits-all model and schools operating completely independently. Aligned autonomy offers the best of both ends of this theoretical continuum that MLT straddles where the strengths of each approach work together to form an optimum solution. But what does this look like in practice?



At MLT, all the schools align around what matters the most and the trust itself has three priorities; to develop great schools, be a great trust and be a great employer. Each individual school is led by a headteacher who maintains control with full accountability and is supported by a direct governing body, working together to develop a culture and priorities that reflect the needs of the unique community that they serve. Each school's catchment is as different as the next, leading to differing strategies for curriculum and attainment that meet these unique needs in each school.

What holds all these individual schools together is a shared, clear vision and values; to release each child's full potential through the power of education and to ensure that every pupil at MLT attends an exceptional school. Indeed, all staff are encouraged to share the outlook that each and every child deserves to be treated as if they were their own child and in doing so, giving them every opportunity they would want for their own children.



In order to facilitate and achieve 'great schools', every member of the trust is clear about what constitutes a highly effective school:

- an explicit ethos and expectations (committed to by all);
- behaviour of the highest standard;
- a meticulously planned curriculum, tailored to each individual school, which is delivered consistently well, day in, day out;
- a robust culture of safeguarding;
- a thorough and inclusive personal development strategy;
- a commitment to all children (especially the most vulnerable) to receive an excellent education at an exceptional school;
- leadership at every level who are focused and driven by the right priorities.

Trust and school leaders know what needs to be implemented and applied – this is an aligned strength within the trust. Exactly how these components are applied to each school is where autonomy and flexibility is given.



As well as sharing a moral vision, explicit understanding of highly effective provision and the correct priorities, each member school shares key, non-negotiable and identical strategies that are developed at a trust level. These strategies include common frameworks for curriculum, teaching, personal development, a SEND framework and a safeguarding gold standard. There are also trust-wide identical systems to manage finance, HR, GDPR, estates, marketing and IT. By pooling resources to develop and implement strategies that provide over and above a standard, it allows school leaders the freedom to focus on discrete areas of development for their school.



How these resources are accessed depends upon the needs of each school. For example, a particular school may require a greater investment in building maintenance and another may require IT infrastructure upgrades but by pooling their resources the trust is able to spend according to need. Keeping this specialist capacity as a central resource frees school leaders from the bind of administrative and bureaucratic tasks and also ensures they have access to the support they need when they need it.

A brilliant and innovative example of this is the marketing expertise that Abi Merritt, Marketing Manager at MLT, has brought to each individual school. Of particular note is the work that has been undertaken in re-branding and marketing Woodlands Primary School, something which a headteacher working alone would not be able to achieve to an equivalent standard.



Collaboration is also a key element of the aligned autonomy approach. By working together, school leaders are able to carve the path for joined-up thinking on critical issues, such as SEND, trust improvement and safeguarding. The CEO meets weekly with headteachers and regular, systematic meetings focusing on HR, IT and marketing strategy are also in place. This allows for a free flow of information and intelligence sharing from each school, as well as joint problem-solving, because staff from all the schools sit down together to address key issues.



Aligned autonomy also paves the way for staff to develop and become effective home-grown leaders and specialists. MLT is proud to offer all staff excellent CPD opportunities, including a trust-wide annual conference with industry expert keynote speakers, such as David Didau, Mary Myatt, Dylan Wiliam and Marc Rowland appearing at the 2021 conference. Shared principles and priorities facilitate flexibility within MLT, not only building the leadership capacity of the staff body (which numbers nearly 570) but also means they are able to pool expertise within the trust. This not only fills gaps but offers greater opportunities to accelerate talent and ability by continuing to build on the already ambitious and energetic SLT that is driving the trust forward.



### Why an Aligned Autonomy Approach?

Coherence and alignment build better schools. At MLT, it has led to school improvement on an individual school level as well as creating the great trust that it aims to be. In essence, aligned autonomy means the trust leaders can define the goals but allow individual school leaders to find the solutions that work for their teams. It empowers leaders to really focus on standards within their own school but gives them a network that is supporting them and cheering them on as well as sharing the same vision and values. The trust can also be confident that the shared knowledge among school leaders of highly effective schools means an excellent education is delivered consistently.

The SLT at Mercia Learning Trust are always pushing for improvement, constantly wanting to be better and asking what is the next step? A successful partnership culture has been cultivated through the adoption of aligned autonomy and its application across the trust. Commonality, as well as difference, has created a family of schools that genuinely share love across the trust and succeed in offering an excellent education to every child.



If you would like to know more about Mercia Learning Trust you can visit their website here: <https://www.merciatrust.co.uk/>, follow them on Twitter: [@MerciaTrust](#), [LinkedIn](#), or subscribe to their YouTube channel: [Mercia Learning Trust](#) on YouTube.

