



# Blackpool Sixth Form College

## Teaching school development and academy sponsorship

Blackpool Sixth Form College and Hodgson Academy have successfully secured teaching school status. This partnership is the first collaboration of its kind involving a Sixth Form College and was one of the first hundred teaching schools to open in September 2011. These schools are seen as the vanguard for the delivery of school-to-school improvements, through continuous professional development, leadership support and dissemination of best practice. This case study charts the establishment of the limited liability company to take forward this unique alliance and outlines the mechanism of creating a multi-academy trust to sponsor the launch of up to three academies within the Fylde Coast area. The research process captures and summarises the evolution of the project, focusing on overarching governance issues.

### **What was the catalyst / driver for reviewing the governance structure?**

The national trigger for this initiative was the publication in November 2010 of the Schools White Paper 'The Importance of Teaching'. This proposed the development of a national

network of teaching schools, based on the model of teaching hospitals, to lead the training and professional development of teachers and head teachers.

In Blackpool in 2010, the Sixth Form College was engaged in a National Challenge partnership, supporting a nearby under-performing secondary school. In the previous year, the College had secured an 'outstanding' assessment from Ofsted, a major achievement from a 'satisfactory' grade in the previous round. Governors and senior managers were considering how they might avoid complacency, sustain improvements and retain their 'outstanding' status.

The College was invited to join Hodgson High School in bidding for the establishment of a teaching school. Also an 'outstanding' local provider, the School was in the process of converting to an academy. Key features of the Blackpool bid were that both institutions were outward looking with proven experience of successfully working across the school sector. Their shared vision and positive relationships at senior levels (the Head of Hodgson was a previous governor of the College)

facilitated the emergence of the all-important ‘collaborative gene’.

The Hodgson Academy governors were very supportive of the partnership bid, having seen examples of similar ‘win-win’ initiatives that had ultimately benefited the Academy and its students.

The Chair of the College Corporation believed the development would support the drive to improve standards, not only at the College but also across the feeder schools in the Fylde Coast area. This in turn would strengthen student progression to the College. His guiding belief is that all organisations have to keep moving and evolving to avoid being overtaken. From his perspective, using a limited liability company for the teaching school’s governance structure would enable the management team to facilitate coherence, direction and leadership.

## **What process is being used to carry out the review?**

The teaching school initiative was first shared with college governors at the Strategic Planning and Standards Committee held on 14 June 2011, and all governors were given notice at the 5 July 2011 Corporation meeting of a visit by inspectors to examine and assess the feasibility of the bid. A week later, the Principal informed governors by email that the College would be designated a teaching school with effect from 1 September 2011.

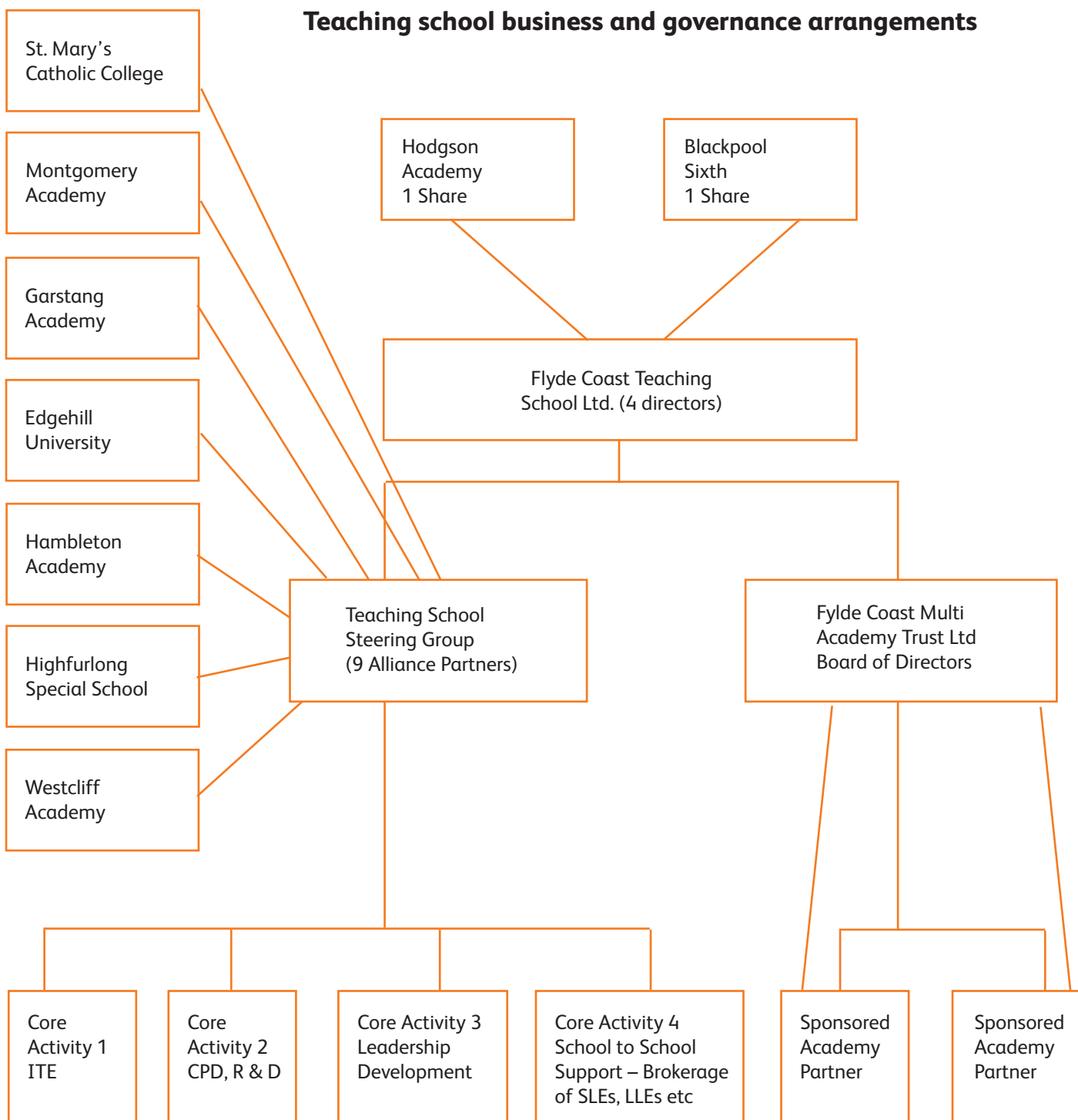
Subsequent meetings of the Strategic Planning and Standards Committee during the Autumn Term informed governors of the progress of the project. At the November 2011 meeting of the Committee, the Principal provided a succinct report detailing a range of national and local developments in respect of teaching schools. Perhaps of most significance was that the Department for Education was now approaching teaching schools to become

sponsors of academies. Thereafter, discussions took place with officers within the Blackpool local authority regarding this development. The Chair of the Corporation noted at this time that progress was moving quickly and he and the Chair of the Hodgson Governors had met to discuss the governance arrangements of the Teaching School, examine alternative structures and had received from advice from the Department of Education.

At the December 2011 meeting of the Corporation, the Principal advised that the project was moving rapidly and along with the seven strategic alliance partners, the College had invested time in looking at best practice in teaching and learning, which had already regenerated the drive to deliver high quality provision. Discussions were ongoing with legal advisers to fashion the legal framework of the Teaching School. Blackpool Council held discussions with the Teaching School as a potential sponsor of future academies. Whilst the Principal acknowledged that this development offered very important opportunities, it also had significant risks. The December Corporation meeting also agreed the detailed programme for the Annual Governors Residential Conference in February 2012, which would provide an extended period of time to review this strategic development and attempt to address the concerns expressed by some governors.

An initial meeting was held in early January 2012, with legal advisors, to set up the formal framework to establish the Teaching School as a private company limited by guarantee, with a minimum of four directors, being the chairs and heads of the respective institutions, to be known as the Fylde Coast Teaching School Ltd.

The diagram below illustrates the governance, steering groups and core business activities. It also shows the potential multi-academy board.



## How have stakeholders been involved in this process?

A number of different local stakeholders were involved in this project, these included governors and senior leaders of:

- the two leading institutions;
- the seven other Alliance members; and
- the two or three identified schools, which may move to academy status.

In addition, there were the senior officers of the two local authorities; Blackpool and Lancashire.

A critical vehicle for engaging the College governing body was the governors' Annual Residential Conference, which was held in early February 2012. The Teaching School was featured in the Principal's opening presentation and in the subsequent syndicate discussions. A session on academy sponsorship was particularly successful, as the College Principal and the Head of Hodgson Academy jointly presented an unfolding situation, as well as reviewing the opportunities and potential threats of this form of collaboration. In open discussion, governors posed many of the frequently asked questions about academies and shared their concerns about the risks to the College. In addition, the after-dinner speaker was a leading professor in teaching and learning developments from Edge Hill University, the HE alliance member within the Teaching School. This was particularly useful to focus governors on the crucial issue: improving the student experience and achievements through best practice in teaching, learning and assessment.

Governors received briefings regarding progress on the governance issues at the February 2012 Search Committee and on general progress at the March 2012 Strategic Planning and Standards Committee and Corporation meeting.

## What questions have arisen for you throughout this process?

- A key concern of governors was the potential adverse and detrimental impact upon the College arising from arising from taking the eye off the ball. It is felt that the central mission of driving up student achievement and standards can be quickly displaced by the novelty of such an initiative.
- In addition, a small team of senior college managers can become over-loaded by additional work and responsibilities, particularly where the way forward is uncharted.
- Given the high national expectations surrounding teaching schools, there exists considerable reputational risk should there be a delivery failure.
- The modest initial funding to establish the Teaching School with a declining contribution over the next two years requires a strong and robust business model to move to a self-sustaining status after three years.
- The Teaching School is located within two local authorities. This has added complexity to relationships with the town's unitary authority and Lancashire County Council.
- The pressure on funding has brought an additional dimension of uncertainty and concern. As resources shrink and competition increases, the appetite for collaborative working is diminished.
- The open, supportive and equality based teaching school model is significantly changed when considering future academy sponsorship, in some respects, to an interventionist agenda driven approach, which is somewhat

at odds with the culture of sharing of best practice.

- The governance mechanism through the Limited Liability Company is conceived as high level, akin to trustees, possibly with regular termly meetings. A particular question surrounding the use of a casting vote of the Chair, (should an impasse occur between the four directors), had been a sticking point. The final solution was a casting vote limited to routine operational matters which were not featured on a 33 item 'prohibited list'.
- The term of office and selection of the Chair were resolved by a rotating one-year period of appointment.
- The Company Secretary is the College's Director of Finance, but banking arrangements, authorisation levels and processing mechanisms involves Hodgson Academy partners.

## **What conclusions or decisions have you come to so far?**

The Teaching School is considered by both partners as one of the major drivers and change agents of education in the local area for some decades. A vehicle for good through sharing and pursuing of best practice, in order to change the lives of local students and open up opportunities through raising aspirations and facilitating access to further educational opportunities.

Best practice in professional development has emerged in examples from different educational sector settings. The benefits of cross-phase working are evident in such areas as differentiation, personalised learning and questioning techniques.

However, launching and driving forward the Teaching School on an operational basis has demanded significant time commitments by the two senior leaders of the institutions and similarly huge commitments of time and energy by their two deputies. In February 2012, the College appointed a Director of Teaching School to oversee the College's professional development programme and its side of teaching school activities and so relieve the pressure on the Deputy Principal.

## **How has the changing external environment for FE and Skills influenced this review?**

The dramatic changes to the external environment, most prompted by the Coalition Government have both accelerated and frustrated this development. The drivers have been the new government initiatives and changes to legislation. However, the reductions in central funding have provided a difficult backdrop.

## **Next steps**

The first meeting of the Teaching School Board is planned to take place in the Summer Term 2012, once the Company is incorporated. This will confirm the working operations of the Board, the reporting mechanisms and take forward the governance framework of the Fylde Coast Multi Academy Trust, to which the Teaching School provides the majority of members for the Trust's Board. Hopefully, the meeting will clarify the VAT position of the Teaching School and its precise charitable status.

## **What three lessons learned would you share with other governing bodies considering a similar change process?**

- 1.** At a time of significant change, it is essential to be forward-facing, brave and become involved with new initiatives, providing the institution has the management resource available to ensure there is no detrimental impact on the College's core business.
- 2.** Senior post holders and governors have to be capable of high-level strategic thinking. They need to have established an agreed risk appetite, which allows managers freedom to innovate, sometimes working on their own, often at a frenetic pace, to respond to new initiatives without the opportunity to undertake a full risk analysis.
- 3.** There must be confidence in the College's senior leaders and their capabilities. This is demonstrated in their ability to lead teams into uncharted areas to follow the College's ambitions. However, time must be created later to allow governors to understand new developments and thereby to become fully engaged.

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