What data can and can't tell us about the impact of MATs on student outcomes: an evidence review and recommendations for further research

A report by FFT Education Datalab for McKinnon, an independent, non-partisan philanthropic organisation

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Executive Summary

England's MAT sector has reached significant scale and maturity. As of 2025/26, 49% of schools and 55% of students attend schools that are in MATs. Medium-sized (10 to 19 schools) and large MATs (20 or more schools) have grown nearly ninefold since 2015, from 43 to 383. A third of schools in medium-sized and large MATs have been members for ten or more years.

Headline attainment comparisons between MATs and other governance models can be misleading. Raw attainment data shows minimal differences between school types (local authorities, Single Academy Trusts, and Multi-Academy Trusts). However, medium-sized and large MATs disproportionately educate disadvantaged and lower prior-attaining students reflecting successive governments' design of the system to encourage them to take on schools with these students. As it can take more than three years for outcomes to improve after a school joins a MAT, comparisons that ignore intake differences and improvement trajectories are not comparing like with like.

The strongest evidence for MAT impact is in school turnaround. Of 586 schools judged inadequate by Ofsted (the inspectorate) between 2006 and 2019 which subsequently joined a MAT, 87% are now judged good or outstanding. Some MATs have been particularly effective: all schools taken on by Reach2 Academy Trust, Harris Federation, Delta Academies Trust and Lift Schools are now judged good or outstanding.

The highest-achieving schools in large MATs achieve significantly better outcomes, especially for disadvantaged students. In the highest-achieving quarter of large MATs, 71% of primary students achieve the expected standard in reading, writing and maths — nine percentage points above the national average (62%). Meanwhile, in the highest-performing 10% of schools within large MATs, disadvantaged students outperform the national average for all students (63% vs 62%) and significantly exceed the national average for disadvantaged students (49%). At secondary level, disadvantaged students in the highest-performing 10% of schools within large MATs achieve Progress 8 scores close to the national average for all students — around half a grade higher per subject than disadvantaged students nationally.

Performance varies considerably within as well as between MATs. Around 22% of the variation in attainment between schools in the ten largest MATs is attributable to differences between MATs; the remainder reflects variation between individual schools within the same MAT. This is consistent with patterns across the broader school system — within-group variation is typically larger than between-group variation.

MAT turnaround success varies significantly by region. London turnaround schools were far more likely to be judged outstanding than those in other regions. Almost one in three turnaround schools in the North East, North West and South West were still judged less than good in 2024. The uneven distribution of strong MAT sponsors may be part of the explanation.

The evidence base has not kept pace with the sector's maturation. Much of the published research predates the emergence of larger, more established MATs, and the absence of a definitive verdict reflects a research gap as much as a finding. Three research priorities stand out: creating value-added measures that control for intake differences; better analysis of improvement trajectories for schools joining MATs; and research into which trust characteristics — size, track record, phase composition, geographical concentration — are associated with the strongest outcomes.

Introduction

In England, the evolution from a model of school governance delivered through local authorities to a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT)-based model raises important questions: what has been the impact of this structural change on student outcomes, and what do we know about the types of MATs that have had the greatest impact?

In this report, we review the evidence of the effectiveness of MATs and academies more generally. We show how the piecemeal way in which MATs have developed leads to difficulty in evaluating their effectiveness, and offer some thoughts on new research to improve the evidence base and identify areas of strong performance within the MAT landscape.

The MAT landscape in 2025/26

As of the start of the 2025/26 academic year, nearly half (49%) of schools in England were part of a MAT, and a further 4% were Single Academy Trusts (SATs).[1] More than half of all students (55%) attended a school in a MAT— higher than the school-level figure because secondary schools, which tend to be larger, were more likely to be part of a MAT than other school types. The remaining schools we consider to be local authority maintained schools, which includes groups made up of foundation, voluntary-aided and voluntary-controlled schools funded by local authorities.[2]

MATs vary considerably in size, phase composition, and how long their schools have been part of the MAT. The majority of schools in a MAT were in a MAT with ten or more schools: overall, nearly one in five (17%) were part of a medium-sized MAT with between 10-19 schools and a further 15% were part of a large MAT with 20 or more schools.

Table 1: Number of schools and students by MAT size, 2025/26

		LA schools	SAT	Small MAT (2-9 schools)	Medium MAT (10-19 schools)	Large MAT (20+ schools)
N	Schools	9,899	960	3,786	3,742	3,252
	Students	3,008,188	731,405	1,748,030	1,486,467	1,302,934
%	Schools	46%	4%	17%	17%	15%
	Students	36%	9%	21%	18%	16%

Table 2: Number of schools by MAT size and phase, 2025/26

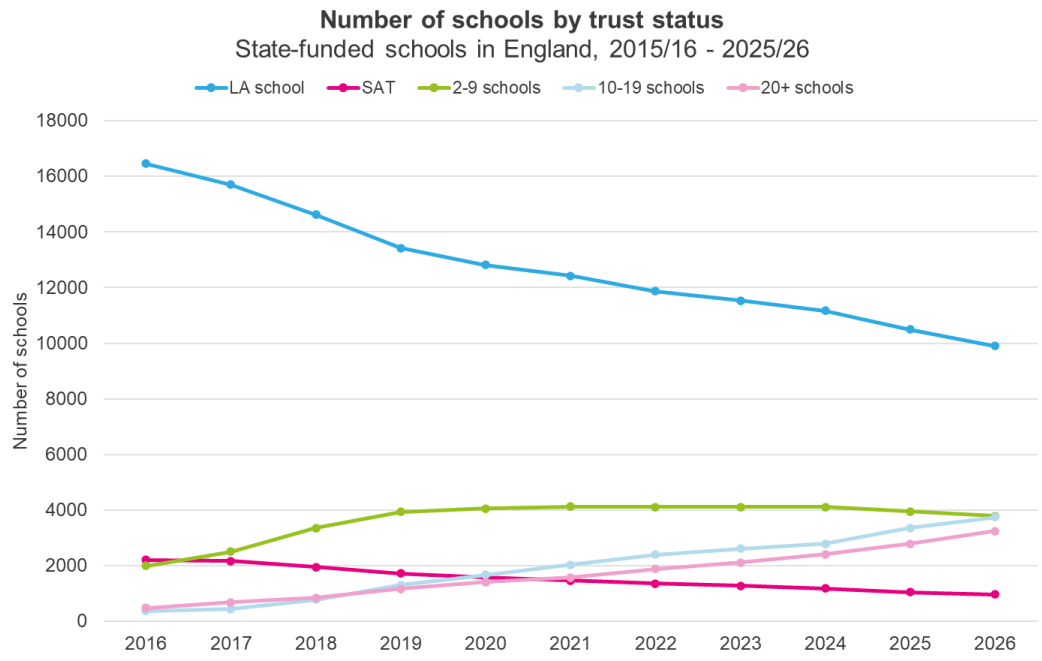
	Phase	LA schools	SAT	Small MAT (2-9 schools)	Medium MAT (10-19 schools)	Large MAT (20+ schools)
N	Primary	8,674	375	2,444	2,773	2,468
	Secondary	543	485	879	697	655

[1] Based on analysis of data from https://www.get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/Downloads
[2] https://www.gov.uk/types-of-school

	16+	1	19	43	13	5
	All-through	18	20	54	38	31
	Special	511	44	276	168	70
	Alternative Provision	152	17	90	53	23
%	Primary	52%	2%	15%	17%	15%
	Secondary	17%	15%	27%	21%	20%
	16+	1%	23%	53%	16%	6%
	All-through	11%	12%	34%	24%	19%
	Special	48%	4%	26%	16%	7%
	Alternative Provision	45%	5%	27%	16%	7%

Larger MATs are increasingly the norm: the number of MATs with ten or more schools has grown nearly ninefold since 2015, from 43 to 383. The sector is also consolidating, with smaller MATs merging into larger ones and the number of SATs continuing to fall.

Chart 1: Number of schools by trust status, 2015/16 to 2025/26



MATs are now an established feature of the education landscape in England. A third of schools in medium-sized or large MATs have been members for ten or more years, rising to 45% for secondary schools, and only around one in five joined within the last three years.

Table 3: Length of time that schools have been part of medium or large MATs by phase

	Phase	0-3 years	3-5 years	5-9 years	10+ years
N	Primary	1,055	508	2,106	1,572
	Secondary	173	118	460	601
	16+	3	3	9	3
	All-through	13	5	23	28

	Special	64	37	91	46
	Alternative Provision	20	4	31	21
	ALL	1,328	675	2,720	2,271
%	Primary	20%	10%	40%	30%
	Secondary	13%	9%	34%	45%
	16+	17%	17%	50%	17%
	All-through	19%	7%	33%	41%
	Special	27%	16%	38%	19%
	Alternative Provision	26%	5%	41%	28%
	ALL	19%	10%	39%	33%

This history matters for how MAT performance data should be read. By design, MATs have disproportionately taken on schools with a history of underperformance and higher proportions of disadvantaged students, and it can take several years for standards to improve after a school joins a MAT. Raw attainment comparisons that ignore intake differences and improvement trajectories are not comparing like with like. We make some recommendations for analysis to address these deficiencies in the conclusion.

Recent research by other organisations on the effectiveness of MATs

Literature over the past decade on the impact of MATs has found that performance varies markedly within and between MATs.[3] However, much of the published research on MAT effectiveness predates the maturation of the sector, and the absence of a definitive verdict reflects a research gap as much as a finding. Evaluation has not kept pace with the system's growth, and conclusions drawn when MATs were smaller and less established have limited bearing on a sector that now educates more than half of England's students.

Two recent studies are worth examining:

- Hodge et al. (2024)[4] found that MATs with 10 or more schools are disproportionately educating disadvantaged students and those with low prior attainment, achieving stronger progress for those groups than local authority schools while managing their finances more effectively than any other group type. However, they also had higher rates of persistent absence, suspensions and teacher turnover compared to schools in local authorities and smaller MATs but notes that turnover "isn't necessarily a bad outcome, if for example schools are adept at identifying and retaining only high-quality teachers, this could potentially help drive efficiencies."[5]

- The UK Department for Education (2022)[6] found that MATs have disproportionately "taken on the challenge of underperformance", with sponsored academies typically replacing schools with a history of low attainment and higher proportions of disadvantaged students – factors that depress headline results but reflect the structural role MATs have been asked to play. Despite this, the analysis shows that sponsored academies improve more quickly than

[3] https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Chain-Effects-2018.pdf
[4] https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Effective_school_groups_final-240404-2.pdf
[5] https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Effective_school_groups_final-240404-2.pdf
[6] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1076862/The_case_for_a_fully_trust-led_system.pdf

otherwise similar local authority schools after joining a MAT[7], with more than seven in ten previously underperforming schools subsequently rated good or outstanding.[8] At the upper end of performance, the highest-attaining schools in MATs improve student outcomes significantly: if all students performed as well as those in top-quartile of MAT-run schools, national primary attainment at Key Stage 2 would have been eight percentage points higher; for disadvantaged students specifically, the gain would have been ten percentage points. The analysis finds that the lowest-attaining schools in MATs achieve lower outcomes than the lowest-attaining local authority schools — typically where MATs have taken on sponsored schools but been unable to drive sufficient improvement — and uses this as the basis for its case for stronger regulatory oversight rather than as evidence against the model.

Together, these studies shift the central question from whether MATs work to which ones work, for whom, and under what conditions. The evidence points towards larger MATs achieving better outcomes for disadvantaged and low prior attaining students than smaller MATs or local authority schools, but the variation between MATs remains wide, and the causal mechanisms are still poorly understood.

How does attainment compare across different sized MATs

We now examine how attainment varies across small, medium-sized MATs and large MATs.

Before examining the attainment data, it is worth establishing why headline comparisons between these groups require careful interpretation. As noted above, MATs — especially those with 10 or more schools — have disproportionately taken on low-performing and challenging schools, reflecting successive governments' design of the system on the assumption that MATs would be a key driver of school improvement. They therefore admit more low-attaining and disadvantaged students than other school types, which depresses headline attainment figures. Timing also matters. Once a school joins a MAT, it may take more than three years to see any improvements in outcomes because of the intensive work required to develop and implement effective school improvement strategies.[9]

Box 1: Measures of student attainment and progress in England

At primary, attainment is measured as the percentage of students who reach the expected standard in reading, writing and maths at Key Stage 2. These are the national assessments taken at age 11, at the end of primary school. Reading and maths are assessed by test, and writing by teacher assessment. Each test result is converted into a scaled score, where 100 marks the expected standard, and a student must reach that standard in all three subjects to count towards the measure.

At secondary, headline attainment is measured using Attainment 8, which sums a student's grades across eight subjects in their General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and equivalent examinations, national qualifications taken by students at age 16. GCSEs are graded on a scale of 9 to 1, where grade 4 is a standard pass and grade 5 is a strong pass. English and maths are double-weighted in the Attainment 8 calculation to reflect their importance.

[7] These comparisons should be interpreted cautiously, as schools that became sponsored academies were not randomly assigned and may differ in unobserved ways from those that did not convert, including factors such as local sponsor availability.

[8] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5f4fb988d3bf7f610032e834/Sponsored_Academy_Research_Report.pdf

[9] https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Chain-Effects-2018.pdf

Progress at secondary has historically been measured using Progress 8, which compares each student's Attainment 8 score against students nationally who achieved similar results at Key Stage 2, controlling for prior attainment and making it a fairer measure of school effectiveness than raw grades alone.

With that context in mind, the raw attainment data shows minimal differences between school types. Looking at the most recent data on attainment at the end of primary school (Key Stage 2) and secondary school (Key Stage 4) both for all students and for disadvantaged students (FSM6)[10] in mainstream schools, the raw differences between school types are minimal, with the exception of higher performance in the basics at Key Stage 4[11] among schools in SATs. However, these tend to be converter academies (schools judged good or better in inspections prior to becoming an academy).

Table 4: Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 performance by MAT size, 2024/25

Key Stage	Student group	LA schools	SAT	MAT 2-9 schools	MAT 10-19 schools	MAT 20+ schools
Key Stage 2	All	64%	66%	64%	63%	64%
	FSM6	44%	47%	48%	44%	48%
Key Stage 4	All	67%	74%	66%	64%	65%
	FSM6	48%	51%	46%	43%	47%

There is, however, evidence that larger MATs achieve better outcomes for disadvantaged and low prior attaining students than the headline figures suggest. [12] Whilst small MATs achieve good outcomes overall, disadvantaged students appear to benefit less than they would in schools in a larger MAT. [13] Understanding why requires looking beyond snapshot attainment data at improvement trajectories, intake composition, and how long schools have been part of a MAT.

Performance within larger MATs in 2024/25

As discussed above, interpreting data on the performance of medium-sized or large MATs (10 or more schools) is not straightforward for a number of reasons, including the fact that many schools in MATs were low-attaining prior to joining a MAT and it typically takes time to stabilise a struggling school, and that schools in MATs have disproportionate numbers of low-attaining and disadvantaged students.

[10] Eligible for free school meals in the last 6 years.
[11] 'The basics at 9-4' refers to those achieving grade 4 or above in both English and maths GCSE. Figures based on analysis of data from https://www.get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/Downloads and https://www.compare-school-performance.service.gov.uk/download-data. Percentages were calculated by dividing the total number of students who achieved the standard in each MAT by the total number of students at the end of the relevant Key Stage in each MAT. They include all schools that were part of the MAT at the start of the 2024/25 academic year except schools with a very low number of students at the relevant Key Stage; data for these schools is not published for data protection reasons. These figures will differ from DfE MAT performance measures, which use weighting to take account of the length of time that schools have been part of a MAT and exclude schools that been in a MAT for less than three years.
[12] https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Effective_school_groups_final-240404-2.pdf
[13] https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Effective_school_groups_final-240404-2.pdf

These caveats notwithstanding, the table below shows the percentage of students in mainstream schools that are part of MATs of 10 or more schools meeting the expected standard in reading, writing and maths at Key Stage 2, and the basics (English and maths) at GCSE grades 9-4 at Key Stage 4, broken down by the number of years in which their school had been in the MAT in 2024/25.

Table 5: Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 performance in medium and large MATs by years in MAT, 2024/25

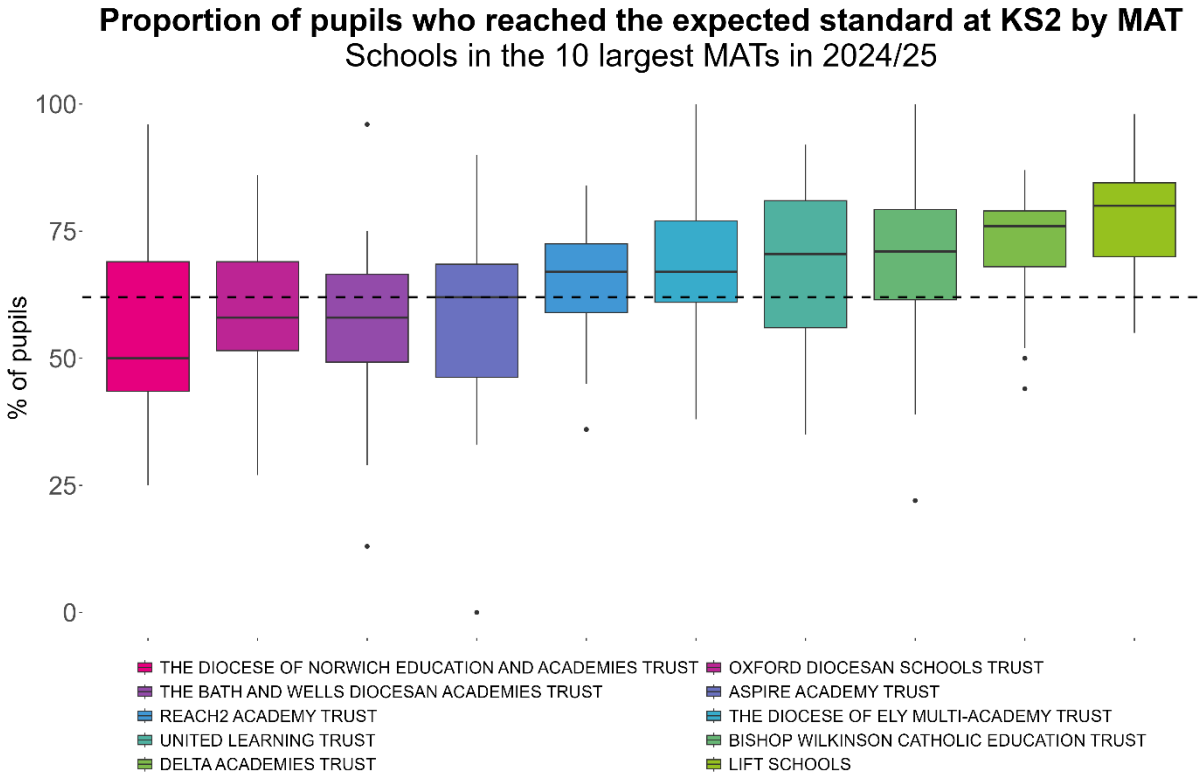
Key Stage	Student group	0-3 years	3-5 years	5-9 years	10+ years	National average
Key Stage 2	All	60%	66%	65%	64%	62%
	FSM6	39%	53%	48%	46%	47%
Key Stage 4	All	63%	65%	66%	65%	67%
	FSM6	43%	48%	50%	46%	48%

The performance of students in schools that have been part of a medium-sized or large MAT for less than three years tends to be lower, particularly for disadvantaged students.

A further complication in interpreting MAT performance data is the fact that there can be considerable variation in performance between schools in a MAT. Focusing on the MATs with the highest number of schools with Key Stage 2 attainment data available, the chart below shows the range of school level percentages of students reaching the expected standard in reading, writing and maths in 2025.[14] Each bar shows the range of attainment across individual schools within a MAT, from the lowest performing school to the highest. The national average in mainstream schools is shown on the chart as a dotted line.

Chart 2: Proportion of students who reached the expected standards at Key Stage 2 by MAT

[14] Based on analysis of data from https://www.get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/Downloads

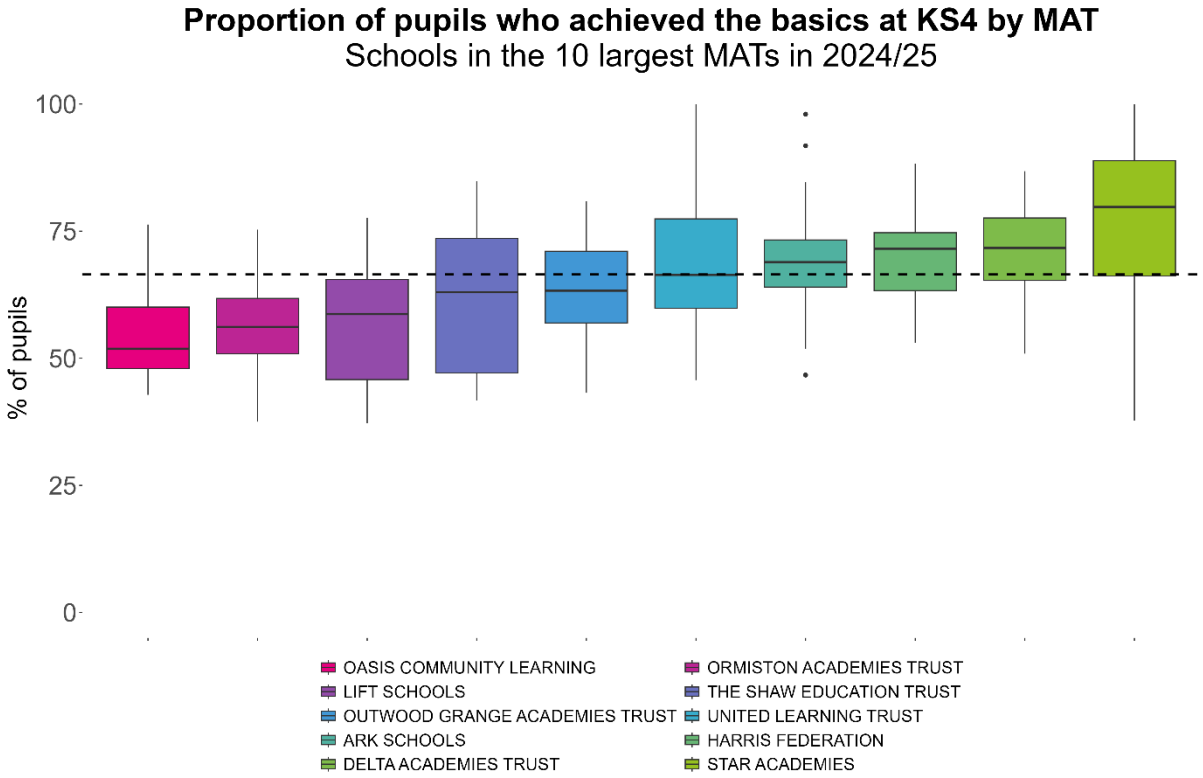


To illustrate the point, just under 80% of students in schools that were part of Lift Schools reached the expected standard, but individual school percentages ranged from 55% to 98%.

Similarly for Key Stage 4 attainment data, again focusing just on MATs with 10 or more schools with Key Stage 4 attainment data, the chart below shows the range of school level percentages of students achieving the basics at GCSE grades 9-5[15] in 2025. The national average in mainstream schools is shown on the chart as a dotted line.

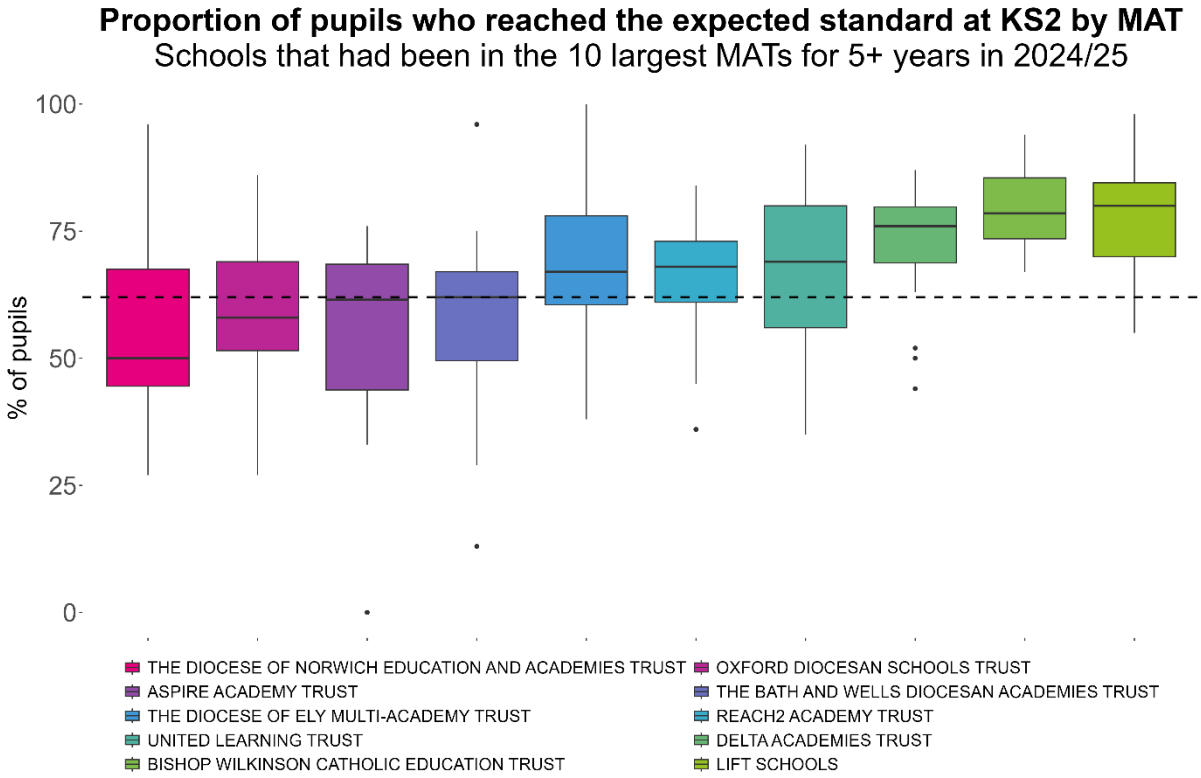
Chart 3: Proportion of students in large MATs who achieved a standard pass or higher (grade 9-4) at Key Stage 4 by MAT

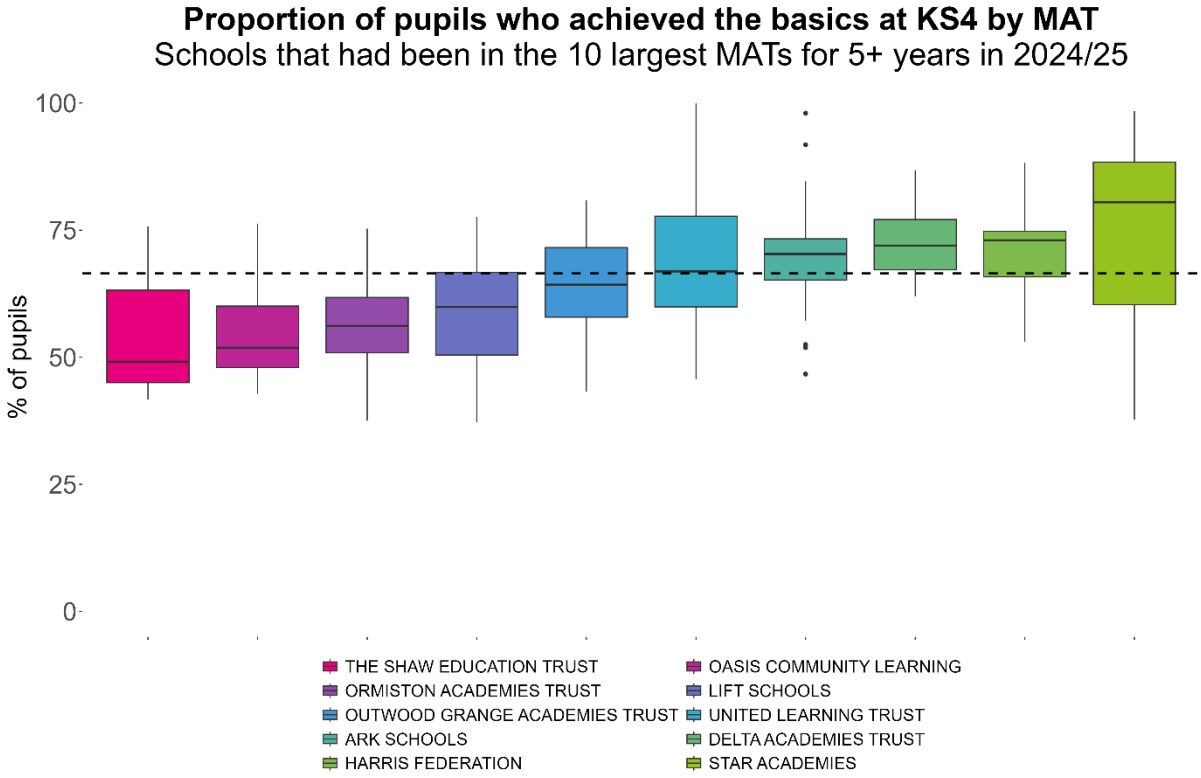
[15] Grades 9 to 5 in GCSE English and maths are sometimes referred to as 'strong passes'. Grade 5 is broadly equivalent to a high C or low B under the previous A*–G grading system.



Three quarters of students in schools that were part of Star Academies achieved a standard pass or higher (grade 9-4) in both English and maths GCSE, for example, but results in individual schools within the MAT ranged from 38% to 100% - a spread of 62 percentage points.

In other words, there is variation in attainment among schools in MATs. This can be the case when a MAT has recently taken on a lower-attaining school. We repeat the above charts removing any schools that have not been part of their MAT for at least five years.





Even after restricting the schools to those that have been part of their MAT for at least five years, there is notable variation within MATs. Put another way, there is more variation in attainment between schools than between MATs. We estimate that around 22% of the variation in attainment between the schools in the 10 largest MATs is due to differences in attainment between MATs, and the remainder between schools. Consequently, at present – without the ability to control explicitly for differences in student intake between schools – it would be more accurate to talk about high

attaining schools in MATs rather than high attaining MATs. Our subsequent research seeks to identify the spectrum of performance of MATs, including the types of MATs that have had the greatest impact on improving student outcomes.

How does school performance vary across MATs?

As described above, the UK Department for Education set out some analysis in 2022 to support its case for a fully MAT-based system.[16] It showed that: "If all students did as well in reading, writing and maths at Key Stage 2 in 2019 as students in the MAT performing at the 75th percentile of MATs on this measure, national performance would have been 8 percentage points higher at 73%. At the 90th percentile this would have been 79%." However, it should be noted that the percentiles relate to schools in MATs, not MATs themselves, as variation within MATs is not considered.

We have updated this analysis using data for 2025 and present it below.

Table 7: Key stage 2: Local authority, MAT and SAT average percentage of students reaching expected standard in reading, writing and maths, 2025 (national average 62%)

Type	10th percentile	25th percentile	50th percentile	75th percentile	90th percentile
Local authority	57	59	63	67	72
SAT	57	62	68	74	81
MAT 2-9 schools	49	56	64	72	78
MAT 10-19 schools	54	59	63	69	73
MAT 20+ schools	56	60	65	71	79

71% of students at schools at the 75th percentile of schools in large MATs (20 or more schools) achieved the expected standard in reading, writing and maths, well above the national average of 62%. Although schools in SATs tend to be higher performing, this reflects their origins: the vast majority converted as good or outstanding schools and have not taken on the turnaround role that large MATs have.

The picture for disadvantaged students is particularly notable. 63% of disadvantaged students at schools performing at the 75th percentile of schools in large MATs achieved the expected standard in reading, writing and maths. This was higher than the national average for all students (62%) and well above the national average for disadvantaged students attending state-funded mainstream schools (49%).

Table 8: Key stage 2 local authority, MAT and SAT average percentage of disadvantaged students reaching expected standard in reading, writing and maths, 2025 (national average 49%)

Type	10th percentile	25th percentile	50th percentile	75th percentile	90th percentile
Local authority	38	42	46	53	59
SAT	33	41	50	60	68
MAT 2-9 schools	29	39	49	60	70
MAT 10-19 schools	36	42	49	55	61

[16] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1076862/The_case_for_a_fully_trust-led_system.pdf

MAT 20+ schools	39	45	51	63	71

At Key Stage 4, the Progress 8 metric measures how much progress students make between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 relative to students with similar prior attainment nationally, making it a fairer basis for comparison than raw attainment. A score of zero means students progressed in line with the national average; a positive score means they progressed more. Nationally, disadvantaged students[17] achieved a Progress 8 score of -0.57 on average, indicating achievement more than half a grade lower per subject compared to students with similar prior attainment nationally.

Using 2024 data,[18] students at schools in large MATs performing at the 90th percentile of schools in large MATs achieve, on average achieve 0.53 grades per subject higher than students with similar prior attainment nationally. This was approximately 10% of a grade per subject higher than the equivalent percentile for local authority schools.

Table 9: Key stage 4 LA, MAT and SAT average Progress 8 score, 2024 (national average 0.0)

Type	10th percentile	25th percentile	50th percentile	75th percentile	90th percentile
LA	-0.41	-0.23	-0.02	0.18	0.43
SAT	-0.42	-0.06	0.15	0.41	0.67
MAT 2-9	-0.61	-0.30	-0.02	0.27	0.56
MAT 10-19	-0.63	-0.34	-0.15	0.16	0.37
MAT 20+	-0.45	-0.28	0.01	0.24	0.53

Disadvantaged students attending schools at the 75th percentile of schools in large MATs achieved Progress 8 scores only slightly below the national average rate of progress (a score of 0). That the best large MATs reduce this gap to near-zero is a good reminder that the headline attainment figures, which reflect intake composition rather than school effectiveness, understate what the strongest MATs are actually achieving for their most vulnerable students.

Table 10: Key stage 4 LA, MAT and SAT average Progress 8 score for disadvantaged students, 2024 (national average -0.57)

Type	10th percentile	25th percentile	50th percentile	75th percentile	90th percentile
LA	-0.97	-0.72	-0.52	-0.28	0.06
SAT	-0.95	-0.65	-0.34	-0.01	0.30
MAT 2-9	-1.11	-0.82	-0.53	-0.18	0.18
MAT 10-19	-1.10	-0.81	-0.64	-0.30	0.17
MAT 20+	-0.90	-0.68	-0.49	-0.06	0.26

[17] Eligible for free school meals in the last 6 years

[18] The measure was not calculated in 2025 as Key Stage 2 tests were cancelled in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result, measures of prior attainment are not available for students who completed Key Stage 4 in 2025.

How effectively have MATs turned around inadequate schools?

Using historic data on results in Ofsted inspections and on membership of MATs, we can track the subsequent journeys of schools that are judged inadequate by Ofsted inspectors and which subsequently join (or change) a MAT.

We identify 586 schools judged inadequate at least once between May 2006 and July 2019, and which joined (or changed) MAT within 12 months of the inspection. We use the latest inspection for schools judged inadequate more than once.

For each school, we analyse the prevailing Ofsted inspection result at the end of the 2023/24 academic year.[19] In some cases, schools have closed and been replaced by successor schools operated by a different MAT on the same site. In some cases, schools have closed outright and not been replaced by a successor school.

The vast majority of the schools (80%) were judged to be good as at 31st August 2024. An additional 42 (7%) were judged outstanding.

Table 11: Ofsted judgments for overall effectiveness, August 2024

Ofsted, as at 31/08/24	Schools
Outstanding	42
Good	466
Requires Improvement	61
Inadequate	10
Outright closure	7
Total	586

Some MATs have been particularly successful with turnaround schools. In the table below, we show the Ofsted inspection judgments for MATs which have taken on at least five turnaround schools, using the latest MAT where a school has changed MAT.[20]

Table 12: Ofsted judgments for overall effectiveness by latest MAT, August 2024

Latest MAT	Outstanding	Good	Total
Ark Schools	2	6	9
Astrea Academy Trust	0	5	6
Community Academies Trust	1	4	6
Delta Academies Trust	2	7	9
E-Act	2	4	6
Greenwood Academies Trust	0	9	10
Harris Federation	5	3	8
Lift Schools	0	8	8
Northern Education Trust	1	5	7
Ormiston Academies Trust	0	7	8
Reach2 Academy Trust	2	10	12
The Active Learning Trust Limited	0	5	6

[19] Ofsted ceased to provide an inspection judgment for overall effectiveness from September 2024

[20] Where the total number of schools is higher than the number of outstanding or good schools, the additional schools are rated as requires improvement or inadequate, or they have closed.

The David Ross Education Trust	2	3	6
The Diocese of Ely Multi-Academy Trust	0	8	9
United Learning Trust	1	4	6

All schools that are part of Reach2 Academy Trust, Harris Federation, Delta Academies Trust and Lift Schools are now judged good or outstanding. Harris Federation stands out, as five of its eight formerly inadequate schools are now judged outstanding.

There is, however, a regional dimension to the turnaround success story. Turnaround schools in London were far more likely to be judged outstanding by the end of 2024, reflecting a broader pattern of higher performance in the capital that is at least partly attributable to student demographic factors.[21] By contrast almost one in three turnaround schools in the North East, North West and South West were still judged less than good in 2024. The uneven distribution of strong MAT sponsors, noted above, may be part of the explanation: where capable MATs are thin on the ground, the turnaround pipeline stalls.

Table 13: Ofsted judgments for overall effectiveness by region, August 2024

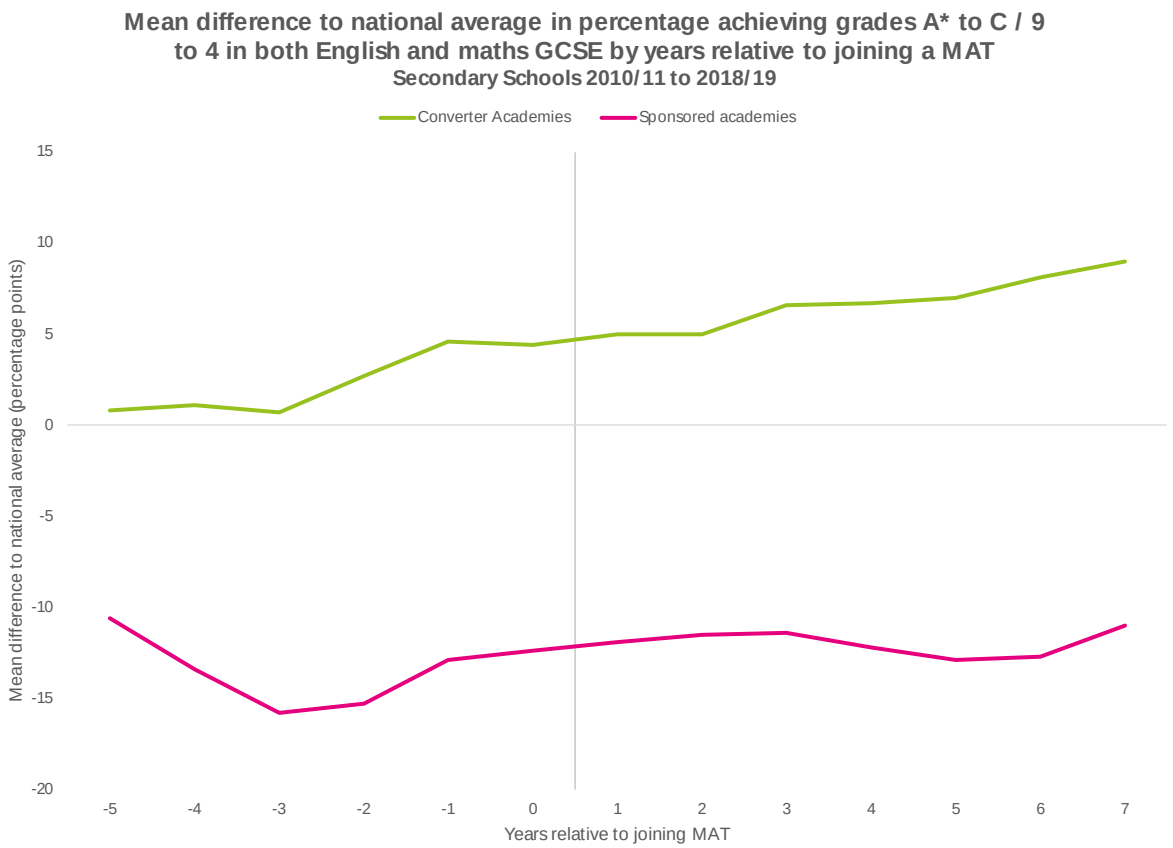
Region	Outstanding	Good	Total
East Midlands	5%	84%	82
East of England	3%	88%	111
London	25%	70%	60
North East	10%	60%	20
North West	3%	70%	33
South East	6%	89%	71
South West	4%	69%	72
West Midlands	5%	84%	56
Yorkshire and the Humber	9%	77%	81
Total	7%	80%	586

Does attainment improve when schools join a MAT?

Beyond Ofsted judgements, there is limited published data on how student attainment changes following local authority schools becoming a SAT or joining a MAT as a sponsored academy. Statistical analysis published by the UK Department for Education in 2026[22] tracks attainment changes in schools that became converter academies (formerly good our outstanding local authority schools that chose to become academies) and sponsored academies (lower-attaining local authority schools that became academies in MAT) over the period 2010/11 to 2018/19.

[21] https://ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/2019/08/looking-at-the-london-effect-five-years-on-part-one/

[22] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/699b1bacb33a4db7ff889f21/Schools_school_workforce_students_statistical_analysis_2026.pdf



The chart above shows the percentage of students achieving Grade 4 (a "standard pass") or above in both GCSE English and GCSE maths[23] by the number of years a school had been in a MAT. For example, if a school joined a MAT in 2011/12, 2011/12 would be treated as Year 0 on the horizontal axis, their result for 2012/13 would be treated as Year 1 and so forth.

The data indicates a general improvement in attainment among converter academies over time, although this seems to start before joining a MAT. Improvement among sponsored academies is less clear. On the surface, attainment worsens between 3 and 5 years before joining a MAT before improving slightly though remaining well below the national average.

However, there are several methodological limitations with the existing evidence base, which we plan to address in further research.

Firstly, the number of schools counted in each year varies in size. For example, there were 564 sponsored academies included in the data point for Year 0 but only 69 for Year 7. It would be instructive to see how the 69 schools changed over the full observation period.

Secondly, the measure used focuses on a particular part of the attainment distribution: those at the Grade 3/Grade 4 boundary. Although this is considered a critical threshold for further study and later employment[24], it tells us nothing about improvement in attainment among students at the upper and lower ends of the distribution.

Part of the reason there is only limited analysis of the change in attainment over time in MATs is that school performance measures in England routinely change over time. This means comparable

[23] The measure is detrended each year, i.e. the mean difference to the national average is shown
[24] https://cver.lse.ac.uk/textonly/cver/pubs/cverdp014.pdf

measures are rare. Even the example above covers up a disjuncture which occurred in 2016/17 when reformed GCSEs (graded 9-1) replaced legacy GCSEs (graded A*-G). Different governments have also encouraged and discouraged the use of particular qualifications in schools[25] through the machinery of school accountability, particularly Performance Tables.

Conclusions and recommendations for further research

The research and data reviewed in this paper provides tentative evidence that the MAT model has delivered improvement for many of the schools and students that needed it most.

The clearest finding to date concerns turnaround. MATs are playing an effective role in improving inadequate schools. 87% of schools that were judged inadequate and subsequently joined a MAT are now judged good or outstanding. For schools that were previously underperforming under local authority oversight, the MAT model has — in the majority of cases — delivered meaningful improvement. Some MATs have been particularly effective, though outcomes vary considerably by region. That said, there is currently no counterfactual evidence of what might have occurred in a hypothetical world in which MATs don't exist.

The broader attainment picture requires careful reading. Headline comparisons between MATs and other school types are not comparing like with like: large MATs disproportionately educate disadvantaged and lower prior-attaining students, and improvement after joining a MAT takes time to materialise. When those factors are accounted for, a more positive picture emerges. Disadvantaged students in schools in the upper quartile of schools in large MATs outperform the national average for all students at Key Stage 2. At Key Stage 4, the highest-attaining schools in large MATs reduce the disadvantaged attainment gap to near zero. The headline figures understate what the strongest MATs are achieving.

Further analysis is needed, however, to assess the broader picture. The evidence base on MATs has not kept pace with the sector's maturation. Much existing research predates the large-MAT era, and the central question has shifted: it is no longer whether MATs work, but which ones work best, for whom, and under what conditions. As England progresses to a fully MAT-based system[26], this is an important research question. Although investigating this latter question requires detailed qualitative (case study) work, much can be done to improve the evidence base on MATs by undertaking quantitative analysis of government datasets.

Three areas of further work specifically would substantially strengthen the evidence base.

First, whilst the UK Department for Education publishes attainment measures for MATs each year, these do not account for variations in intake between the schools within MATs. Fairer comparisons could be produced by calculating value added measures[27] of school and MAT performance that control for differences in prior attainment and demographic characteristics.

Such analysis requires the calculation of performance measures that are consistent over time. These do not exist. At Key Stage 4, almost all students take GCSE English and GCSE maths and this has consistently been the case for the last twenty years. However, the grading of GCSEs changed in 2016/17 from A*-G to 9-1. While there is comparability at key grades (7/A; 4/C; 1/G) there isn't at other parts of the distribution. We will therefore convert the grades into standardised scores with mean 0 and standard deviation 1 each year. We will perform a similar task based on Key Stage 2

[25] https://ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/2019/05/crying-wolf-part-one/
[26] Every Child Achieving and Thriving
[27] https://ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/2024/05/contextualising-progress-8/

tests in reading and maths which changed from reporting results as fine grades to scaled scores in 2015/16. This approach will provide common measures that summarise attainment across the whole distribution.

Second, there is limited recent evidence on the improvement trajectories of schools that join MATs as a result of under-performance, including those with an inadequate inspection judgement. Further research on how (and indeed, if) attainment improves in schools after joining a MAT would be valuable. This work would uncover which MATs have been most successful in improving outcomes, taking into account differences in the characteristics of their student intakes.

Finally, further research could examine the journeys of schools that join MATs with particular characteristics, such as larger MATs compared to smaller MATs, and MATs with a history of turning around schools compared to those without. The Ofsted turnaround data presented in this paper suggests that some of these differences are real and substantial, particularly at a regional level. Understanding the mechanisms behind them — whether MAT size, geographical concentration of schools, or something else entirely — is the logical next step for the evidence base.