

# Academy chains

## A briefing for UNISON activists and organisers

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### What is an academy chain?

An academy chain is a partnership between a group of academies. Chains vary in size and composition. Sometimes they are loose, informal collaborations. Other times, they have a formal shared structure.

Chains are formed using three main models:

- the 'multi-academy trust model' - where academies join together to become one legal entity governed by one trust and board of directors.
- the 'umbrella trust model' - where a group of individual academy trusts set up an overarching trust to provide shared governance and collaboration.
- the collaborative partnership – where there is no formalised governance structure and academies simply agree to work together.

In an umbrella trust the employer of staff is usually the individual academy trust while in a multi-academy trust the employer is usually the governing body of the chain.

### Why do academies form chains?

Academies are joining together in chains in order to give them greater clout. Chains can enable academies to share ideas and best practice – as well as gain support, a shared infrastructure and economies of scale.

In many cases the chain's governing body will oversee the strategy and vision of the chain, as well as staffing management and curriculum. It may also procure services on behalf of the academies within the chain, such as supply cover, behaviour services and CPD - as well as back office functions such as HR, ICT, insurance, legal and payroll. Sometimes chains will buy these services from other providers (such as local authorities or private companies) or set up separate structures to provide these services themselves. They may even provide services to academies outside the chain or to maintained schools.

### Working with chains

UNISON is opposed to the academies programme. However, we also know that many UNISON members work in academies and it is our job to provide them with the support they need. That is why UNISON continues to secure trade union recognition with many local, regional and nationwide chains.

In order that UNISON members have a voice in their school and a say in the decisions that are taken by chains, it is vital that there are workplace representatives and contacts directly in schools. It is also essential that UNISON continues to push for active, local joint negotiating forums in all schools.

It is important to note that if a chain opts to set up a chain-wide joint negotiating forum this should aim to build on, rather than replace, the local arrangements for partnership working in each academy. Also, chain-wide trade union recognition agreements should not automatically override local recognition arrangements, unless by agreement. Likewise, the introduction of chain-wide workplace policies cannot override any policies or procedures that have been protected as part of a TUPE transfer.

### Nationwide chains

Most chains are small local or regional groups of academies. However, there are several large chains that cover a number of different regions across England. Some of these nationwide chains have been

operating for many years and UNISON has well-established relationships with them. For example, chains such as Oasis, E-ACT and United Learning Trust have national joint negotiating forums where unions meet with the chain's executives to agree workplace policies and to negotiate on pay, terms and conditions. Other nationwide chains are very new and we are working to forge effective and ongoing relationships with them.

### **Tips for activists and organisers**

- Use any local avenues to get information about academies in your area that have joined, or are planning to join, a chain. Keep in touch with your local UNISON branch and regional/area organisers so that you share the latest information.
- Encourage school support staff to join UNISON. Use the materials on the UNISON Schools pages to help you: [www.unison.org.uk/education/schools](http://www.unison.org.uk/education/schools)
- Identify UNISON members who can act as a workplace representative or contact and give members a voice in their school – and the wider chain. For tips read our Organising in Academies leaflet: <http://www.unison.org.uk/acrobat/20833.pdf>
- Find out more about the chains operating in your area. Here are some questions to consider:
  - Which academies are part of the chain? Does the chain cover a local area – or does it span a number of UNISON branches or regions?
  - Who are the UNISON workplace representatives or contacts in these schools? What are the arrangements for facility time?
  - Is the chain an informal collaboration or a formal arrangement with shared governance?
  - Are staff employed by each academy trust or by an overarching chain-wide body?
  - Is there active local partnership-working taking place in each school?
  - Is there a chain-wide trade union recognition agreement in place? Is there an active chain-wide joint negotiating forum?
- UNISON has developed an internal database to house information on the major nationwide academy chains, including copies of national recognition agreements and policies. UNISON organisers can access the latest documents, share these with branches and update the database with new information.
- Talk to your branch and local/regional UNISON organisers about ways to maintain strong UNISON links throughout each chain. This might include: setting up 'email trees' of workplace contacts to share information, convening meetings of reps from across the chain and gathering views from members to inform the discussions or decisions taking place at chain-wide level.

### **Useful links:**

Department for Education - information on open academies and academies in development  
[www.education.gov.uk/schools/leadership/typesofschools/academies/b00208569/open-academies](http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/leadership/typesofschools/academies/b00208569/open-academies)

Academy chains FAQs: [www.education.gov.uk/a00204883/academy-chains-faqs](http://www.education.gov.uk/a00204883/academy-chains-faqs)

Edubase: database of schools in England: [www.education.gov.uk/researchandstatistics/edubase](http://www.education.gov.uk/researchandstatistics/edubase)

Academies called to account – UNISON report: [www.unison.org.uk/acrobat/20367.pdf](http://www.unison.org.uk/acrobat/20367.pdf)

UNISON advice on shared services in schools [www.unison.org.uk/acrobat/20276.pdf](http://www.unison.org.uk/acrobat/20276.pdf)

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