

Nick Blackburn – Lingfield Education Trust



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Tell us about your career before becoming CEO

I was a teacher for six years in London before leaving to work in business. However, I found that I quickly missed working in a school. Stepping out of teaching for a bit served to galvanise my conviction that working in education was what I really wanted to do. When I went back into teaching, I had more self-belief and a greater sense of moral purpose, and I quickly moved into leadership roles. I became a headteacher in 2007, and a CEO in 2012. I became CEO of the Lingfield Education Trust in 2016.

What attracted you to apply for the CEO role?

Once I understood the role of CEO, I realised that I was better suited to it than the role of headship, or even executive headship. Running a trust is about being strategic, and thinking through models and ways of working that will help the organisation. It’s also about articulating our vision, purpose and values, and continually reflecting on how we deliver those as a trust. The role suits my personality and skillset as I enjoy strategic and reflective thinking, reading situations and institutions, and finding ways to work with others that bring out the best in them.

What are the main differences between the CEO role and your previous role?

The CEO role is more layered and complex, and requires a more nuanced way of working. Academy trusts need the CEO to enable reflection on matters such as; how well we’re working together as a team, how well we are creating positive enabling environments, and to what extent we are achieving the vision and values of the trust, and where that could be improved further.



What have you enjoyed most about the CEO job so far?

I enjoy strategic planning; to me it is a very creative thing, and I've enjoyed having the time and the space to reflect on the way we do things as a trust. I believe it's not just about what we're achieving, although I am very proud of that; it's also about how we are doing that along the way. I enjoy focussing on the values of the trust, and helping the organisation to continually reflect on how we are putting those values into practice.

I also love being able to have an impact on the way children are treated at scale – it's a real privilege. There are 1000 more pupils in our trust who are in good or outstanding schools than there were three years ago. It's fantastic to see our way of working resulting in success, because our way doesn't off roll, it's highly inclusive, and we have never permanently excluded. Around a quarter of our children live in the 5% most disadvantaged households nationally. It's wonderful to know that through my role I am making a positive difference to them, and to all of our children.

Where do you feel you have had the greatest impact so far, and why have you been so effective in this aspect of the job?

I think I have been most effective in creating positive enabling environments for the leaders in my trust, which is all about creating the conditions that enable people to function at their best. Because people feel enabled, their motivation and energy levels are generally very good. I've also created a culture which values feedback, and where people are very willing to engage with and respond to constructive, unfiltered feedback. If you avoid feedback you're ultimately going to miss out on some really important information. However, when we are able to respond in an open-minded, non-defensive way to constructive feedback (which does not include mean-spirited attacks, nor being artificially harmonious), it is extremely powerful, because we are then open to continual improvement and learning; and that includes me!

What have you learnt since becoming CEO?

That your mindset is very important. Without a growth mindset the job would be impossible.

Also, I've learnt that your job list is never finished, so you have to be realistic. I've learnt to avoid filling up all my time just because I think I should be filling it, and to allow more space for strategic thinking and value that.



What has been the most challenging aspect of the job? How are you overcoming this challenge?

Balancing how you work in a team alongside how you work in a hierarchy. It's a complicated situation to address, and therefore it is sometimes all too easy to avoid facing it head on. However, if you don't get the balance right, it can lead to confusion in the dynamics of how the trust operates. I try to address this through honest conversations with others, by seeking feedback, and by continually refining my approach.

The other thing which is difficult to balance is how much autonomy you allow each of your schools to have. There are certain instances where you need to tell schools what they have to do, but if you go down the route of telling them how to do everything, you end up losing too much of the individual character of each school. Again, it takes continual reflection on the way you are operating to ensure that the balance is right, and also that the approach is scalable.

What has been your greatest source of support and advice in taking on the role?

Michael Pain's book, 'Being the CEO', was very helpful, because that was the first book that really articulated the CEO role in education.

Professionally, I've developed a really strong and diverse network through working with Forum Strategy, and through 'Allied', which is a network of trusts in the North East.

In my personal life, my wife and my family are my main sources of support.

What would be your advice to someone about to take on the role for the first time?

Invest time in a network.

Make friends with - and grow to love - unfiltered feedback, and research and understand what high quality feedback looks like.