

*This article first appeared in **Academy Trusts Today**, Spring 2026.*

The White Paper, Enrichment and Belonging

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Every school and trust leader is acutely aware of how engagement in education has deteriorated since the pandemic. This is evidenced in rates of attendance, persistent and severe absenteeism all comparing negatively to 2020, coupled with the current very high levels of school suspension and exclusion. The causes of this are multiple and complex, with a disproportionate impact on disadvantaged communities and, as research suggests, illustrate a worsened perception of the importance of education.

Schools, MATs and wider partnerships are deploying a range of strategies to tackle this issue, often under the umbrella of belonging. In other words, providing a positive experience through the curriculum, pastoral support, and wider enrichment — engendering a stronger sense of value and affinity to a school identity. MATs are well placed to drive belonging through their trusts on both individual academy and collaborative programmes.

Enrichment of learning through meaningful experiences within and beyond the curriculum is critical in driving belonging and hence attendance and engagement. School leaders with well-established and wide-ranging enrichment provision often describe the positive impact it has on creating an inclusive and ambitious school culture. Adults often identify trips, experiences, and wider activities as some of the most influential parts of schooling alongside academic achievement.

The recently published White Paper identifies enrichment as a key area and indicates the forthcoming publication of a national Enrichment Framework, against which schools will be inspected and therefore held accountable. There is a societal inequality in the life experiences of young people both within and across schools. Opportunities to travel, engage in sports and culture at home correlate with circumstances, background and outlook. Sometimes, the most disadvantaged young people will only have these opportunities if they are offered through school, and they are encouraged and supported to participate.

MATs can utilise their inherent partnership, internal structures, and strengths of individual academies to meet the ambition that all young people can access a meaningful enrichment offer — including collaboration with peers from a wider sphere than their immediate community. If well planned with appropriate impact measurement, MATs will also be in a good position to access additional funding as part of the National Youth Strategy.

However, even when working to scale across a trust, leaders will foresee obstacles in cost, staff capacity and workload — in the identification of gaps in current provision, sourcing best value provision, allocating resources, and evidencing impact. These can be significantly reduced when MATs and schools work with well-structured and connected external partners in the development and implementation of enrichment programmes.

For example, in Liverpool, ESL works with and across schools to identify and implement best-value programmes of individual and collaborative activities which has, to date, reached over 9,000 young people. Working at scale has achieved an impactful offer with wide participation, and has demonstrated savings in both costs and staff workload.

Leaders will be concerned that enrichment, as defined in the White Paper, will be yet another accountability measure under the inspection framework. Conversely, there will be an almost universal desire to develop programmes of enrichment, particularly for disadvantaged young people. MATs and wider partnerships are best placed to utilise the enrichment ambitions of the White Paper to meet the important and urgent priority of attendance and engagement through belonging.

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