



Notes of Parents Meetings about CAP joining UL

CAP/UL Presentation

Coleridge CC 19th March at 6.00pm
Parkside CC 20th March at 6.00pm
Trumpington CC 26th March at 6.00pm

1. Comment re timing of communication and informing parents, some of whom feel aggrieved about the approach. In general parents do not have an understanding about what being part of a national chain will mean and what will happen in the future, so despite local autonomy, we don't know how potential growth of United Learning will affect our school - reassured for the next few years but in the long term future, what will happen?

We did take advice from Regional Schools Commissioner about communication as this is a new process. United Learning currently do not have big presence in the East of England and they have indicated that our cluster model is one that they would welcome. MAT Board have taken time to understand UL and the different factors affecting education.

We are reassured that we will retain our identity as UL openly encourage and support this - they are not prescriptive at all and retaining our identity is key. If we merged locally, that would have been a takeover which would mean losing our identity, ethos and principles. The future of school budgets are very uncertain so we feel that joining UL will create the certainty that we need.

2. Do you feel that you have authority in this arrangement?

We are in a position of ensuring that the Memorandum of Understanding is written with CAP strategies as its basis ie. keeping our structure as determined by us. This is about CAP setting the agenda.

3. Query re financial stability relating to article on Local Schools network in August 2018 - why are we not concerned?

CAP are satisfied with the due diligence we have done on United Learning and we are confident that joining the Group will enable our schools to continue to thrive into the future.

It is absolutely true that United Learning has received a number of grants over the years. This reflects the fact that they have taken on a large number of schools in difficulty and turned them round. It is routine for deficits to be written off on conversion and for sponsors of weak schools to receive grants to support school improvement.

No grants were received 'to subsidise the Group's finances'; they were all to carry out specific pieces of work. The success of the work United Learning has done is visible from the number of times government has come back to them to do more.

4. Thank you for your request to express my concerns about the merger between Cambridge Academic Partnership (CAP) and United Learning Trust (ULT).

I am happy to take this opportunity because I am really worried about the implications that this merger can have for the quality of the service that our schools will be able to offer for the years to come.

Due to the relevant communication coming from the school only recently, I have had little time to research ULT, but even so the information I readily found available on the internet is not at all reassuring, as I will show below. Therefore I believe that that the merging process should be discussed further, allowing more time for the information to be spread out and considered by families.

The presence of around only 15 parents (less than 0.4%, I believe) at the meeting on 20th March reflects the way that meeting was called, as I will discuss below in Issue/Question 4 and Appendix 1.

Below I will summarize the issues that I would like to raise with the CAP management regarding the CAP-ULT merger. All issues are referenced at the end of the letter, just after Appendix 1.

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Issues and questions:

1. **The reputation and ethos of ULT are not flawless, as CAP representatives insistently asserted at 20th March meeting. For example:**
 - o **ULT have been involved in a row with the DfE about artificially inflating their funding requests (see Guardian article, Ref.1);**
 - o **ULT have admitted “fraudulent payments to bogus bank accounts” (see the Telegraph article, Ref. 2) ;**
 - o **ULT have refused to disclose their CEO salary even after this was requested under the Freedom of Information Act. This behavior was perceived as so unusual to inspire a dedicated BBC news article (Ref. 3).**

How does this fit with the argument that ULT ethos and good reputation are a major reason for CAP to join them?

2. **At the 20th March meeting, CAP representatives have repeatedly stated that ULT would guarantee financial stability to our schools. Yet, it would seem that ULT itself is not stable financially because they have recently received emergency funding from the DfE (Ref.4). This emergency funding (~ 0.7 Million Pounds) was given to “stabilize their finances” and avoid “disrupting schools activities”. Therefore it is clearly distinct from the grants ULT receive whenever they absorb government schools in trouble (Ref. 5) and, surprisingly, even if they do not finally absorb them (Ref. 6). Can ULT really guarantee financial stability and can you explain clearly which increase in funding we could expect?**
3. **At least with respect to the independent schools they are running, ULT function as a proper corporation. They sell/buy schools and land for sums that they refuse to disclose (Ref. 7), they sack teachers and shut failing schools (Ref. 8). Moreover, the management receive disproportionately large salaries that amount to large portions of the budget (Ref. 9).**

What real guarantees are in place to protect our schools from all this?

4. **Finally a more direct criticism to the way CAP has operated and communicated about this merger. CAP has avoided good communication with families to avoid attracting attention (see Appendix 1 where this is demonstrated). I believe that, even if it is likely that they are not legally obliged to seek parental support, this behaviour reflects badly on our schools.**

Why CAP has actively sought to minimize parents’ involvement with the merger

Appendix 1

Below I analyze in detail the messages received from the school to demonstrate that CAP has deliberately avoided good communication with the families about the merger with ULT.

Discussions about the merger between CAP and ULT started in 2017, yet the first message to the parents came only on 28th January 2019. It was a strange message. The subject simply read:

“Letter to Parkside CC Parents”.

The message body was similarly void of information. Here it is:

Dear Families

**Please find attached letters regarding an announcement from Janet Swadling, Chair of MAT Board:-
Letter 1 - from Janet Swadling, Chair of MAT Board Letter 2 - from
Jon Coles, CEO United Learning”.**

What should readers think this message is about? Neither the subject nor the message body give any clue about what is going on. They refer to an unspecified "letter" and to an unspecified "announcement". Surprisingly, it appears that this message was supposed to mark the start of the "consultation process" with the families about the merger. Even more surprisingly, the message actually should have served the purpose to call a meeting with the families, but there is no mention of a meeting in the subject and body. To know about the meeting one needs to open one of the two letters attached, each with completely uninformative titles (how could we possibly know why United Learning was writing to us), and then go all the way to the very last paragraph. Is this the way to call a meeting hoping to widen participation? I don't think so. And neither the school does.

In fact, let's see how the school usually call meetings with the parents.

As an example, here is the message inviting me to go to Parents Consultations:

*Subject: Year 10 Parent Consultations Dear Families,
This is an invitation to attend the Parent Consultation Evening for Year 10 students. This will take place on the evening of Thursday 21 March at from 17.00 in Parkside Community College. .
.etc...*

The essential information is given already in the subject. The message body tells exactly where and at what time the meetings are. A message with a subject : "Letter" and a message body saying simply "please see attached a letter regarding an announcement" would have caused many parents to miss the consultations, I think.

So - the message about Parents consultations proves that the school knows how to use email effectively to call for meetings with parents. However, to contact families for the second time about the CAP-ULT merger (March 6th), the school sent instead another strange message as follows:

Subject : Letter to Parkside CC Parents

Please find attached a letter and summary from Janet Swadling, Chair of CAP

Again, both subject and message body contain no information whatsoever. Letter and summary about what? Completely vague, and unusual statements, similarly to the use of "letter" and "announcement" in the previous message about the merger. It is extremely likely that parents will miss a message like this. Yet again the purpose of this message was to call a second meeting with parents. However, to find out about the meeting one had to open one of the two attachments (the right one, i.e. the summary, because the letter did not mention the meeting) and yet again go all the way to the last paragraph. Moreover, the title of the attachment was unintelligible as it read:

"PCC Summary of Decision Process about CAP joining UL(1)"

How can a reader possibly think that an attachment with this title can contain a call to an important meeting with parents that will define the future of our schools?

In my view, all the above proves that the school has actively communicated in such a way to minimize parents involvement. It is therefore no surprise that so many parents completely missed those meetings. And many of them, I believe, probably still ignore what is going on.

References

Ref. 1 <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/mar/25/united-learning-academy-chain-accuses-dfe-acting-illegally>

Where it is described that Joe Coles – CEO of ULT – has been in a row with DfE because DfE was "proposing unilaterally to break its contract with ULT" . Reason: DfE thought that UL was over-predicting the number of pupils" they will recruit in future years." Why? To get more money from the government.

Ref.2 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/2017/02/03/top-academy-boss-paid-420000-last-year-new-analysis-reveals/>

In this article, the quote about ULT says:

"One trust, United Learning, which runs 36 academies across England, admitted that £240,000 had been paid into a fraudulent bank account last year as part of a bogus construction invoice.

This is interesting because I guess strictly speaking ULT could claim that they have been a victim and that they hope to recover the money. However, even if so, this shows, at the very least, that they are not very careful with tax payers' money. One should double check whom one is paying and why, before giving away that amount of money....May be someone can elucidate what exactly happened here?

Ref. 3 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-20669621>

[United Learning] : The group which doesn't know its chief executive's pay"

Ref.4 <https://www.localschoolsnetwork.org.uk/2018/08/exclusive-686k-given-to-trust-with-over-50-academies-in-financial-support>

and from there to get the letter and spreadsheet from DfE you need to go to https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/grants_to_academies_to_stabilise_2# Anyway for your convenience I have attached both letter and spreadsheet as Appendix 2 and 3 to this letter. If you need any further clarification let me know.

Ref.5 <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/the-academy-chains-given-10m-northern-powerhouse-cash-but-failed-to-help-any-schools/>

The quote about ULT is towards the middle of the article and is as follows:

"United Learning, which received £700,000 but so far has opened no further schools, said the cash was used to build capacity, with four schools lined up to join in September."

Ref.6 The link <https://www.localschoolsnetwork.org.uk/2018/08/exclusive-686k-given-to-trust-with-over-50-academies-in-financial-support> will send you to the same page of Ref. 4, then you need to scroll down until you find the quote:

Last ditch funding' for Lambeth school

In an Exclusive in January 2018, [Schools Week](https://www.schoolsweek.co.uk) found ULT received £150k in 'last-ditch funding' intended to support schools 'in danger of imminent failure'. Grants from the Strategic School Improvement Fund are awarded to academy trusts which support a non-academy rated inadequate but which hasn't converted to academy status or an 'inadequate' academy which hasn't changed its sponsor.

The £150k given to ULT was to support Sedgehill School via a formal partnership with Lewisham council. It's unlikely ULT will take it over – Sedgehill School is lumbered with a [hefty PFI millstone](#) and remains under the stewardship of the council.

Ref. 7 <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/chinese-backed-firm-buys-united-learning-private-school/>

Ref.8https://www.surreycomet.co.uk/news/15002273.Every_secondary_pupil_to_be_displaced_as_three_school_merger_moves_on_site/

Ref. 9 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/2017/02/03/top-academy-boss-paid-420000-last-year-new-analysis-reveals/>

Technically no reference here to the salaries of the ULT bosses which is not surprising because they refuse to disclose them (see Ref.1), but for this very reason it appears therefore logic they should be in line with these figures.

Thank you for your query setting out your observations from your, as you admit, limited research into United Learning.

As we have previously said, we have completed significant due diligence on United Learning and believe that it offers CAP and our schools the best future and the opportunity to continue to work as we already do, whilst benefiting from the educational best practice and cost economies that are only possible as part of a large group of schools.

To address the points you raise in your email in turn:

- The meeting on 20 March was the second such meeting we have offered parents at the four CAP schools with an initial one taking place on 6 February. Both these meetings were well publicised to all parents, as indeed has been our request for any questions parents might have. In addition, separate meetings have been held with staff and the governing bodies at all four schools. We are therefore confident that all our key stakeholders have had several opportunities to ask questions and comment. All relevant information, including answers to the questions raised, has been published on our website so it is available to parents who were not able to attend the meetings.
- You highlight a report of a dispute between the Department for Education and United Learning in 2014. We view it as a strength that United Learning, as a strong and successful group of schools, is prepared to raise issues with the DfE when it believes its schools are being unfairly treated or are not receiving monies that they believe they are entitled to. In joining United Learning the CAP schools will be part of a group that is respected by government but that is prepared to challenge government when it feels something is not right.
- Any fraudulent activity, such as that you refer to, is clearly a concern. This instance was caught at an early stage and the overwhelming majority of the money was recovered. Each year United Learning's accounts, which are audited by Grant Thornton, have been fully cleared. The Group agreed to be mentioned in the article to warn other charities, educational trusts and local authorities to be aware of this scam.
- You have also mentioned funding received by United Learning to support its school improvement work with schools that require rapid transformation. Such payments are entirely normal and are not at all a reflection on United Learning's financial standing as a Group. The Local Schools Network article you have quoted relates to Sedgehill School in Lewisham (not in Lambeth as the article wrongly states), which had been in special measures for a year when United Learning took responsibility for school improvement. Within a year Sedgehill School came out of special measures, and United Learning is now working with the school and Lewisham with a view to the school joining the Group formally.
- United Learning's CEO's remuneration is in fact in the public domain, in the accounts of the United Church Schools Trust (which is the employer of all United Learning's central office staff). It has been widely reported in the media (see attached, for example, which suggests that Jon Coles provides excellent value for money in terms of salary cost per pupil).

[Schools Week MAT CEO Pay](#)

- You make several statements about United Learning's independent schools. The schools are run as a charity, not a "corporation" and are entirely separate from United Learning's academies. United Learning must act in accordance with charity and education law in running its schools. United Learning has a strong track record in both the independent schools sector and the academies sector, turning around schools that were previously struggling in order to provide an excellent education for children and young people. We believe strongly that the CAP schools will gain from the opportunity to work alongside independent schools, for example through sharing of best practice and offering opportunities to both staff and pupils.
- I am sorry that, in sharing your research, you have not also taken the opportunity to highlight the many examples in both print and online media of the positive impact United Learning has had on its schools. The CAP Board has been impressed, for example, by the very wide range of examples shared on social media of children in United Learning schools accessing sporting, musical and cultural opportunities, and by published data that indicates it is one of the most successful large multi-academy trusts.

5. How will the Memorandum of Understanding be a guarantee that CAP will retain their local autonomy and how will CAP be protected long term. Will there be a handover document?

The Scheme of delegation will determine responsibilities and provision for the new Partnership Board.

The Governors scheme of delegation at United Learning is the same as at CAP so will not change. The plans for the new Partnership Board are more inclusive with a more formal structure of meetings in place.

6. At the meeting in February the CEO stated that CAP would become part of a cluster of 10 schools - can you clarify how this would work?

We will be part of a region but we will remain our own cluster as CAP. CAP will no longer be a legal entity so no need for a CEO. We will remain as cluster of 4 schools in the city. The new role of EHT initially at Parkside will ensure that our structure remains as a cluster.

The UL strategy is to grow/develop single phase clusters of 3-5 schools, where each school is no more than 30 minutes from another United Learning school and the cluster is no more than an hour's journey end-to-end. CAP already meets these criteria, and we would see no need to grow the secondary cluster further. UL have confirmed that they are not anticipating any further growth in the region at this stage. They consider opportunities for growth on a case by case basis, and only say yes where they feel they have the capacity to do a great job.

7. Can you clarify the position regarding Independent Schools within UL and how does this affect the state schools?

UL is a charitable trust plus an academy trust, therefore the independent and state schools collaborate but funding is separate. The responsibility of academy schools lies with the academy trust.

8. Can we lock in the level of top slice of 3.8%? Can you explain what this means?

The top slice will provide central services e.g. financial management, subject specialists like the previous LA subject advisers model. Schools will have local autonomy. More information to follow.

9. Are CAST and Parkside 6th in danger of closing?

CAST is a growing institution and we have a business plan in place for Parkside 6th. We will be seeking support from the UL marketing team to promote both schools supporting recruitment into 6th and CAST.

10. Where will savings be made?

The working party paper on the website gives a full explanation of where savings will be made.

11. There is some concern about land sales. Where did the £300m investment come from for UL?

You cannot sell the land & buildings of a school - that is statutory. United Learning receives funding from the government to run schools.

12. With regard to the Memorandum of Understanding, how long does this last? Is there a get out clause? Can we retract?

We are not aware of any statutory ability to do this but MATs can move to other MATs. The key point here is that UL have listened to our requests which will be included in the MoU.

13. Concern raised about increasing numbers of SEND students - will they still be given the support they need?

We are committed to being inclusive schools. LGBs look at data carefully and provision for that will remain. UL share our ethos, principles and values for every child, including SEND and all disadvantaged students. We have never off-rolled students - our admissions criteria ensure that every child has the same opportunity.

14. Concern raised about loss of the CAP CEO and how this will impact on CAP.

LGBs will have key representation and LGBs will ensure that those same standards are kept across the CAP schools.

15. It has been mentioned that joining UL will help with recruitment. How can they solve the recruitment crisis?

UL have an Integrated teacher development approach for CPD and a strong ITT model exists within UL. There is a robust succession planning in place and opportunities for teachers to progress and there is evidence of development of young teachers by UL taking on higher positions. They encourage people to stay with organisation with a view to career progression and development of careers.

16. Are most teachers here in favour?

We have held meetings with all teachers from all 4 schools and they are happy with opportunity. The aim is not to decrease staff and to ensure that the maximum amount of funding goes to teaching and learning.

17. We understand that each school will have its own HT - will there be a group HT?

To confirm, there will be a Headteacher for each school and LGBs are committed to this.

18. What if there is a change in government which do not approve of academies? Has a risk analysis been carried out?

LAs as they exist now do not have capacity to support schools. If there was a change it would be over time incrementally. We have to respond to national policy changes. The important point is to provide the best that we can and invest in teaching and learning. If there were to be a change then the Board and LGBs would assess the situation and plan accordingly.

19. Does UL provide their own pension fund?

No - we use LGSS and TP.

20. What will happen if this is not agreed by RSC?

If RSC do not agree, then we stay as we are and cuts of subjects and staff would then occur.

21. Will the MoU be shared with parents?

Yes - this will be published on website.

22. Will the Partnership Board continue to publish minutes on the website?

Yes.

23. What is the capacity for growth of United Learning and how will this affect CAP in the future?

To date in 2018/19, 7 academies have joined United Learning. These were all transfers of schools from small MATs: one group of three primaries in Oxford and one of two secondaries and two primaries in Salford. A further 4 primary academies are due to join from a small MAT in east London at the beginning of April, and a secondary academy in the north is likely to join before the end of the academic year.

We are in discussion regarding some projects that may lead to further schools joining United Learning during 2019/20. Other than the planned joining of the Cambridge Academic Partnership schools, none of these is yet at a stage where we can confirm anticipated numbers.

Generally, our Board has agreed that we should seek to grow by around 5-6 schools in a year. We have made an exception to that this year because we had the capacity to do so and because we have been able to bring in small groups of schools already working together, in line with our cluster strategy.