



Anthony Gell School

09 May 2022

Dear parents/carers,

Consulting on a proposal to convert to Academy status and join the Embark Federation Multi-Academy Trust (MAT)

The governors of Anthony Gell School (AGS) propose we should convert to academy status and join the [Embark Federation Multi-Academy Trust](#) alongside three other strong Derbyshire secondary schools: Aldercar High School, Buxton Community School and Parkside Community School.

We are writing to you to give you the opportunity to comment on the proposal. Please be assured that no decisions will be made before the governing body has met again and fully considered the responses that are received.

The Department for Education (DfE) have given their approval to the proposal and governors would like to hear what parents and carers think and whether or not you agree with the proposal. The formal consultation period will run **from Monday 9 May until Friday 17 June**.

What we would like you to do

We would like to know what you think of the proposal being considered, so we would strongly encourage you to take part in this consultation. Please read more about this proposal on our [website](#), research about Embark, consider what is being proposed, come and meet with Embark and the governors, ask questions if you would like to, and/or send an email to consultation@anthonygell.co.uk to let us know what you think. If you would like to reply at this point in the consultation, but you are not able to email your response, you can write to me using the contact details at the bottom of this page. We will send you a questionnaire on Friday 27 May, after you have had time to consider the information about this proposal, attend the meetings we have arranged, and ask any questions you might have. Please use the questionnaire you will receive on 27 May to say whether you are for or against the proposed change.

I apologise for the large amount of information in this letter, it's a complex topic with much work from many people to get us to this point. Please take the time to look through it all.

Background

This proposal has been discussed thoroughly at governing board level. Governors have been investigating the options open to us since 2015 and have rejected various alternatives because we did not believe that they would be the best way forward for AGS. We are determined to make the best decision for our school and not rush into academisation. We have taken great care to explore a wide range of possible scenarios which could help to better ensure the ongoing provision of high quality, inclusive, education for all who attend AGS now and in the future.

Not all MATs are equal, and our research indicates some whose policies are the opposite of what we stand for at AGS. Some mandate uniformity and commonality in all things, would

Wood Street, Wirksworth, Derbyshire DE4 4DX

Headteacher: Malcolm Kelly

www.anthonygell.co.uk

T 01629 825577

E enquiries@anthonygell.co.uk

rename us the Wirksworth Academy, would remove all local control and governance and their focus is entirely on financial matters and league tables. Right now, we have the luxury of choice and control of our own destiny, something some schools don't, but in the event that we decide not to go ahead with this now and stay a local authority maintained school, we cannot be certain about how that flexibility may change in the future. We may be told what to do or be out of palatable options.

The governing body have evaluated various options against agreed criteria which include being able to:

- Maintain and strengthen AGS's identity, core values and ethos;
- Retain the ability to make key decisions as a school with a high degree of autonomy and local governance;
- Improve the quality of education for all students at AGS;
- Strengthen our commitment towards community, inclusion and pastoral care;
- Continue to care for and support our excellent staff;
- Maintain current partnerships whilst developing new ones with organisations, groups, external providers and schools.

Here are a list of possible advantages and disadvantages of becoming part of a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) such as Embark but you may have other possible advantages or disadvantages you wish to bring to our attention.

Possible advantages of joining a MAT such as Embark

- Our experience shows that working together as a group of schools helps to raise standards and improve our practice.
- Schools who are part of a MAT can work together to help recruit and retain the best staff and give staff excellent development and career opportunities. Shared professional development can more easily be arranged and afforded.
- School leaders and teachers can share thinking and planning, thus helping to spread expertise.
- Governors and trustees can work more strategically, especially during challenging times.
- Groups of schools can find it easier to find and fund specialist expertise (both specialist teachers and specialists in areas such as data analysis, finance, health and safety). We will be able to create and share staffing roles that operate across the MAT that would not have been possible in any one individual school.
- The MAT structure allows headteachers to focus more on teaching and learning, as the business-side of the role becomes more coordinated across the MAT.
- Economies of scale can be achieved by MATs and help schools to provide more within the limitations of annual budgets.
- Reduced reliance on a local authority who are struggling to maintain the level of service and support they used to, due to the reduction in schools (and therefore finances) through academisation.
- There are financial savings that can be made by joining the right MAT. The total amount of money a school has is affected by the proportion of the school's budget removed by the local authority at source. This is often referred to as 'top slicing'. Derbyshire top slice in the region of 5-9% of schools' budgets and schools are then required to pay for

essential services including HR, finance and legal support. Maintained schools are encouraged to buy these services from the local authority. The local authorities top slicing from schools helps to pay for local authority salaries and the upkeep of local authority buildings such as County Hall in Matlock. (Embark top slices 5% but this then includes services for schools such as HR, finance and school improvement. More details about the services provided by Embark as part of their central offer via the top-sliced 5% of schools' budgets can be found here www.embarkfederation.com/our-central-offer/)

- Joining an existing MAT is considerably more straightforward than creating a new one from scratch.

Governors believe that academy status within a carefully chosen MAT could be the best way to support the school in continuing to develop and improve, enhancing teaching and learning, whilst retaining the characteristics and key values of our school.

Possible disadvantages of joining a MAT

- For this to be successful it requires a school to join a MAT which will contain schools who have a similar vision and similar values; and for the MAT to have these values at its core. A school opting to join a MAT with different values and a different approach to theirs would result in significant changes for the school, its staff and its students.
- Joining a pre-existing MAT may bring financial savings, but this should not be assumed and should not be the reason for a school joining.
- There are costs associated with joining a MAT (costs linked to due diligence checks, legal advice etc.). However, the DfE provide £25,000 to help cover the costs linked to start-up. The use of this financial support varies from MAT to MAT.
- Some MATs will dictate how a school looks and acts, as well as how that school can liaise with other schools from outside of the MAT. This would affect the feel of a school and impact negatively on some of the existing partnerships a school may have.
- Once part of a MAT it is extremely difficult for a school to withdraw from this formal partnership.
- There could be significant upheaval for the school, depending on the type of MAT chosen, as new governance and leadership structures are adopted.

Why change?

Our historical school-to-school partnerships have diminished and the support from the local authority has reduced. The current view of the governors is that the advantages of being part of MAT outweigh the disadvantages.

In joining a MAT, the over-riding concern of governors is to ensure that our school continues to provide the best possible standard of education and care for our students.

Academy status is becoming more common; over 70% of secondary schools now belong to a trust and many local authorities have encouraged and supported schools to organise themselves within groups, such as MATs. The recent government White Paper has also highlighted the national ambition for all schools to belong to a MAT by 2030 at the latest. As their budgets have decreased, local authorities are altering the services they make available to schools.

There are 47 secondary schools in Derbyshire who were once all maintained and therefore directly linked to the local authority. 35 of these Derbyshire secondary schools have already chosen to leave the local authority and become academies. This has severely impacted on local authority finances and this in turn has affected the quality and range of support the local authority is able to provide its schools. There are likely to be 8 local authority maintained secondary schools left in Derbyshire by this time next year and that is if AGS elects to remain as a maintained school. We do not know what other schools' governing boards are considering, but they are likely to be monitoring the situation carefully and could be making plans of their own to safeguard the future of their schools.

Our local authority (Derbyshire County Council or 'DCC') has made it clear that it expects all schools to consider the pros and cons of joining a Trust.

Key points of joining the Embark Federation MAT

We have chosen to fully explore the possibility of joining Embark as their core beliefs of Family, Integrity, Teamwork and Success are very closely aligned to our values and ethos. They are a Derbyshire based, medium sized, Trust who help schools to retain their unique identities whilst providing the benefits of partnership. Children and young people are at the heart of their work. Their shared vision is to create 'stand out schools at the heart of their communities'.

This proposal would mean we would retain control of our own destiny and actively contribute at the onset to the further development of a highly regarded local Derbyshire MAT along with the other three secondaries and help shape this trust's secondary expertise. The AGS governing board are excited by the potential to be even stronger together for the good of our students.

- Our school will retain its character and will continue to look, feel and be the same as it is now with the same school name, school times, holiday pattern, dress code and admission policy. Most of the changes will be unseen and will not affect the day to day running of the school.
- Our school would retain an individual headteacher, rather than a 'Principal' with the headteacher continuing to lead the school on a day-to-day basis, alongside the school's governors, whilst receiving support and challenge from the MAT to ensure the best provision for our children/young people.
- The joining of a MAT means some services can be shared across the schools which will help us be more efficient and make sure that funding is focused on teaching, learning and support for children and young people.

Although Embark are currently a primary focused MAT, they are keen to expand their offering and there are significant opportunities that would be created and benefits available in four good secondary schools working more closely together. Being able to shape school improvement within an effective and supportive MAT for children and young people across Derbyshire has very many positive benefits we feel excited to explore.

Where can more information about this proposal be found?

We have created a new section of the AGS website which you can access [here](#). As this section of our website is developed, you will be able to see lots more information on these

pages; detail such as the alternative options which were considered by governors, more information about Embark, and a list of key questions and answers (FAQs).

In order to help provide more detail and opportunities to ask questions, Embark will be hosting a 'consultation day' in each of the four secondary schools. As parents/carers linked to or soon to be linked to AGS, I encourage you to attend the event at AGS as shown below:

Meet with Embark at AGS: Tuesday 17 May

9:00am – 10:00am – *Informal meeting to be held at Anthony Gell School: A chance to drop-in and speak with the Embark Trust Leader and trustee representatives from Embark, AGS governors and the headteacher.*

5.30pm – 6.30pm – *Parents'/Carers' meeting held at AGS for parents to come and find out more about the proposal and ask any questions of the Embark Trust Leader and trustee representatives from Embark, AGS governors and the headteacher.*

There will be another opportunity for parents and carers to meet with governors and the headteacher in school on **Thursday 26 May 6.30pm-7.30pm**. In addition to these opportunities to meet, parents and carers are invited to send any questions to consultation@anthonygell.co.uk.

How will we know if you are for or against this proposal?

We will send you a questionnaire on Friday 27 May, after you have had time to consider the information about this proposal, attend the meetings we have arranged, and ask any questions you might have. **Please use this questionnaire to say whether you are for or against the proposed change, including the reasons for you having the opinion you hold. Please return your questionnaire by the closing date of 17 June.** If you would prefer to receive a paper copy of the questionnaire on or after Friday 27 May, please contact us to arrange for this to happen.

Governors will carefully review all the feedback received during our consultation, before deciding whether to go ahead with the proposed change. We will ensure updates are provided once this period of consultation has been completed, and we will be updating the information on <https://www.anthonygell.co.uk/our-school/academisation/> during the consultation to show the questions that have been asked and the answers to those questions.

Yours sincerely,



Mr Lee Stephens
Chair of Governors