

Guide to using CST's conceptual model of trust-led school improvement

Steve Rollett
Confederation of School Trusts



Confederation
of School Trusts



School
Improvement
Hub



**School
Improvement
Hub**

schoolimprovementhub.org



**Confederation
of School Trusts**

The Confederation of School Trusts is the national organisation and sector body for school trusts in England, advocating for, connecting, and supporting executive and governance leaders. Our members are responsible for the education of more than three million young people.

Bringing together trusts from every region and of every size, CST has a strong, strategic presence with access to government and policy makers to drive real change for education on the big issues that matter most.

Published in April 2024 by the Confederation of School Trusts, Suite 1, Whiteley Mill
39 Nottingham Road, Stapleford, Nottingham, NG9 8AD. Registered charity number 1107640.

© 2024 Confederation of School Trusts. All rights reserved. No part of this document may be reproduced or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, or otherwise, without prior written permission of CST.

How to cite this publication:

Rollett, S (2024). *Guide to using CST's conceptual model of trust-led school improvement*. Nottingham: Confederation of School Trusts

Introduction

In spring 2023 CST established an inquiry to explore how trusts improve schools. While it was initially hoped the inquiry would identify and codify an effective model for school improvement, it became clear this not possible for two reasons:

1. A lack of shared meaning

Improvement models across trusts varied not only in terms of their substance but also their definition. Therefore, it is hard to compare models across trusts because the system lacks a shared language and conceptual understanding.

2. Problematic evidence base.

The evidence base pertaining to trust-led school improvement is too thin to sustain confident and robust causal claims about how best trusts can improve schools. This is not to say there isn't evidence more generally about school improvement, but the evidence about how trusts can do so effectively, leveraging the power of the group, is limited. To be clear, this is not to say that trusts do not improve schools – there is evidence that many trusts systematically do so, including in the most challenging contexts. However, there has been very limited research into how they do this.

Taking a step back

In order to address this, the inquiry decided to take step back and to turn its attention towards resolving these two issues. The work of the inquiry, therefore, pivoted towards establishing a framework, drawing on literature about models of improvement generally, to provide the trust sector with a shared language and set of concepts that would enable trusts to explore and compare their approach to improvement with each other.

The conceptual model, along with its underlying rationale and evidence, is described in *The DNA of Trust-led school improvement: a conceptual model* (Rollett, 2024)¹. It does not prescribe to trusts exactly how they should improve schools. Rather, it shows key considerations that a school or trust's improvement model ought to take account of, based on literature about improvement models from a range of sectors, including education and health care.

The terminology of 'trust-led' was chosen to reflect the unique contribution this work is intended to make to the school improvement landscape, specifically focusing on what groups of schools in a single governance arrangement (a school trust) can do improve education at scale. This is on the assumption there may be affordances and possibilities a group of schools can leverage that a single school cannot. It should not be taken to imply a particular type of trust or the extent of 'central' control exerted within a trust.

It should also be noted the conceptual model

1 Rollett, S (2024) *The DNA of trust-led school improvement: a conceptual model*. CST.



must itself be the focus of reflection and refinement. To that end, users should feel justified in adapting and improving it as required. Over time the sector's engagement with the model could lead to iteration and improvement.

The model consists of three strands, each containing four components. The three strands are broadly sequential in that the first is concerned with establishing purposes and aims, the second is to do with establishing organisational conditions for improvement, and the third is to do with how improvement initiatives are carried out.

In reality, however, the process of improvement is likely to be much less straightforward, involving a back and forth between aspects of the model as improvement is undertaken and new understanding emerges. For example, it may be that implementing a particular initiative (third strand) leads to the observation that purposes and objectives are not properly defined (first strand).

For this reason, the three strands are represented as three intertwined strands rather than sequential steps. The way they co-exist and help to structure each other is one reason why they are described as the 'DNA' of trust-led improvement, reflecting the way that DNA strands are formed of intertwined helices. Scientists, please note we recognise that our model is a triple helix whereas most (but not all) DNA is made up of a double helix!

What is a 'conceptual model'?

A conceptual model is an abstract representation of a process, which is intended to show the fundamental concepts and principles.

Why doesn't the conceptual model tell trusts exactly what to improve in schools?

The conceptual model necessarily sits at a high level of abstraction. For example, it says that trusts need to be mindful of effective implementation, seeing improvement as a process, but it does not specify exactly which initiatives or activities should be implemented. This is because, as explained in the introduction, there is not a sufficiently robust evidence base to provide a prescribed list of what should be implemented within a trust to bring about improvement. Moreover, what is right to implement in each trust will be heavily influenced by the aims of the trust, the context of its schools, and what its priorities are.

For these reasons the conceptual model does not specify particular approaches to aspects of school quality like curriculum, behaviour, pedagogy and so on, even though these are likely to be important for school improvement. However, the model does suggest considerations that will help to inform the specific actions a trust might take. These include using evidence, developing expertise, and using evaluative tools.

Building each of these into a trust model of improvement means there is a better chance that the improvement process will target the right specific initiatives and actions for the problem/challenge at hand. For example, while the evidence on how effective trusts do improvement is thin, there is evidence about how to improve what happens in the classroom. Engaging with this evidence is likely to be an important part of a trust's improvement model.

One way to think of your engagement with the model is to see it as sitting towards the top of a spectrum that runs between abstract and concrete, as per figure 1 below. The ideas it contains necessarily sit at the abstract end because it has to speak to a wide range of contexts and phenomena. When you engage with the model it is important to recognise this and to actively work at making your use of it

as concrete as possible.

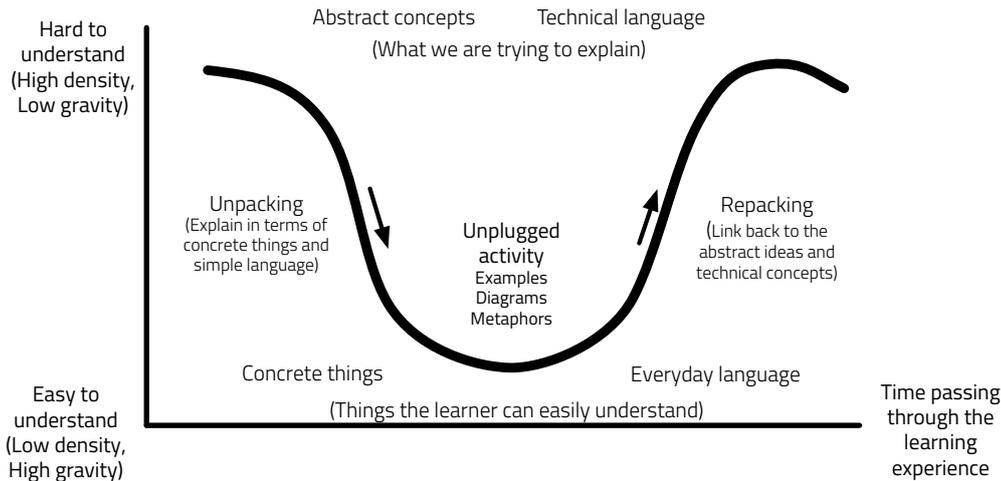


Figure 1: Semantic wave (Curzon, 2019)²

For example, the conceptual model suggests trusts should try to cultivate a culture where teaching and leadership can flourish. Ask yourself: is it enough simply to say “my trust has a strong culture that supports teaching”? Or, can you state more concretely exactly what this looks like and how you achieve it? This need not be an exercise in form filling and bureaucracy, but it is helpful to think how you can be as specific and concrete as is helpful to really understand current and future improvement practice.

There are three main ways it is hoped the conceptual model will be used:

1. As a stimulus for trusts to reflect on and explore their own model for school improvement.
2. As a means of allowing models from different trusts to ‘speak to’ each other. A shared language and set of concepts should support more meaningful comparisons of improvement models, either in part or in their entirety.
3. To support research in the system. The conceptual model identifies a starting point and common framework for future research. For example, we hope it will provide a frame of reference for high quality research into trusts which have demonstrated the ability to improve schools in order to build a shared understanding of effective trust practices. CST is working with ImpactED to do the first of this work, using the conceptual model to structure a sector-wide call for evidence.

The importance of the ‘horizontal’

It is worth drawing attention to one particular component of the conceptual model: ‘empower horizontal improvement’. The meaning and rationale for this is explained more fully in ‘The DNA of Trust-led school improvement: a conceptual model’ (Rollett, 2024), but it can be summarised as “the plane that cuts across schools and internal trust boundaries, allowing us to plan and implement improvements that leverage the collective capacity of the trust.”

Traditional approaches to improvement have tended to focus on single schools, leading in some cases to improvement practices within the trust sector that

² Curzon, P (2019) *Semantic Waves*, Teaching London Computing.

continue to see each school as separate from the others. The conceptual model posits that trusts have the capacity for cross-cutting work to take place across the group of schools – bringing into view the ‘horizontal’ dimension.

“This is where recent theorisation about trusts as knowledge-building institutions comes into play as a key lever for improvement (Bauckham & Cruddas, 2021).³ It is also the perspective that informs growing efforts in the sector to establish communities of improvement across trusts (Rollett, 2021)⁴, and to bring together professional development in new and powerful ways across the group (Barker & Patten, 2022).⁵ All of these approaches to improvement are situated in the ‘horizontal plane’: trust-wide improvement.”
Rollett, 2024

The extent to which improvement activity exists within this horizontal dimension may depend on the nature of the improvement work being undertaken and the wider strategic and operational context of the trust. Some trusts will already be undertaking horizontal improvement work routinely. For others it will be a new and potentially significant consideration.

In either case, we think it is important to pay particular attention to its place in the conceptual model, in part because it may be the component that most marks out ‘trust-led’ improvement from school improvement more generally.

“The identification of the ‘horizontal’ dimension of trust-led school improvement does not necessarily imply a particular organisational structure. For example, it may not necessitate large central teams. It may be that effective horizontal improvement work can be achieved with relatively flat structures that operate more through inter-school collaboration than ‘top-down’ or ‘centralised’ dynamics. Equally, in some trusts it may be that an effective and efficient central team is an important facilitating structure. The ‘horizontal’ plane can speak to both of these.”
Rollett, 2024

Indeed, we hope the conceptual model will help the sector to explore and understand this aspect more over time.

Using the conceptual model in your trust

Perhaps the simplest way to use the conceptual model within your trust is to use it as a stimulus for thinking and discussion. For example, if you already have a codified improvement model you might reflect on how far your model addresses each of the twelve components in the conceptual model. Are there specific parts your model emphasises? Are there aspects of the conceptual model that are not included?

This is not to say that your own model should address all twelve components, but overlaying your model on top of the conceptual model might be generative of helpful



3 Bauckham, I and Cruddas, L (2021) *Knowledge building: School improvement at scale*. CST

4 Rollett, S (2021) *Communities of improvement: School trusts as fields of practice*. CST

5 Barker and Patten, (2022) *Professional development in school trusts: Capacity, conditions, and culture*. CST

insight.

If your trust does not have a model for improvement, the conceptual model could be a helpful stimulus to help you create one, providing a structure and prompts to help you think about the ingredients an improvement model might include.

In either case, the table below, which sets out some exploratory questions, might be useful in helping you to think about the approach to school improvement within your trust.

Using the conceptual model to build sector knowledge

We also hope the conceptual framework will support sector-wide knowledge building about trust-led school improvement. Trusts (and other organisations working to support their work) could use the framework to explain and illustrate aspects of trust-led improvement practice, coalescing around its language and concepts in order to enter into a shared dialogue.

For example, research organisations might seek to illustrate how existing research maps against the framework in order to make it more relevant and accessible to trusts. Service providers might consider how their products and services might help trusts with particular parts of the conceptual model.

A good example of this is Steplab's paper *De-implementation and following a north star*, which explores the components relating to 'de-implement' and 'develop expertise'.⁶ It draws on research, insights from research, and case studies from school trusts to illustrate key ideas that trusts wishing to act these components might wish to consider. We hope other organisations will engage with the conceptual model and school trusts in this way.

Over time it is hoped the sector will develop a better understanding of which components of the conceptual model seem to be particularly high leverage, how different parts of the model come together in the most effective ways and the best ways of enacting each component. This, it is hoped, will inform understandings of better practices not only within individual trusts but across the sector as a whole – embodying the notions of collective improvement and 'upwards convergence' (Berwick, 2016).⁷

CST is working with ImpactED to build an evidence base about the trust-led school improvement practices, which will be framed by the conceptual model. The sector's participation in this work will help to grow understanding about effective improvement practices. It will also allow for evaluation of the conceptual model itself and provide insights that could lead to its iteration over time.

- You can find out more about this and get involved by visiting schoolimprovementhub.org

6 Goodrich, J and Hill C (2024). *De-implementation and following a north star: How a focus on what trusts can do, and stop doing, can make all the difference for school improvement*: CST

7 Berwick, G (2016). *Upwards Convergence. An introduction to creating a high performing and equitable system*. Challenge Partners

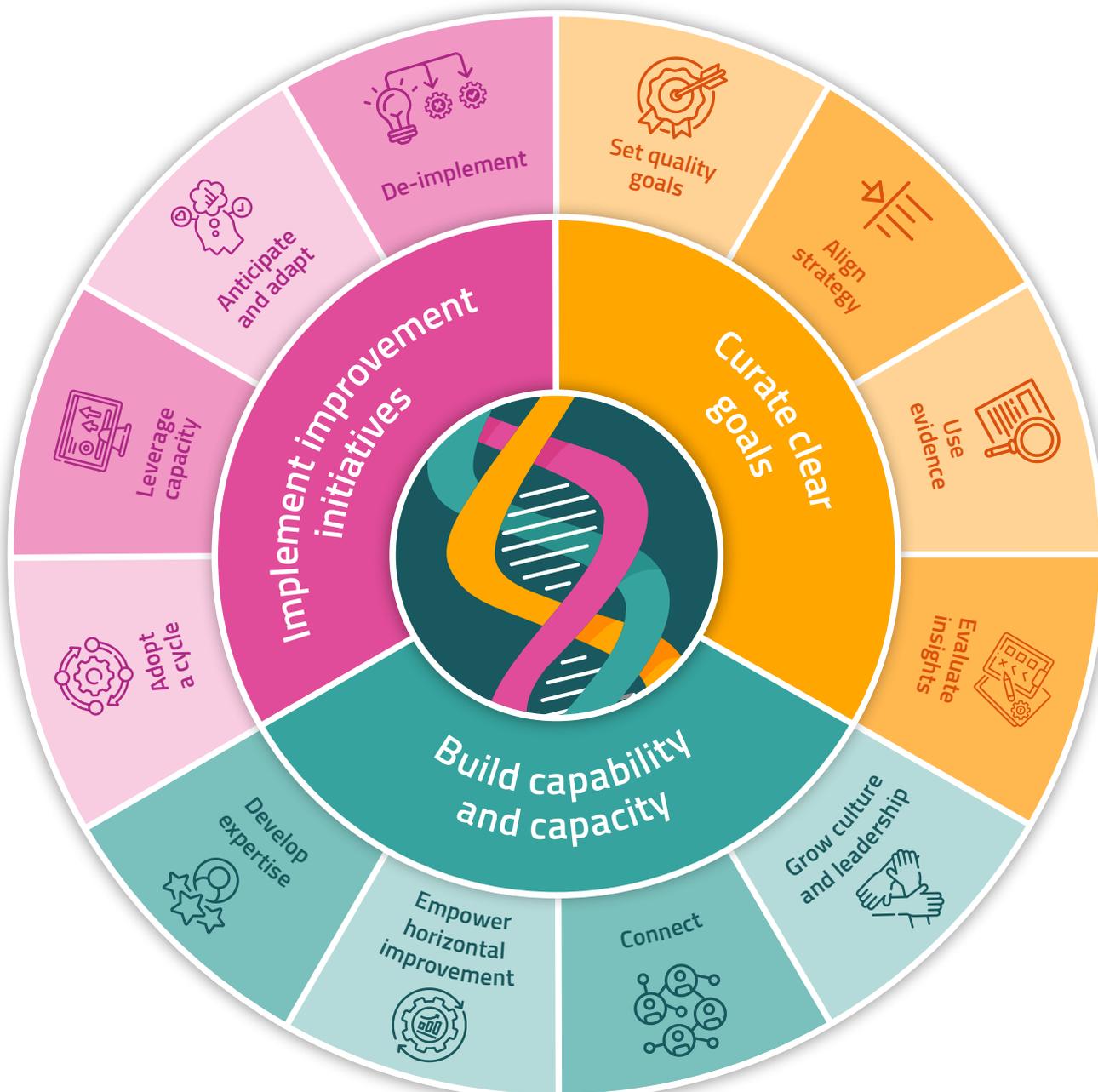
The conceptual model

You can see below the conceptual model of trust-led school improvement. For each component there is a summary of what it means and some accompanying exploratory questions, which are intended to support trusts' thinking and reflection about each of the components.

Although it is not necessary to address all the questions, they should help trust leaders in particular to translate between the abstract conceptual model and the specific practices employed in their trust.

We hope that trusts find spending time with the model, and reflecting on their improvement practice, is time well spent.

It is a tool being offered to the system and we look forward to seeing how it is used.



Curate clear goals

Define clear purposes, strategies and goals so you know what you're aiming for and how you plan to get there

COMPONENT	IN MORE DETAIL	EXAMPLES OF THIS IN PRACTICE	EXPLORATORY QUESTIONS
 <p>Set quality goals</p>	<p>Define the quality the trust is aiming for, and the specific goals needed to achieve this.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What the school improvement model/strategy says (explicitly or implicitly) is effective practice. ▪ Codifying what effective practice looks like in schools & classrooms. ▪ What the school articulates, for example through job descriptions or a school prospectus, about its aims. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Does the trust have a clear and shared understanding of what high quality education looks like (a conception of quality)? ▪ What are the key aspects of schooling that are considered to be the highest leverage improvement priorities (the things likely to have the most impact)? ▪ How/where are purposes and the conception of quality recorded?
 <p>Align strategy</p>	<p>Ensure alignment between school improvement objectives and wider trust strategy.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Embedding wider trust improvement objectives into school level improvement plans. ▪ Having a clear strategy for what is determined as a trust and where improvement planning sits locally, and why. ▪ Having clear & coherent improvement goals & strategies that are understood by all. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How do school level improvement plans fit within the wider trust strategy? ▪ What processes are there to help ensure school and trust improvement plans align? ▪ How are improvement goals determined and how are they communicated?
 <p>Use evidence</p>	<p>Use evidence to identify the actions most likely to build momentum in the desired direction.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Building evidence into improvement models & strategies. ▪ Staff research reading groups. ▪ Evidence/research libraries staff can use. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How is evidence used to identify the right priorities for improvement initiatives? ▪ How does the trust support teachers and leaders to make effective use of evidence & research? ▪ How does the trust/school contribute to the development of research & evidence?
 <p>Evaluate insights</p>	<p>Use quality evaluative tools to understand the performance of schools and the trust.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Using trust peer review to identify strengths & areas for improvement. ▪ Using a common assessment system for reading at Year 7, to allow comparisons across the group. ▪ Using a trust-wide data system to provide insight on where performance is stronger/weaker to inform strategy & deployment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Which evaluative tools does the trust use to understand school performance? ▪ How is data used to identify where improvements are needed and where strengths reside?

Build capability and capacity

Shaping the people, culture, and capacity within the organisation to create the conditions for sustainable improvement

COMPONENT	IN MORE DETAIL	EXAMPLES OF THIS IN PRACTICE	EXPLORATORY QUESTIONS
 <p>Develop expertise</p>	Put expertise and professional learning at the heart of improvement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Prioritising CPD within improvement plans. ▪ Encouraging teachers to be part of subject communities. ▪ Investing in high quality leadership development programmes for new leaders. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How important is the development of expertise in improvement planning? Is it considered when determining initiatives? ▪ How is this made communicated, monitored and evaluated? ▪ How is CPD enacted for different roles/phases etc?
 <p>Empower horizontal improvement</p>	Improve practice across a group of schools simultaneously, rather than just 'one school at a time'.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Trust-wide subject networks & CPD. ▪ Setting shared improvement priorities across the trust. ▪ Bringing together subject leaders across the trust to develop and/or align the curriculum. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How does trust improvement planning seek to understand and address shared improvement goals? ▪ What improvement priorities are being worked on across the trust? ▪ How is school-to-school improvement planned/encouraged/enacted?
 <p>Connect</p>	Build connections across the organisation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ensure staff don't work in silos by establishing working groups on specific issues. ▪ Holding whole-trust conferences to support improvement. ▪ Participating in professional networks and initiatives beyond the school/trust. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What opportunities are there for staff to develop connections across the organisation, and how are these connected to improvement? ▪ How are role-specific networks used to connect colleagues facing similar problems of practice? ▪ What external connections and networks are used to support improvement?
 <p>Grow culture and leadership</p>	Establish a culture where leadership and teaching can flourish.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Being explicit about 'how we do it here' (whether at trust or school level). ▪ Consciously curating the leadership behaviours that are valued through mentoring & coaching. ▪ Codifying what standards of classroom behaviour explicitly teaching these to children. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What is the culture the trust/school seeks to cultivate, how is this communicated and enacted with staff and pupils? ▪ What are the desired leadership behaviours? ▪ How is school culture explored and evaluated?

Implement improvement initiatives

The ongoing process of implementing improvement, iterating, and refining as plans are enacted

COMPONENT	IN MORE DETAIL	EXAMPLES OF THIS IN PRACTICE	EXPLORATORY QUESTIONS
 <p>Adopt a cycle</p>	<p>Adopt the behaviours that drive implementation (Engage, Unite, Reflect). Do this whilst tending to contextual factors and using a structured but flexible implementation process: Explore, Prepare, Deliver, Sustain).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Embedding EEF Implementation guidance in improvement initiatives. ▪ Establishing an improvement cycle that allows for evaluation. ▪ Providing time for staff to reflect on practice. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How are the right behaviours for improvement cultivated? ▪ How does the trust ensure implementing improvement is seen as an ongoing process informed by evaluation? ▪ How is the implementation of improvement initiatives made structured but flexible?
 <p>Leverage capacity</p>	<p>Match improvement initiatives with capacity to deliver.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Deploying expert teachers from a central team to support subject teaching. ▪ Deploying into a school leaders who have prior experience of 'turn around' in the trust. ▪ A budget to support improvement initiatives across the trust. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What is the trust's view of what 'improvement capacity' consists of? ▪ How are expert teachers and leaders from elsewhere in the trust deployed to support improvement where needed in schools? ▪ How is improvement capacity deliberately built over time?
 <p>Anticipate and adapt</p>	<p>Know what's likely to cause failure and how you will spot it. Learning from it and adapting or ejecting the failing action.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Drawing on experience to anticipate likely implementation challenges. ▪ Evaluating & adapting curriculum plans. ▪ Establishing key metrics and milestones that will indicate the path to success. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How are improvement initiatives evaluated, and by whom? ▪ What & who determines whether improvement initiatives continue, adapt or cease? ▪ What work is done prior to implementation to anticipate and mitigate common/likely reasons for plans to fail?
 <p>De-implement</p>	<p>De-implement initiatives that are not effective, or less effective than alternative options.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Reviewing the opportunity cost of low impact teaching initiatives. ▪ Reducing teacher workload. ▪ Having a 'one in, one out' policy when introducing new initiatives. What will we stop doing in order to implement this? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What work is done to evaluate teacher workload? ▪ How does the trust help to ensure improvement initiatives don't overload staff and potentially undermine improvement goals? ▪ What work is done to identify which activities are low (or negative) impact and could be stopped?



School Improvement Hub

CST and ImpactEd Group are working together to collate examples of school improvement practices used by trusts, freely shared to help schools across the country. If your trust has work that aligns with our conceptual framework for trust-led improvement, please visit the website for details of how to work with us to develop and share a case study, and help all our schools to keep getting better.

schoolimprovementhub.org

Confederation of School Trusts

Suite 1, Whiteley Mill
39 Nottingham Road
Stapleford
Nottingham
NG9 8AD

0115 9170142

cstuk.org.uk



**Confederation
of School Trusts**

© 2024 Confederation of School Trusts