

Bridge To The Future series

The new domains of educational leadership

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June
2023



Confederation
of School Trusts

The voice of school trusts



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Published in June 2023 by the Confederation of School Trusts, Suite 1, Whiteley Mill
39 Nottingham Road, Stapleford, Nottingham, NG9 8AD. Registered charity number 1107640.

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How to cite this publication:

Cruddas L (2023). *The new domains of educational leadership*. Nottingham: Confederation of School Trusts

Introduction

School structures in England take different forms. Prior to 2010, the then Labour government in England focused on the challenge of failing largely inner-city schools which were required to become academies, taking them out of local authority control and linking them to a government-approved sponsor.

The Academies Act 2010 under a Coalition Government of the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats made conversion to becoming an academy open to all good and outstanding schools, subject to Department for Education approval. Since that time, the number of multi-school groupings operating as a multi-academy trust (which I will call school trusts) has grown substantially. It is important to note that not all school trusts are multi-school groups. Some are standalone schools; at the time of writing, there are currently around two and half thousand academy trusts educating over half of all children in England, of which just over one thousand are single academy trusts.

School trusts are established in all ten Department for Education regions in England but are dispersed slightly differently with the highest proportion of trusts being in the south west.

While the Labour government saw academy status as a response to entrenched failure, the Coalition government and successive Conservative governments have seen the academy programme as both a response to failure (a school judged to be failing by the inspectorate can be issued with a 'Directive Academy Order' requiring it to join a school trust) and as the promotion of educational excellence (by allowing good and outstanding schools to convert).

The leadership of a group of schools working together as a single legal entity and under a single governance structure is a new field of inquiry. I make the case here for new domains of educational leadership emerging from this field.

1. The first domain is about **Organisational Leadership**: this is leadership of the school trust – the group of schools in a single legal entity operating under a single governance structure.
2. The second domain is about **Civic Leadership**: how trust leaders work with others to advance education as a wider common good.
3. The third domain is about **System Leadership**: not in the old definition of 'working beyond the school gates', but rather how trust leaders need to act *on*, rather than just acting *in* the system.

All three leadership narratives are underpinned by ethics – the Seven Principles of Public Life.¹ In trust settings, leaders must:

- Act solely in the interest of children and young people;
- Avoid placing themselves under any obligation to people or organisations that might try inappropriately to influence them in their work;
- Act and take decisions impartially and fairly, using the best evidence and without discrimination or bias;
- Be accountable to the public for their decisions and actions and must submit



¹ UK Government, (1995) [The Seven Principles of Public Life](#) ('Nolan Principles')

themselves to the scrutiny necessary to ensure this;

- Expect to act and take decisions in an open and transparent manner;
- Be truthful; and
- Exhibit these principles in their own behaviour - they should actively promote and robustly support the principles and be willing to challenge poor behaviour wherever it occurs.

This think piece draws substantially on a paper I wrote for the Confederation of School Trusts (CST) in January 2020: *Systems of Meaning – Three Nested Leadership narratives for school trusts*.² In this paper, I develop those emergent leadership narratives into new domains of leadership.

The new domains of educational leadership

Organisational leadership

1. Creating the conditions for deep and purposeful collaboration
2. The power of purpose and importance of culture
3. Building expertise
4. Building relational trust

Civic leadership

1. The protection and promotion of public values
2. Building a connected system
3. Catalysing collective leadership through a theory of action
4. Community anchoring

System leadership

1. Acting on, rather than just acting in the system
2. System building
3. Developing the next generation of leaders
4. Creating the conditions for the system to keep getting better

² Cruddas, L (2020) [Systems of Meaning – Three Nested Leadership narratives for school trusts](#). Nottingham: CST.

Organisational leadership

Creating the conditions for deep and purposeful collaboration

In the final paper of a series for the National College for School Leadership in 2019, David Hargreaves wrote about what maturity in a self-improving system looked like. He set out a grid which differentiated between 'shallow, loose' partnership and 'tight, deep' partnership which he described as inter-school integration.³

I believe the closest expression of inter-school integration is the school trust - a group of schools working in deep and purposeful collaboration as one entity, under a single governance structure, to improve and maintain high educational standards across the trust.

In a pamphlet published in January 2023, I argued that deep and purposeful collaboration is at the heart of the trust structure.⁴ And from our point of view, structures are in fact very important because they create the conditions for this intensely focused collaboration.

There are undoubtedly other forms of inter-school collaboration but none of them – not even the hard federation – can create quite the depth and tightness of collaboration described by Hargreaves.

An important aspect of leading and school trust is the ability to create the conditions for deep and purposeful collaboration across the group of schools.



The closest expression of inter-school integration is the school trust - a group of schools working in deep and purposeful collaboration

The power of purpose and importance of culture

I believe that this comes primarily from the power of purpose – the capacity to link people through a shared belief about the identity, meaning and mission of an organisation. In the strongest trusts, there is a deep sense of collective purpose.

Trust leaders are people with a deep knowledge and understanding of the substance of education, including:

- schools and how to improve them;
- organisations and how to build them;
- people and how to develop them; and
- finances and how to manage them.

But a core principle of this domain of leadership is the ability to articulate a compelling shared purpose which puts children at the centre, and then build an organisational culture around this core purpose.

Building expertise

A growing body of literature places teacher professional development at the heart of efforts to improve the school system. The Confederation of School Trusts has recently published a paper that seeks to explore the role of professional development in building expertise.⁵ This paper builds on the idea that school improvement – in order to be lasting and sustainable – should be underpinned by deliberate and intentional knowledge building. Professional development of teachers is core to these knowledge building efforts.

³ Hargreaves, D (2012) [A self-improving school system: towards maturity](#), National College for School Leadership.

⁴ Cruddas, L (2023) [Starting with Why – why join a trust and why a trust-based system?](#) Nottingham: CST.

⁵ Barker, J and Patten, K. (2022) [Professional development in school trusts: Capacity, conditions and culture](#), Nottingham: CST.

The paper argues that pupils who benefit from more effective teaching not only learn more, they live happier and healthier lives.⁶ The effect is strongest among pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.⁷ In order to improve the quality of teaching, we could try to recruit better teachers into the profession, but this is a slow and uncertain route - in part because it's hard to identify a great teacher right at the start of their career.⁸ A better, and indeed a more ethical approach, is to focus our efforts on helping existing teachers to improve.

This is the hard task of creating cultures and communities of improvement across professionals in a group of schools designed using the 'active ingredients' of professional development.⁹ This is hard to do and not yet the norm in our education system, but we believe that the trust structure is uniquely well placed to do this.

Our contention is that school trusts can work to overcome some of the challenges associated with the design and implementation of high-quality professional development through leveraging their capacity (scale and expertise) alongside their ability to systematically control the conditions and culture in which all staff work, and professional development takes place.

Trust leadership therefore involves the intention building of expertise across the group of schools.

Building relational trust

Our education system must reclaim trust as a relational principle. By this I mean that all schools and trusts must have as a core focus, the behaviours, and actions everyone will take to build trust - with children and young people, parents and the community and the wider society. Trust as a relational principle should also be at the contractual heart of employer-employee relationships. The principle of trust should represent an objective reality in our education system that transcends cultures and organisations. It is at the heart of education as a public good.

Trust is an essential human value that quantifies and defines our interdependence in relationships with others. Viviane Robinson (2010) has perhaps done more than anyone working in the leadership space to define the importance of relational trust.¹⁰

There is more for us to do to establish the quantitative and qualitative evidence about the links between the leadership practices that build trust, their impact on staff attitudes and Trust organisation and, finally, the impact of levels of relational trust on pupil achievement outcomes but we can perhaps claim with some confidence that a strong case can be made for a leadership capability in the area of relationships.

Finally, I'd like to consider trust as a promise. Kofi Annan, the late Secretary-General of the United Nations said: "There is no trust more sacred than the one the world holds with children. There is no duty more important than ensuring that their rights are respected, that their welfare is protected, that their lives are free from fear and want and that they grow up in peace."¹¹ When we establish a school trust, we are effectively making a promise to hold trust with and on behalf of children.

6 For example, Jackson, K, Rockoff, J, and Staiger, D (2014) *Teacher Effects and Teacher-Related Policies*. *Annual Review of Economics* 2014 6:1, 801-825 and Chetty R, Friedman JN, Rockoff JE (2013) *Measuring the Impacts of Teachers II: Teacher Value-Added and Student Outcomes in Adulthood*. NBER Working Paper 19424.

7 The Sutton Trust (2011) [Improving the impact of teachers on pupil achievement in the UK: interim findings](#). Sutton Trust.

8 Wiliam, D (2016) *Leadership for teacher learning: creating a culture where all teachers improve so that all students succeed*. Chapter 2. Learning Sciences International.

9 Sims, S, Fletcher-Wood, H, O'Mara-Eves, A, Cottingham, S, Stansfield, C, Van Herwegen, J, Anders, J (2021) [What are the characteristics of effective teacher professional development? A systematic review and meta-analysis](#). London: The Education Endowment Foundation.

10 Robinson, V M J (2010) *From instructional leadership to leadership capabilities: Empirical findings and methodological challenges*. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 9(1), 1-26. doi: 10.1080/15700760903026748

11 Annan, K (2000) Foreword to *State of the World's Children*. UNICEF.

Civic leadership

The protection and promotion of public values

Trust leadership is necessary but not sufficient. I believe wholeheartedly that leaders must have the domain specific knowledge to lead their organisations. But I increasingly think that the domains of leadership required to address the challenges we face in our school system go beyond the knowledge and expertise of leading a group of schools – essential though this is.

If we are to build a *connected* system in which all actors work together, trust leaders must also understand their role as civic leaders. I have previously made the case for school trusts as a new form of civic structure.¹² As such, leaders have a duty to engage with each other and other civic actors for the wider good.

Civic leadership is about the protection and promotion of public values and addressing issues of place or public concern. Civic leaders create the conditions for collective impact by addressing complex issues affecting children and young people that require different actors to work together.



Building a connected system

Trust leaders are civic leaders. As well as leading a group of schools, trust leaders also look out beyond their organisation. They work with each other in a connected system, and they seek to work with other civic actors to ensure coherent public services, and that the collective actions of all civic actors protect high-quality education.

This means that trust leaders ensure that they build local relationships, not just with each other but with wider civic actors – the local authority, the NHS trust, the mental health trust, health commissioners, the police commissioner, the university vice chancellor etc. It is only through building a connected system that we will be able to address the multiple challenges facing our communities.

Catalysing collective leadership through a theory of action

The pandemic has left us with a host of negative legacies – educational, social, economic and health. On top of these challenges has come a global economic crisis which in England has resulted in more families living in absolute poverty. It is beyond the reach of individual organisations to support our families and communities through this. It requires a collective response.

As Peter Senge points out, the deep changes necessary to accelerate progress require

¹² Cruddas, L and Simons, J (2020) [School trusts as new civic structures – A framework document](#), CST and Public First

leaders who catalyse collective leadership.¹³

But simply catalysing collective leadership is unlikely to be sufficient. We will need to develop a collective theory of action. Robinson (2018) has perhaps done more than any other leadership academic to help to codify theories of action through agreeing on the problem to be solved, constructing a theory of action, evaluating the relative merit of the current and alternative theories of action and implementing and new, sufficiently shared theory of action.¹⁴ Albeit she views the theory of action through the lens of school improvement, her conceptual analysis and outline of process are very helpful in the context of civic leadership.

Community anchoring

As part of developing our understanding of school trusts as new civic structures, they must be anchored in their communities. In a paper jointly authored with Townsend and Vainker (2022), I argued that they must be 'anchor institutions'.¹⁵

Anchor institutions, alongside their main purpose, play a significant role in a locality by making a strategic contribution to the greater social good.

Typically anchor institutions:

- Have strong ties to the geographic area in which they are based;
- Tend to be larger employers and have significant purchasing power;
- Are not-for-profit or as in the case of school trusts, charitable organisations.

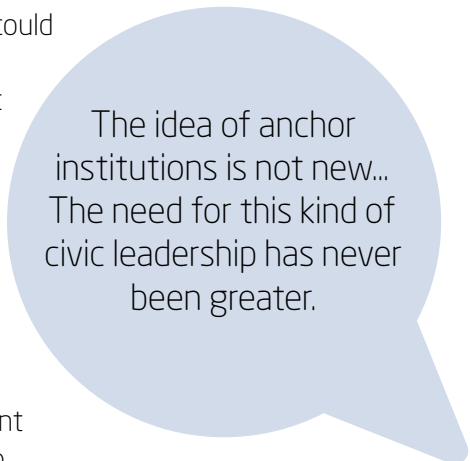
The idea of anchor institutions is not new. The concept originated in the United States in the 1960s. By the turn of the century, urban universities felt that they could no longer ignore the conditions that their communities were experiencing. As a consequence, universities started to create partnerships with other local and civic organisations to address the complex social and economic challenges faced by their local communities.

The need for this kind of civic leadership has never been greater. Gilbert (2021) argues that "Schools' vital role at the heart of their communities has been brought into sharp relief. In many places they became an anchor, providing support and some stability."¹⁶

The 'disadvantage gap' between children experiencing disadvantage and their wealthier peers is the largest it has been in a decade at both KS2 and KS4. A recent study showed that, "over 95 years in Britain the association between family socioeconomic status and children's primary school performance has remained stable."¹⁷ As charities with a mission to advance education for public benefit, we must consider all the factors that are barriers to us achieving this mission. That includes the beyond school factors that require partnership and collaboration to address.

An 'anchor institution' is an organisation with an important presence in a place. In the United Kingdom, NHS trusts,¹⁸ and universities¹⁹ have arguably been more conscious of their role as anchors.

Whilst many school trusts already do important work in ensuring all children can



The idea of anchor institutions is not new... The need for this kind of civic leadership has never been greater.

13 Senge, P (2006) *The Fifth Discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. Random House.

14 Robinson, V (2018) *Reduce change to increase improvement*. Corwin.

15 Townsend, Vainker and Cruddas (2023) [Community anchoring – school trusts as anchor institutions](#). CST and the Reach Foundation.

16 Gilbert, C (2021) [Coming back stronger: leadership matters](#), London: UCL Centre for Educational Leadership.

17 Von Stumm, S, Cave, N and Wakelin, P (2022) [Persistent association between family socioeconomic status and primary school performance in Britain over 95 years](#), npj Science of Learning 7(4).

18 Reed, S, Göpfert, A, Wood, S, Allwood, D and Warburton, W (2019) [Building healthier communities: the role of the NHS as an anchor institution](#), The Health Foundation.

19 [The Civic University Network](#) launched from the 2018 UPP Foundation report, [Truly Civic: Strengthening the connection between universities and their places](#).

access full opportunities offered by schools, we argue that seeing Trusts as 'anchor institutions' opens up longer timeframes and broadens our thinking about how we best address our collective mission to advance education. Riley (2021) argues that leaders who are place-makers understand their students and build trust by "making meaningful connections to families and locating the school within the wider archipelago of surrounding communities."²⁰ The pandemic has underlined the importance of these relationships.

In this way, school trusts become part of a civic community which is engaged, supportive and shares objectives, further supporting the places where they are based.

²⁰ Riley, K (2021) *Contemporary challenges in building trust and collaboration between schools and communities*, in T Greany and P Earley (eds) *School Leadership and Education System Reform* (2nd ed), London: Bloomsbury.



System leadership

Acting *on*, rather than just acting *in* the system

Michael Fullan in his book *Coherence* talks about 'systemness' as a key system driver.²¹ What he means by this is focusing direction and the need to integrate what the system is doing. Right now, in England, we have a divided school system. We need to begin to integrate what the system is doing. And the system is building groups of schools.

We cannot limp on indefinitely with a two-tier system which leaves smaller maintained schools vulnerable as local authorities retract their school improvement services. It is imperative now that we create system coherence.

The system leader is a strategic builder of local and regional systems. For some local school systems, we are close to an end state in terms of all schools being part of a group. In other local school systems, we are far away from this point. Trust leaders, along with regulators, must now think deliberately and intentionally about how to build local school systems.

This is the opposite of aggressive acquisition as a model of growth. It requires leaders who act collectively and strategically *on* – not just *in* – the system.

System building

As distinct from some of the legacy thinking on system or 'systems' leadership which appears to focus narrowly on the attributes of the leader, our definition of system leadership is about system building. Much of the literature of system leadership actually falls into what I would term civic leadership – working across professional boundaries.

System leaders enact the Indo-European root of to lead, "leith" which means to step across a threshold. We must step across the threshold into a new system. We need to build and share an understanding of the mental model of this system. And to do this, we need leaders who can see the whole system, not just parts of it.

We require unprecedented collaboration among school trusts and trust leaders to foster collective leadership in order to build local systems, particularly in areas where the quality of education has been poor for years and decades.

In the next decade, the growth of trusts cannot be organic. It must be by design. We need leaders who can work together within and across cities and regions to build system coherence so that no school – and no child – is left behind.

Developing the next generation of leaders

One of the ways the important aspects of system building is building the pipeline of the next generation of leaders. This is a system leadership challenge because the school system in England can only take the next step if we have identified, supported and developed the next generation of school and trust leaders.

There are several potential problems that we need to face as the system of school trusts in England grows, and our knowledge, theories and practices evolve.

The first is that there is no clearly defined model of trust leadership beyond competency-based or generic domain-based models typically focused only on organisational leadership. Competency is the application of the specific knowledge,

21. Fullan, M. and Quinn, J. (2015) *Coherence: The Right Drivers in Action for Schools, Districts, and Systems*. Corwin.

skills and attitudes that are needed to undertake a work role. As Leesa Wheelahan²² has pointed out, the problem with competency-based training is that it ties knowledge and skill directly to workplace performances and roles, and not to systematic structured disciplinary systems of meaning.

Unlike the domain of school leadership, there has been very little research into how to lead a group of schools. This could lead us back to what Leithwood et al (2004) refers to as the “leadership by adjective literature.”²³

Instead, we could view the task of leading a group of schools through the literature which is beginning to define school leadership. For the avoidance of doubt, this is not to claim that trust leadership is the same as school leadership. It is not. The Confederation of School Trusts has begun the work of codifying the core role of the school trust chief executive.²⁴

But there may be merit in considering the role of trust leaders in solving complex problems. The task of trust leadership is itself a complex activity. Goodhall (2016) calls this a theory of expert leadership.²⁵ Barker and Rees have done a huge amount to define what this means for school leadership exploring the concepts of expertise, mental models, persistent problems and knowledge.²⁶ We need a similar codification of trust leadership.

If our focus remains just on *organisational* leadership, we run the risk that the school trust becomes another insular, inward-looking structure with little connection to its civic context and little interest in the wider system. This is potentially dangerous because it could feed ‘producer interest’ – a focus on ‘outcomes’ for the children in ‘my’ organisation at the expense of others; and a belligerent system divided up into competitive fiefdoms.

Leadership narratives and programmes that keep us tied only to leadership genericism or organisational competencies will not produce the leaders or the system of schooling we need in England.

This requires that we not merely shift our mental models of leadership but forge a new mental model. We need a radically different approach to leadership development which is not based on the tired rehearsal of leadership competencies, but rather gives access to a higher order knowledge and thinking which will allow the hitherto unthinkable to be thought, as trust leaders lead the national and international



22 Wheelahan, L (2010) *The Structure of Pedagogic Discourse as a Relay for Power: The Case of Competency-Based Training, Toolkits, Translation Devices and Conceptual Accounts* in *Essays on Basil Bernstein's Sociology of Knowledge*, 1, pp. 47 –63.

23 Leithwood, K, Seashore Louis, K, Anderson, S and Wahlstrom K (2004). *How leadership affects student learning*. University of Minnesota and University of Toronto. p. 8

24 Confederation of School Trusts (2021) [The core responsibilities of the school trust CEO](#). Nottingham: CST

25 Goodhall, A. (2016) *A theory of expert leadership (TEL) in psychiatry*, *Australian Psychiatry* 24 (3) pp. 231-234.

26 Barker, J and Rees, T *Developing School Leadership* in Lock, S and Bennett, T (eds) *The Research Ed Guide to Leadership*. London: John Catt

dialogue.

We need to develop systems of meaning that provide more access to theoretical knowledge than the weakly classified knowledge of competency-based programmes, with their focus only on the field of practice.

We need to build secure mental models based on a body of knowledge, so that trust leaders are not just able to contribute to society's conversations about schooling, but actively shape them. We must begin to classify the knowledge required to lead school trusts as a field of study.

Creating the conditions for the system to keep getting better

As we build our school system in England, we need to ensure that we have created the conditions for the system to keep getting better. I think building strong and resilient organisations is part of this. We need to develop strong, evidence-informed conceptual models of quality and improvement that can be shared.

The sector has history of working together, for example in loose groups or networks but these have often failed to be precise enough about what we want to do when we come together and/or connect people to each other. This is one of the reasons why we sometimes fail to demonstrate the impact of groups or networks. We need to become much more precise about the ways in which we build professional knowledge and expertise.

We also need to be explicit about the field of school and trust improvement. This is a complex, adaptive system so we need to think about how the way that professionals interact with one another leads to emergent models of improvement, professional knowledge, and expertise. We need to build collectively a discourse of doing improvement at scale across a group of schools.

In a mature system, a stronger institutional professional architecture would foster self-determination and lead to self-improvement in the sense that the sector would develop strong, evidence-informed conceptual models of quality and improvement.

We need leaders who have the expertise and professional will and generosity to contribute to system improvement as a form of system building. In this way, we will leverage leadership of the school system and enable the vastly more powerful and sustainable school system to be born.

An overview of the new domains of educational leadership

	The narrative and purpose	The focus of collaboration	The focus of activity
Organisational leadership	How we talk about ourselves and our organisations, what we do and why we do it – to advance education for public benefit.	Create the conditions for deep collaborations among teachers and leaders to improve the quality of education.	Internal – looking down into our organisation to secure improvements in the quality of education.
Civic leadership	How we work with other civic actors to advance education as a wider common good.	Create the conditions for purposeful collaboration between and among trusts and other civic organisations.	External – looking up and out and working with others to ensure coherent public services that the collective actions of all civic actors protect high-quality education.
System leadership	How we act <i>on</i> , rather than just acting <i>in</i> the system.	Create the conditions for collective system-building.	External/ system-focused – how we deliberately engage in system-building – locally, regionally and/or nationally. The system leader fosters collective leadership to build local and/or regional systems.





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