

# Lessons in trust-led school improvement

A synthesis of evidence from  
system leaders



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## Foreword

This report marks an important milestone in our journey to understand and grow the evidence around how school trusts effectively lead improvement across groups of schools.

What emerges is that trusts, each with distinctive contexts and challenges, have shown considerable innovation, creativity, and adaptability in their approaches. This report seeks not to prescribe rigid methods but rather to capture common themes and promising practices, laying a foundation for shared learning across the sector.

A striking finding is the emphasis on the necessity of curating clear goals, starting with a shared definition of quality that aligns strategic direction with operational realities. We see that alignment – whether constant or adaptive – depends on nuanced decision-making and collaborative processes. Importantly, evidence-informed practice and rigorous, supportive evaluation processes appear to be central in guiding these decisions, underscoring the importance of internal and external evidence integration tailored to each trust's unique circumstances.

Building capability and capacity has similarly emerged as pivotal, with trusts prioritising professional development, strategic identification of effective practice within the trust, and intentional cultivation of culture and leadership. The strength of subject and specialist networks across trusts highlights the powerful role of collective expertise, not only among teaching staff but increasingly extending across support staff, enriching the wider educational culture and environment.

In many trusts implementing improvement initiatives relies on establishing clear, cyclical processes. Proactive anticipation and management of potential challenges, coupled with thoughtful de-implementation practices, further illustrate the dynamic and reflective nature of successful trust-led improvement.

This report affirms that while there is no single "recipe" for trust-led school improvement, the conceptual model developed by CST offers a robust framework for understanding, comparing, and evolving improvement practices across the sector. It invites us all – leaders, practitioners, and policymakers – to continue contributing to a shared knowledge base, supporting each other to enhance educational opportunities for every child, in every school.

On that note, this report arrives in the context of a government that is rightly keen to point to the benefits of collaboration in the education system. The insights in this report – as well as the fact of its existence – are testament to the maturing depth of collaboration within England's trust sector. Quite simply, this report would not have been possible without the engagement of trusts committed to working in partnership to improve education for all children. Collaboration to support school improvement is not some mystical land ahead of us in the distance. We're already walking this path, though of course there is more for us to do together.

I extend my sincere thanks to all the trusts whose contributions have enriched our understanding. I hope you find the contents of this report useful and that it further nourishes and extends the work of this fabulous community of school trusts and what they achieve for the children they serve.

**Steve Rollett**  
**Deputy Chief Executive, Confederation of School Trusts**



*Steve Rollett, Deputy Chief Executive, Confederation of School Trusts*

## Key themes: what have we learned from our submissions to date?

It was in March 2023 that we first convened an inquiry of trust leaders and academic experts to examine the evidence behind how school groups lead improvement at scale.

The inquiry was quick to recognise that there is a wealth of research into improvement at school level, but the evidence base for how school trusts should approach improvement was much more limited. We also found that the ways trusts talked about school improvement varied considerably, making it hard to compare practices across trusts.

To address this, in summer 2024 we ran a call for evidence, based on the conceptual model, asking for trusts across England to share their school improvement model and the practices they implement. For all these trusts, we specified that they must have a sustained record of school improvement, included as part of the submission. We received submissions from trusts serving more than 1,200 schools.

In the sections that follow we bring together themes from those submissions, framed by the three strands of the conceptual model. This includes the case studies published on the School Improvement Hub website, comments made through the submission process, and additional interviews and materials produced by submitters.

As the process involved trusts submitting evidence on their improvement processes, these themes are not intended to provide conclusive evidence on what does or does not work in improving across groups of schools. But they do represent recurring trends across trusts with a strong track record in improving school performance. With this mind, we hope there will be aspects that resonate in your context.

### Curate clear goals

Within this strand, we identified some themes that were consistent across nearly all submissions, and others that varied significantly.

One core theme was that a **shared definition of quality** was generally a non-negotiable starting point. To enable effective improvement, there needs to be a shared understanding of what good would look like. Some trusts have developed this into specific rubrics for teaching and learning; others have been more open – at Windsor Academy Trust for example they have codified “set plays” in areas such as student engagement or curriculum.

Similarly, **strategic** alignment was also seen as essential but **operational** alignment depended on trust context. At one end, Northern Education Trust sees themselves as effectively “one school across



many sites”; others, such as Cabot Learning Federation provide more discretion and local decision making around teaching and learning approaches, though with shared principles.

The use of evidence was also seen as crucial by most trusts. Particularly important here was **matching external evidence with strong internal understanding**. In other words, it was not simply enough to use evidence from the Department for Education or Education Endowment Foundation; this needed to be assessed and implemented against local context. In Danes Education Trust, for example, schools are supported to conduct externally reviewed studies of pilot initiatives, before rolling out.

Finally, this was coupled with evaluation of insights. The depth of data scrutiny and shared systems did vary across trusts. But a relatively consistent theme was the importance of **rigorous conversations about performance, starting from a place of support**. At Inspire Learning Partnership for example, weekly coaching sessions with school leaders are used to collate information shared with the trust executive on a half-termly basis – in this way insights can be generated from bottom-up conversations.

## Build capability and capacity

The vast majority of trusts prioritised **subject and domain specific professional development** over generalist support. There were a variety of different subject and domain networks used across trusts, with regular meetings and opportunities for in-person collaboration. In many trusts it was seen as a strength that these could also be offered to non-teaching staff and to those with more discrete specialisms.

Submissions emphasised the importance of **systematic approach to identifying “bright spots”** rather than generalised best practice. Westcountry Schools Trust has grounded this in particular techniques they were looking to see in lessons; practitioners that were showing especially strong practice in those specific methods could therefore be easily identified.

Some but not all trusts had made use of **matching schools to statistical neighbours**. This was seen as particularly helpful for small schools or those serving discrete communities; rather than general best practice recommendations being made, ensuring advice and support offered was provided by school leaders in contextually similar circumstances increased the likelihood of it sticking. Lighthouse Schools Partnership, for example, see this connecting schools function as a crucial part of their role.

Finally, even in trusts that take different approaches to school agency and alignment, almost all felt it was important to **codify culture and ethos**. For example, ASSET Education has deployed a “complete human strategy” which aims to bring together commitments and principles that apply equally across staff and pupils.

## Implement improvement initiatives

A starting point for this was the central importance of an **understood school improvement and review cycle**. While the specific cadences of this varied – from rapid half-termly reviews to annual cycles to priority by priority planning – having the key touchpoints throughout the year clearly understood was a common theme across trusts.

Trusts also demonstrated **creative approaches to pooling capacity and leveraging expertise**. This allows them to get the maximum benefit for pupils by ensuring that talented staff have a trust-wide impact. For example, WISE Academies creates

regular trust-wide secondments, with each role lasting a year. These are open to all staff, not just teachers, and gives people an opportunity to lead across the trust.

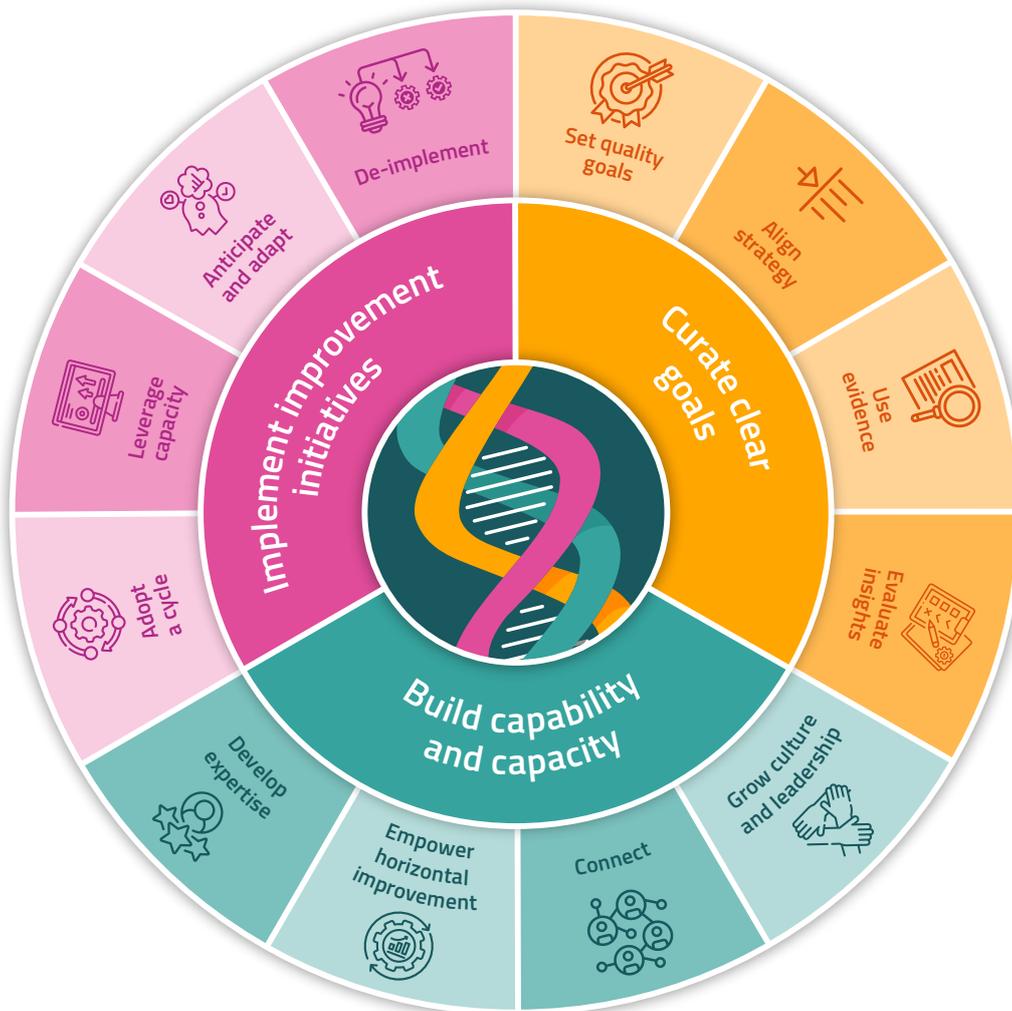
A focus on **predicting, not just reacting** to potential issues also marked out many trusts. As one example, many trusts had thought about how they might manage vacancies in specialist subjects such as science, brokering curriculum resources where they are most needed where schools may have fewer in-house specialists. At SHARE Multi-Academy Trust, significant time has been invested in reviewing potential early indicators of exclusion to pre-empt their underlying causes.

Finally, **innovation and de-implementation** were seen as operating hand in hand across many trusts. While not all trusts were equally as proactive in de-implementing initiatives, where this it was most embedded it tended to be alongside recognising this as working hand-in-hand with innovation. In Ted Wragg Trust, for example, they are innovating their approach to transition across all their schools; once finalised, they are clear that de-implementation of previous approaches will be needed in order to enable this.

In the subsequent sections, we highlight these themes in each area of the conceptual model, providing examples and referring back to supporting resources for further exploration.



# The CST conceptual model of school improvement



The conceptual model is structured as a triple helix consisting of three strands:

- **Curate clear goals**

This strand is about defining clear purposes, strategies and goals so you know what you're aiming for and how you how you plan to get there.

- **Build capability & capacity**

This strand is about shaping the people, culture & capacity within the organisation, in order to create the conditions for sustainable improvement.

- **Implement improvement initiatives**

This strand is about the ongoing process of implementing improvement, iterating and refining as plans are enacted.

It is important to understand the model does not seek to specify what a trust might seek to improve within its schools, but rather it outlines the key aspects of how a school improvement process, strategy or model is enacted within the trust. Accordingly, it does not

assert that particular aspects of school practice, such as curriculum, pedagogy and behaviour should be improved (though a trust might determine they should be).

This allows the model to 'speak to' improvement models and strategies that span the potentially infinite range of things a school or trust could seek to improve. If a trust thinks the curriculum, for example, is central to school improvement, then this would be reflected in various components within the model, including how the trust defines it's conception of quality and improvement goals. It could also flow into other aspects of the model. For example, there might be considerations linked to school culture that are pertinent to curriculum improvement, or the development of expertise.

Essentially, the model is intended to help trusts trace a pathway from what their improvement model/strategy intends to address to a holistic consideration of how they do this.

# Curate clear goals

## Set quality goals

### A shared definition of quality as a starting point

Most – if not all – trusts we engaged with believe that it's essential to establish a shared definition of quality across all schools. Even where curriculums are not fully aligned, trusts will ensure that there is alignment when it comes to teaching and learning best practice.

"We call it collaboration with teeth," says Chris Gould, deputy CEO at Truro and Penwith Academy Trust. "Being really clear what are the things you're working on. What is your challenge? What is your problem? What are you trying to address?"

Increasingly, trusts are choosing to set out their definition of quality in a teaching and learning rubric. The rubric delineates the trust's approach to education, often divided up into key areas of pedagogy, such as curriculum, attendance, reading or behaviour. Often – though not always – this is interactive, and housed on the trust's intranet or shared drive.

The trusts' rubrics tend to share common features. These include links to evidence-informed research, practical classroom tips and further reading. They may also include recommended teaching resources or techniques, as well as case studies of best practice from across the trust.

Not all trusts use a rubric – but they do tend to draw on many of the same elements to define quality. At Windsor Academy Trust, the codified approach to areas such as attendance, curriculum and student engagement is referred to as a series of "set plays". The set play in each area will ask questions such as "What is student engagement and why does it matter?", "Where are we now?" and "Where do we want to be?" Then it breaks down its strategies into evidence-based areas of focus, with practical ideas for implementation.

"It's an induction programme in how we define excellence," says Dan Owen, Windsor Director of Education.



### Case study: The Ark Model

Ark's rubric – known as the Ark Model – was developed jointly over 18 months by the trust's central team, alongside school leaders and principals from its 39 academies. It sets out Ark's approach to all aspects of education – from its vision for excellence to the questions leaders should be asking, as well as strategies and resources to move the school forwards.

This project started with the belief that school improvement could be accelerated if schools were provided with clear information about the foundations that excellence is built on, and about the strategies that were working across Ark schools.

"We have always shared best practice across and between our schools," says Jane Witheford, Ark's director of standards and performance.

"But we wanted to build a model that helps schools to chart their own school-improvement path, with a recognition that 39 schools will not all need the same things at the same time."

### Supporting resources

- [Ark Model](#)
- [Windsor codified approach to improving attendance](#)
- [Windsor codified approach to student engagement](#)

## Align strategy

Strategic alignment essential; operational alignment can vary from trust to trust

Approaches to alignment vary – but there is universal acceptance that strategic alignment across a trust is desirable, in order to ensure colleagues are rowing in the same direction.

At one end of the spectrum, Northern Education Trust has complete alignment in across its schools, down to how lessons are structured and the resources that teachers use. All lessons follow the same format, from the teacher welcoming pupils into the classroom and putting a task into their hands to the fact that all marking is done during lesson time.

“Having a consistent school-improvement model, with a shared nomenclature and tried and tested systems, means that leaders and staff from across the trust can come together to implement the same systems at pace,” says Robert Tarn, chief executive of Northern Education Trust. “They may have never met each other, but they speak the same language. This can lead to a remarkable pace of transformation.”

At the other end of the spectrum, the extent of schools’ alignment within a trust depends on their individual circumstances. At SHARE Multi Academy Trust, practice ranges from complete alignment to local flexibility, depending on the issue.

Other trusts avoid determining their schools’ pedagogy, but find it useful to emphasise trust-approved best practice, particularly as they incorporate sponsored academies. For example, Cabot Learning Foundation, which has taken on a number of sponsored schools and schools in special measures provides a standardised curriculum for all its schools. However, this focuses on key milestones that children need to reach – the trust does not give schools lesson plans or determine what the specifics of the curriculum should look like.

Alignment across a trust is often not about imposition from ‘the centre’, but rather shared approaches being developed and agreed between peers, be that head teachers, subject leaders, or pastoral leads. This evidence suggests the need for a more nuanced understanding of concepts like autonomy, agency and alignment.

“Our subject networks come up with medium-term plans together,” says Sally Apps, Cabot’s secondary education director. “The expectation is that teachers take those and then think: how am I going to adapt that to my context and my locality?”



### Case study: Hatton Academies Trust

At Hatton Academies Trust, key stage 2 pupils were consistently underperforming in maths. After investigating the problem, trust leaders realised that pupils’ knowledge of basic maths principles was not sufficiently secure.

Because this was a trust-wide problem that needed to be tackled with some urgency, the trust introduced discrete “foundational maths” lessons in all of its schools. These lessons follow a set formula, which is used across all schools in the trust, down to the minute-by-minute structure of the lessons.

The format worked, resulting in significant improvement in key stage 2 maths across the trust. In 2023, 31 per cent of Hatton pupils achieved 25 out of 25 in their Year 4 multiplication test check. By June 2024, 48 per cent had achieved the same level. Nationally, the average is 34 per cent.

### Supporting resources

- [NET vision, values and school-improvement model](#)
- [Hatton foundational mathematics rubric](#)

## Use evidence

### Balancing robust external evidence with internal contextual understanding

All trusts have been keen to emphasise that their approach is evidence-informed, and that any strategies or resources recommended to teachers are backed by research. Trust rubrics refer to research findings – most commonly from the Department for Education or the Education Endowment Foundation – that back up recommended pedagogical approaches.

New strategies will often be piloted in one or two schools, and the central executive team will look for evidence of effectiveness before rolling it out across the rest of the trust.

At Danes Educational Trust, for example, all schools are funded to conduct one externally reviewed study every year.

Several trusts operate live databases so that school-specific data can be viewed not only in the school itself, but in a trust-wide context. This internal evidence is then used to drive decision making.

Setting clear success criteria often becomes a useful means for working through the combination of internal and external evidence.

Hatton Academies Trust noted that “we do not start any school improvement work unless we have set out a clear practically based goal that we can use as a measure of success in that area. Our goals must be articulated to all involved from the very start and come back to regularly as we implement and secure changes in our approach”.



### Case study: Danes Educational Trust

Two Danes schools recently piloted a study looking at improving attendance.

The schools were particularly concerned about those students whose attendance fell between 85 per cent and 92 or 93 per cent. These were the students whose attendance was low enough to affect their grades – but not low enough to attract multiagency intervention.

The trust looked into whether it was possible to quantify to students: “If you are away from school for X many days, X will happen to your academic performance.”

Using key stage 3 performance data, Danes was able to project what students’ GCSE maths grades should be if they attended school regularly. It was then able to compare these projected grades with the actual maths grades that students with low levels of attendance were on track to receive.

Using these two sets of numbers, the trust was then able to tell students the effect that low levels of attendance would have on their GCSE grades. This data was shared with parents.

Danes CEO Josephine Valentine described the study as “a Damascene moment” for some of the pupils involved.



## Evaluate insights

### Evaluation for rigorous but supportive conversations about performance and quality

Trusts often have a system for assessing individual schools' performance against those agreed quality markers, often involving elements of self-assessment by schools.

Windsor Academy Trust conducts school-improvement summits in every school: a series of highly structured lesson observations, with a specific area of focus linked to the trust's set plays. By the time all the individual school summits are concluded, members of the trust executive will have spent more than 60 hours observing classroom teaching. This allows the central team not only to provide improvement goals to individual schools, but also to spot trends and areas of challenge on a trust-wide level.

At Danes Educational Trust there is a quality-assurance process based on seven key performance indicators: curriculum depth and breadth; subject knowledge; pedagogy; marking and assessment; inclusion; attitude to learning and behaviour; engagement and joy. These seven performance indicators are then broken down into 41 different areas for schools to consider. The review of these 41 areas enables each school to come up with three to five improvement priorities for the year ahead.

And at Inspire Learning Partnership, weekly coaching sessions for school principals and executive principals are used to collate information that is then shared with the trust executive team on a half-termly basis. This information is used as a starting point for a review of the school's performance each half term: what went well? Where is greater support needed?



### Case study: Robus Multi Academy Trust

Robust Multi Academy Trust has taken a long-term approach to school improvement, embedding collaborative research projects which span a minimum of three years. These are then carefully evaluated to understand impact.

For example, in the last academic year their focus was on metacognition. Careful attention was paid to establishing a shared understanding of why metacognition should be a focus and what was meant by metacognition. A computer-based baseline assessment was used to understand metacognitive skills in learners, which was supplemented by assessments from teachers.

While still at an early stage, this approach has meant that there is an effective baseline to measure progress, that variance between assessments can be acted on, and that there is a shared language to discuss what effective learning looks like.

### Supporting resources

- [SHARE attendance strategy](#)
- [Windsor student engagement: lesson-visit tool](#)

# Build capability and capacity

## Develop expertise

### Prioritising subject and domain specific professional development

Most – if not all – trusts run subject networks, allowing subject specialists across all their schools to come together. Networks meet regularly – usually termly or half-termly – so members can share best practice and devise joint solutions to common challenges. In some cases, these networks are for subject leaders; in other trusts, all practitioners in a given subject join. Equally, in some trusts, the networks are led by a member of the central executive; in others, this role is offered as a professional-development opportunity to a subject leader or teacher.

Most trusts also provide subject-specific professional-development sessions. Ark Schools, for example, offers every teacher in its 39 academies 10 training days a year. For three of these days, all Ark schools shut, so staff can take part in cross-trust training. Teachers come together in subject-network groups for training relevant to their subject; principals, vice-principals and other leaders also come together in groups.

This learning does not need to be limited to subject specialisms. At Cabot Learning Foundation, every member of school staff – whether teaching or non-teaching – is in a trust-wide network specific to their area of expertise; all safeguarding leads will be in the safeguarding network, for example, and all office managers are in the office-manager network. Meanwhile, WISE Academies seconded teachers from a number of schools to create the WISE Memorable Moments programme of large-scale trust events.

In addition, a number of trusts use coaching triads to support staff development. As with peer coaching, coaching triads involve working with colleagues, rather than professional coaches. However, instead of working in pairs, they work in groups of three, with each member taking on the role of coach, coachee and observer in turn.

Many submissions noted the link between professional development for teachers and the cultivation of a high-performance culture. For example, St Joseph Catholic Multi Academy Trust provides regular coaching for teachers on a fortnightly basis and trained “instructional coaching champions”.



### Case study: Creative Learning Partnership Trust

Creative Learning Partnership Trust has taken a deliberate approach to developing expertise. Leaders from all subject/provision areas now meet termly in their networks to discuss quality, and have created two-sided documents that set out quality in each area. “We’ve stopped writing long policies that people don’t read”, says Jonathan Keay, Deputy CEO – this focus on brief definitions helps avoid potential rabbit holes.

School improvement partners visits in the trust then involve talking out loud about what they see and how this measures up to the conceptions of quality we have written – with coaching from the lead reviewer, teachers and leaders then establish strengths and next steps.

Finally, all trust headteachers are invited to take on an additional project leadership role each term – they offer 10 days of their time and work alongside experts to gain deeper knowledge and devise new approaches to common trust problems.

### Supporting resources

- [Inspire Learning Partnership education strategy](#) – introduction to coaching triads on page 20

## Empower horizontal improvement

### A systematic approach to identifying good practice “bright spots”

Horizontal improvement is about improving across the group simultaneously, rather than working only ‘one school at a time’. To facilitate this trusts have found it useful to establish a shared understanding of what good teaching and learning looks like.

Many trusts have therefore introduced a set of features of effective classroom practice. For example, Westcountry Schools Trust has identified five teaching techniques that it wants to see in lessons across its secondary schools: something that is increasingly referred to as “house-style teaching”.

And Ark Schools devised a Great Teacher Rubric (GTR), intended as a path Ark teachers can follow to great teaching. The GTR is divided into five strands: climate for learning; planning and preparation; teaching and learning; assessing and responding; and professionalism. These are then subdivided into substrands reflecting teachers’ stages of development: attempting; foundational; proficient; and exemplary. The GTR provides an overview of practice for each stage of development.

Some trusts use these frameworks to inform evaluative activities such as classroom observation. In many cases, they also have their own set of descriptors to evaluate practice, ensuring that all schools speak a common language of improvement. At White Rose Academies Trust, for example, practice is defined as one of: highly assured, assured, action/attention or intervention. Most have deliberately chosen to avoid adjectives used by Ofsted, such as “outstanding”.

“If we can provide space and time to work effectively together, putting in place strong systems and processes, then we can ensure no colleagues or schools will be left behind,” says Director of School Improvement Nicola Widnal.



### Case study: Windsor Academy Trust

Each year, the Windsor executive team decides on a specific area to focus on during its “school summits”: annual lesson observation and feedback sessions. Within these areas of focus, school leaders are invited to determine the emphasis of their own summit.

The executive team and school leaders decide which classrooms to visit, often including potential exemplars for the trust. “I’m a hunter-gatherer of bright spots,” says Sonya Lanckham, Deputy Director of Education.

The summits themselves are highly structured, with designated roles for each observer, each of whom takes up a pre-agreed position in the classroom. And an observation checklist guarantees that all members of the team focus on the same areas – ensuring that the data is replicable.

At the end of the summit – once all classroom observations are complete – the team comes together to synthesise its findings. Individual and subject-based feedback is a byproduct of the summit, rather than its purpose – the aim is to spot trends across the school and, more broadly, across the trust as a whole.

### Supporting resources

- [Ark Great Teacher Rubric – an introduction](#)
- [White Rose: Effective self-evaluation – guiding principles](#)
- [Windsor Academies Trust student engagement: lesson-visit tool](#)

## Connect

### Matching schools to “nearest neighbours”, helping change to stick

One of the aims of cross-trust leader and subject networks is to enable teachers and leaders who hold similar roles in different schools to form professional alliances. This allows them to come up with joint solutions to common challenges – and also means that teachers and leaders who have successfully surmounted these challenges can offer advice.

One feature of several trusts we profiled including thinking about how to develop models of school similarity. This means that where leaders are encountering challenges, they can work with colleagues who are dealing with contextually similar issues.

Where trusts include schools in rural areas, with no immediate neighbours, the central team can link up two of its schools with similar intakes and challenges – sometimes at different ends of the country. Similarly, linking small schools with larger schools that can offer support or resources can help to extend limited capacity.

Truro and Penwith Academy Trust groups its schools into triads, with leaders from each school visiting the other two on a termly basis. This allows schools of different sizes – and catering to different communities – to learn from how they’re each meeting the trust’s universal offer.



### Case study: Lighthouse Schools Partnership

One of Lighthouse’s primary academies, a two-form-entry school with falling rolls, reported that it was considering introducing mixed-age classes at key stage 1. The trust’s central team itemised the curriculum support that it could put in place for mixed-age classes. And it was also able to point staff to a nearby trust school that used the same model and was achieving excellent results with it.

Lighthouse believes that connecting schools with a similar demographic of pupils and the same strategies and teaching methods is a key part of its role. “The school up the road has a similar number of pupils and the same curriculum,” says Neil Lankester, Director of School Improvement. “We all go to the same headteacher meetings. So then a headteacher thinks: what can I learn from them, because we have that commonality across the trust?”

### Supporting resources

- Inspire Learning Partnership middle leaders’ development programme – sample session



## Grow culture and leadership

The value of codifying culture and ethos, even in trusts with different philosophies

Most trusts agree that developing a strong culture helps to create a sense of the trust as a cohesive whole. To this end, Windsor Academies Trust has developed its own trust language: instead of “network” or “trust”, it refers to “our family”; instead of a central team, it has an education directorate. ASSET Education, meanwhile, has launched what its “Complete human strategy”: a model that identifies six key areas that boost wellbeing for staff and pupils, and provides a detailed guide to implementing it in any school.

Staff retention is key to a strong trust culture. Many trusts are therefore keen to demonstrate that talented staff can progress professionally without having to leave the trust. A number of trusts publish career-pathways documents, setting out potential career goals, as well as the training staff would need to achieve these goals. WISE Academies replaced staff appraisals with a conversation about career aspirations and professional growth.

Where talented staff have been identified, but there are not yet any relevant posts to offer them, WISE has also created “aspiring” positions – so, for example, a talented deputy headteacher might be appointed as an “aspiring headteacher”.

Other trusts run CPD sessions specifically for aspiring leaders, partly to develop their skills and partly as a talent-scouting exercise for the trust. Inspire Learning Partnership runs an annual course for middle leaders, with areas of focus including what it means to be a leader and how leaders live by their vision and values. Kernow Learning designed an Aspirant Headteachers programme for talent identified within their schools: two of the twelve are now successful headteachers within the trust. At Inspire Partnership Academy Trust, they deliberately invested in external expertise where relevant to strengthen leadership across their network.

Culture also manifests directly through approaches to teaching and learning: for example, Rainbow Education Multi-Academy Trust has published a set of principles around curriculum, pedagogy, behaviour, inclusion, professional development, assessment and ethical leadership.



### WISE Academies

As part of their induction to WISE Academies, new members of staff are presented with a copy of the Little Purple Book.

The book sets out the trust’s values, as well as the specific behaviours associated with those values. So, for example the behaviours associated with the value of “partnership” include: “We work together”, “We listen and learn” and “We are accessible”.

The Little Purple Book also outlines the tone that staff should use (“Knowledgeable but not patronising”) when interacting with pupils, parents and the outside world.

The Little Purple Book has become an integral part of any discussion about an individual’s professional growth: how are they able to contribute to the culture outlined in the book?

“The purple book helps us talk about how to inspire success and excellence, drawing on everyone’s strengths,” says WISE CEO Zoe Carr.

### Supporting resources

- [WISE Academies: The Little Purple Book](#)
- [WISE Academies: Professional growth policy](#)
- [ILP: Accountable talk](#)
- [ILP: Action-learning overview](#)
- [White Rose Academies Trust: Leader networks proposal, 2024-25](#)

# Implement improvement initiatives

## Adopt a cycle

### A regular and understood school improvement and review cycle

A number of trusts follow an annual school-improvement cycle. This often begins with a review in the autumn term, which then leads to improvement decisions that are subsequently put into practice through the year. For example, Windsor Academies Trust conducts its “school summits” – trust-wide structured lesson observations – throughout the autumn term. By the end of this process, trust leaders have spent more than 60 hours observing classroom teaching. They are then able to synthesise findings and take improvement decisions, for individual schools and also the trust as a whole.

By contrast, ASSET Education’s cycle is much briefer: every half term, the trust surveys pupils and staff on one of its six strategic pillars. It also sends out questions for families to reflect on. The central team then analyses the results of the survey, using them to make any adjustments necessary. Where particular challenges emerge, the trust will launch a full review of all six pillars.

Other trusts choose to pilot new initiatives in a small number of schools, so as to allow for evaluation and reflection before the initiative is rolled out to the rest of the trust. Some ask for volunteers to pilot a new initiative; others choose a representative sample from among their schools.

Josephine Valentine, CEO of Danes Educational Trust, imported a similar cycle from her pre-teaching career in hospital research. “This idea that you have a hypothesis, you pilot it, review it, evaluate it and roll it out appropriately – or abandon it,” she says. “That’s been my model, because I’m a scientist. I followed that model when I was a headteacher, and it’s been the model we have rolled out across all new initiatives in the trust.”

Ensuring shared calendars, rhythms and touchpoints that support these planning cycles is crucial. For example at the White Rose Academies Trust, they host half termly Leader Networks which bring role-specific leaders together to wrestle with a specific area identified for improvement and collectively address shared goals. Alongside this, a half termly Academy Development and Improvement Forum is devoted to the provision of high-quality leadership development and codifying effective practice.



### Ted Wragg Trust

Using the EEF’s approach to effectively implementing improvement initiatives, Ted Wragg has introduced an annual review cycle. From September through to December, the trust reviews current practice in partnership with its headteachers. Next, the team explores what its strategic priorities should be for the current academic year. During this phase, the trust will take all its headteachers on a study tour to a different city, where they will visit local schools. In consultation with headteachers, the central team then develops strategies for the year ahead. These are implemented during the summer term, before the cycle begins all over again.

The cycle is not always linear: for example, as they develop new strategies, the central team may realise that they need to extend the exploratory phase. And some projects – such as recent work on developing relationships with families – extend the cycle over two academic years, to allow initiatives to embed properly before they are reviewed and evaluated.

### Supporting resources

- [Ted Wragg Trust annual cycle](#)

## Leverage capacity

### Creative approaches to pooling capacity and seconding expertise

All trusts recognise the value of ensuring that teachers in different schools across the trust are able to learn from one another. This often takes the form of shared CPD – Ark, for example, closes all 39 of its schools simultaneously for three days of the year, so that staff can take part in cross-trust training. Other trusts ask particularly effective teachers to submit resources or classroom videos to a trust-wide intranet.

This emphasis on shared capacity can be particularly beneficial for smaller schools. At Lighthouse Schools Partnership, for example, there are five schools with 100 pupils or fewer. Rather than creating a curriculum for every subject, the headteachers of these schools are able to draw on the collected expertise of the 30 schools in the trust. Working at scale also means that any new curriculum design can be tailored to suit the requirements of bigger and smaller schools in a trust, including any mixed-age classes.

Some trusts also have talent-scouting exercises in place, enabling the central team to identify high potential teachers. For example, Inspire Learning Partnership runs an annual programme for middle leaders, which doubles as a talent-spotting opportunity. Then, if a school approached trust leaders needing a particular skill, they would be able to identify the appropriate middle leader to help.

The Diocese of Salisbury Academy Trust aims to base its professional learning offer in diagnostic assessment of the need of each academy – this helps map capacity where it is most needed, and which academies may be able to provide support.



### WISE Academies

WISE Academies creates regular trust-wide secondments, with each role lasting a year. Talented school staff members apply for the opportunity to deliver programmes across the trust. For example, when Ofsted's 2019 framework brought curriculum to the fore, WISE advertised across the trust for nine curriculum leads who had previously developed their own curriculum ideas. Successful applicants were released from their role for one day a week to support trust curriculum thinking and to develop curriculum materials.

Secondments are open to all trust staff, not just teachers. A teaching assistant who was involved in bringing the Outdoor Play and Learning programme to key stages 1 and 2 at their school was asked to support the development of outdoor play in other schools across the trust.

"It gives people an opportunity to lead across the trust," says WISE CEO, Zoe Carr. "It develops staff relationships and it builds the culture of the trust."

### Supporting resources

- [Lighthouse three-year curriculum plan](#)
- [WISE professional-growth policy](#)
- [Inspire middle leaders' development programme – sample session](#)

## Anticipate and adapt

### Predicting, not just reacting, to potential issues

As part of any cycle of implementation and improvement, most trusts will include an evaluation and review phase. This then allows for any new strategy to be adapted – or abandoned – as appropriate.

Some trusts use their knowledge of their own schools and contexts to anticipate and tackle problems before they arise. So, for example, a trust-wide commitment to science teaching could take into account the fact that some schools will have the capacity to teach all three subjects with separate specialists, whereas others will divide the three subject between two teachers. In the latter case, the trust would then offer curriculum resources and examples of best practice to support the schools with fewer teachers.

Trusts also anticipate the needs of staff, balancing the goals of the central team with the goals of individual teachers. For example, at SHARE Multi Academy Trust, individual English departments often had very strong feelings about which exam board they taught, which meant that it took a lot of time and effort to reach trust-wide consensus.

“As a result, we’ve got much better at communicating pros and drawbacks, and communicating who’s responsible for which decision,” says John McNally, SHARE CEO. “It’s about setting up the framework in the right way in the first place.”



### SHARE Multi Academy Trust

In common with schools around the country, SHARE academies are working to reduce exclusions, particularly among disadvantaged pupils. Staff have a series of red flags that they use to trigger an in-depth examination of what might be going on for a particular child. For example, if a student was excluded, that would lead to an investigation into everything from reading ability to underlying safeguarding concerns.

Rather than simply doing this on a case-by-case basis, however, the trust attempts to pre-empt the risk of exclusion – or similar sanctions – by anticipating underlying problems that might affect pupils. On Inset days, SHARE staff examine how to identify patterns of failure, so that they can explore potential underlying causes. Staff have been trained to anticipate pupil dysregulation and take action to address it before it escalates into problematic behaviour. SHARE senior leaders and pastoral leaders then patrol potential hotspots in their schools, seeking out pupils who may have arrived in school dysregulated or more generally out of sorts.

### Supporting resources

- [SHARE strategic plan](#)



## De-implement

### Innovation and de-implementation go hand in hand

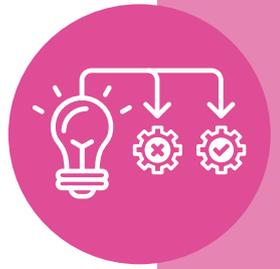
In trusts where innovation is emphasised, the approach is generally to pilot an idea, test its effectiveness and then roll it out across the trust – simultaneously abandoning any strategies that are not aligned with the new idea. At Northern Education Trust, a trust-wide teaching and learning task group meets once or twice a term to question what works and what doesn't, and to look at areas where innovation or change might be needed.

Ted Wragg Trust refers to this as “having a consistent core with disruptive innovations”. For example, Ted Wragg will be creating a structure for transition across all its schools. Each school will then de-implement its existing transition strategy in order to adopt the trust-wide version.

“It saves time and money,” says Siobhan Meredith, Executive Director of Education. “We draw on best practice across schools and use school leaders to contribute.”

Such changes are often part of a culture shift. For example, several trusts – Ted Wragg among them – have recently introduced coaching or professional-development interviews for staff – which meant abandoning previous methods of staff appraisal. In all cases, this marked a shift from a high-stakes, performance-led approach to an emphasis on professional growth.

The Elliot Foundation noted in their submission that the trust itself is a process in change over time: “Our model is not one of absolute goals as in destinations... our focus is on continuous improvement and continuous reassessment of priorities”. In this way innovation is seen not as peripheral to what a trust does, but a core part of its function.



### Northern Education Trust

Since 2017, pupils in all Northern schools have been taught in collaborative tables of four. Heads of maths across the trust recently began noting that this might be holding pupils back in their subject – their results have been lower than in English, bringing down the average trust score.

The heads of maths argued that they would prefer to put pupils in rows and teach from the front, only moving to collaborative groups when pupils were consolidating learning. So the trust commissioned an exploratory group to look at what form of instruction works best, at Northern and elsewhere.

The group will report back to a meeting attended by the trust executive team, as well as school and subject leaders from every Northern school. This will be followed by an all-day discussion session. Any decision taken will be immediately rolled out across all the schools in the trust.

### Supporting resources

- [NET vision, values and school-improvement model](#)

## Conclusion

We began by highlighting the importance of developing a conceptual model for trust-led school improvement. As this document has shown, this is far from a theoretical concern. The evidence we have gathered shows that trusts are deliberate in how they structure and support particular practices. Much of the academic literature on trusts is limited to notions of autonomy and control, but the evidence in this report shows that decisions made by trusts are often about more than an arbitrary expression of power. For example, choosing what to align, when to align it and how, and at what level to align, are complex decisions that trusts think about a great deal.

This means there is much more to know about how trusts approach school improvement. This report has scratched the surface, highlighting some of the practices undertaken by trusts with compelling records of school improvement. What emerges from this is not – and cannot be – a recipe for trusts to follow. It's clear from the evidence that trusts calibrate their approaches based on a range of factors, including context, geography, organisational maturity, and many others.

But what this report has shown is that by using CST's conceptual model as a common reference point we are better equipped to compare and contrast trust approaches. This will help the sector build knowledge to support professionals working in trusts to make education better for children. The more we can do to share from trusts with a sustained track record in transforming life chances for pupils – the better.

We are continuing to better document what we can learn about trust-led school improvement. Resources and materials are hosted on the School Improvement Hub, an open-access resource which showcases the practices used by trusts across England to lead school improvement.

But we would also invite you to be part of the conversation – whether by engaging with us at an event, sharing your own approach, or simply using the prompts from this report and our case study resources to reflect on your practice.

Thank you again to all the trusts who have submitted evidence for this important project; we look forward to continuing to profile your work in the months ahead.



## With thanks to

ASSET Education  
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Creative Learning Partnership Trust  
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Diocese of Salisbury Academy Trust  
Dixons Academies Trust  
E-ACT  
Ebor Academy Trust  
Education Learning Trust  
Ethos Academy Trust  
Focus-Trust  
Greenwood Academies Trust  
Hamwic Education Trust  
Hatton Academies Trust  
Inspire Learning Partnership  
Inspire Partnership Academy Trust  
Inspiring Futures through Learning  
Kernow Learning  
Learning in Harmony Trust  
Lighthouse Schools Partnership  
Lingfield Education Trust  
Manor Multi Academy Trust  
Matrix Academy Trust  
Northern Education Trust  
Oasis Community Learning  
Pendle Education Trust  
REAch2  
Rainbow Education Multi Academy Trust  
Reach South Academy Trust  
Robus Multi Academy Trust  
SHARE Multi Academy Trust  
Shaw Education Trust  
Sigma Trust  
St Joseph Catholic Multi Academy Trust  
Ted Wragg Trust  
The Black Pear Trust  
The Eden Academy Trust  
The Elliot Foundation  
The GLA Trust  
The Kemnal Academies Trust  
The LEARNERS' Trust  
The Marches Academy Trust  
The Mead Educational Trust  
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The Sir John Brunner Foundation  
Thinking Schools Academy Trust  
Truro Penwith Academy Trust  
Unity Schools Partnership  
University Schools Trust  
Vanguard Learning Trust  
Vision Academy Learning Trust  
WISE Academies  
Wellspring Academy Trust  
Westcountry Schools Trust  
White Rose Academies Trust  
Windsor Academy Trust



# 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](https://schoolimprovementhub.org)

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