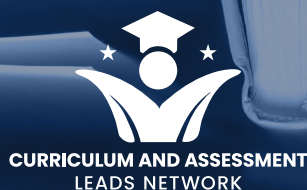


The challenge ahead

A collaborative response to the Curriculum and Assessment Review

Curriculum and Assessment Leads Network



February
2026



Confederation
of School Trusts

The voice of school trusts



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Foreword

School trusts are navigating a period of sustained reform alongside significant structural pressure. A wide-ranging programme of policy change is underway, touching every phase of education, and trusts are well placed to ensure that policy reform translates into meaningful improvement for children and young people.

This paper explores how the sector might respond to the [Curriculum and Assessment Review](#) published in November 2025. Legislation currently making its way through Parliament will apply the National Curriculum directly to academies for the first time. The review's conclusions, and the system's response to them, will therefore shape how curriculum, assessment, accountability and progression align over the coming years.

The Curriculum and Assessment Leads Network, facilitated by Unity Schools Partnership's Lauren Meadows and Creative Education Trust's Nimish Lad, make the case for a measured, evidence based, and collaborative, response to the Review's conclusions.

To put this into wider context, the Review has taken place amid substantial legislative and policy activity: the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill; a [new Ofsted inspection framework for schools](#) and the prospect of trust-level inspection; accountability arrangements through [RISE](#); and reforms to further and higher education in the [Post 16 education and skills white paper](#).

Further change is anticipated through a forthcoming schools white paper, alongside ongoing national debate about SEND and inclusion. Collectively, these developments position curriculum and assessment as central mechanisms through which policy ambition is realised in practice.

A purposeful, evidence based and collaborative response to the Review is essential. Curriculum is the connective tissue of the education system, influencing teaching and learning, shaping accountability, guiding progression and signalling what is valued. School trusts are uniquely placed to provide system leadership in this field. Operating at scale and across phases, trusts have direct insight into how curriculum and assessment expectations interact with workforce capacity, inspection, accountability and local context. Through collaboration within and between trusts, leaders can test approaches, share learning and support consistent, well sequenced implementation.

We recognise that many of the drivers shaping education in England sit outside the direct influence of schools and trusts, particularly where policy, funding, workforce supply and wider social conditions are concerned. At the same time, we see significant opportunity in the shared commitment to improvement, professional learning and inclusive practice that persists across the sector.

By treating the Review as a system shaping opportunity, trusts can help anchor wider reform and ensure change delivers lasting, system-wide benefit.

Steve Rollett
Deputy Chief Executive
Confederation of School Trusts



Introduction

The Curriculum and Assessment Leads Network brings together curriculum and assessment leaders from across trusts and schools to form a collaborative, cross-organisational partnership. The group was established to share our collective learning from within the system around curriculum development and assessment practices.

The network exists to create the time, space, and professional community needed for leaders to think deeply about the principles and practices of curriculum and assessment and how these can be reflected in our work with schools. We champion the sharing of sharp ideas, strong evidence, and effective approaches, offering clear thought leadership, practical guidance and authentic collaboration.

Our aim is to build collective capacity in the system so that leaders of curriculum and assessment can develop their practice to ensure coherence between what we teach and how we assess that students have learned this. By scaling solutions, spotlighting insights and strengthening professional knowledge, the Network supports leaders to secure professional meaningful learning, develop robust assessment practices and drive high-quality curriculum implementation system-wide.

Never before has it been more important to work in partnership with those around us. The changing landscape of education is rife with opportunity but also risk. Responding to the Curriculum and Assessment review, alongside accommodating a new inspection framework and the imminent schools white paper would be a huge undertaking for any single organisation. We are – in this moment – benefiting from the maturation of the trust sector, where authentic collaboration feels truly possible and where sector generosity has become the norm. Working together in this way affords us the opportunity to truly deliver the very best education for the collective group of young people that we serve.

Responding to the Curriculum and Assessment Review

Starting from the known-knowns

At this stage in the renewal of curriculum and assessment we know that some things are certain to change, but not necessarily how they are going to change. This moment gives us the opportunity to prepare thoughtfully, interrogate our current practice, and set up systems and structures that can adapt as more detail arrives.

We know, for instance, that there will be changes to the accountability measures, but we don't know exactly what these will look like. So, what can we do in the meantime? Examine whether our current KS3 offer is broad, balanced and learnt well, so that our pupils are ready for any suite of qualifications. The proposed entitlement to triple science at Key Stage 4 might compel us to consider our staffing and finance – what foundations can we lay now to ensure that we are ready to teach this when the time comes? On the curriculum front, while we know that programmes of study will be re-considered, we do not know what they will look like. Setting up groups of subject experts across a trust and sharing this expertise across multiples trusts will reduce replication of workload across schools.

In terms of HR, we know that we are likely to need more science teachers to deliver single science options in our secondary schools. If we know this now, we can begin considering how to strengthen the pipeline so that skilled staff feel ready to teach the new curriculum in September 2028.

Even proposals that currently lack finite detail can still guide our preparation. If digital and media literacy are to be elevated, we can invest in professional development that ensures staff are confident, competent and critical consumers. If financial literacy requires greater emphasis, we can ensure that sufficient curriculum time is allocated to PSHE and citizenship in future curriculum planning and that foundational mathematical knowledge is mastered by all pupils. As oracy becomes more central, we can explore when and how pupils currently get the chance to engage in purposeful and deliberate academic talk.

There are also some things for which waiting is the best option – these are our known-unknowns. We do not yet know what the new KS3 assessments will look like, or how teacher writing assessment will evolve. In these cases, our collective view is that the best thing we can do while we await further detail is teach English and maths really well in the meantime.

Be measured

In considering the Review and the subsequent government response, we have a real opportunity to create a climate of hope, professionalism and disciplined thinking. While policy will continue to adapt and move forward at pace, we as leaders will shape the culture in which these changes are understood and realised. Throughout



this reform, leaders across the system will set the weather: a climate that either supports thoughtful improvement or allows uncertainty to dominate.

As systems leaders, we play a central role in this. Positioned between national policy and school-level realities, our job is to act as translators, interpreters and stewards of coherence. Crucially, our response must be measured. As a collective, we have the opportunity to inoculate against knee-jerk reactions and show that meaningful responses will require hard thinking, professional compromise and, above all, authentic collaboration. By modelling calm deliberation and intellectual generosity, systems leaders will help staff view curriculum and assessment developments not as compliance exercises but as opportunities to deepen expertise and improve equity.

As a group, we also recognise the importance of leadership ecosystems. Trust leaders will need to nurture networks of subject expertise, encourage disciplined innovation and build cultures where teachers can engage critically with emerging expectations. It is our ambition to cultivate the conditions that allow professional judgement to flourish within any future landscape, ensuring that leaders at all levels are supported in the pursuit of purposeful curriculum development.

By setting the weather with intention and promoting coherence, shared endeavour and collective efficacy, we believe that this is an opportunity for long-term systems-level improvement. As a group, we will meet this moment with measured leadership, hopeful purpose and a commitment to collaboration.

Respond strategically

Let us be in no doubt that the English education system is a good system because we have built on the evidence of what works. If we are to build a great school system, then we must design it so that all our children flourish. This means putting those children for whom the system does not work, at the heart of system reform. It requires a gear change. – Leora Cruddas CBE, CST Annual Conference 2025¹

Undoubtedly, the Curriculum and Assessment Review is a unique opportunity for us to truly deliver on the ambition of all our children flourishing. It is one that should drive every action that we take and decision that we make in the sector. However, in order to maximise the many opportunities of the Review, it is vital that we give ourselves time and space to respond strategically and with deep thought. This is, after all, the element of our work that has the most impact on children. The message of what we teach and how we teach it – so that all young people can flourish – is key for all that hold an educational responsibility.

But it is broader than that; how will we encourage our HR teams, estates teams and



¹ <https://cstuk.org.uk/news-and-blogs/2025-annual-conference-speech-leora-cruddas>

IT teams to work together closely with our respective education teams to develop a provision that retains the best of what we know, whilst ensuring that we can respond to national reform? How will we ensure that the financial modelling needed for us to realise the necessary changes is considered in the wider picture of falling rolls and increased staffing costs? Starting that thinking now is key and the thinking needs to span the breadth of our work as school trusts.

It is perhaps helpful to exemplify this in the context of one aspect of the Review. Its report makes clear that embedding digital tools strategically is vital, helping to empower teachers and prepare learners for a rapidly evolving future. However, this will require significant investment, dedicated CPD time and a clear plan for implementation. Working with our IT teams to consider the digital infrastructure needed to deliver this in every school is just as important as working with our education team to ensure that this development is baked in, not bolted on. Our professional learning calendar will need to reflect the investment of time needed for leaders and teachers to translate this area of the reforms into the classroom. Of course, this also has significant implications for financial planning for several years ahead.

The review timescales give the sector time to plan and implement but it is important that we use this time to consider the scope of the work needed and engage with all stakeholders who will need to contribute. It is the level of strategic thinking and planning that will, we believe, determine the quality of our responses, not the pace of action.

In action: Unity Schools Partnership

At Unity Schools Partnership, we are using the spring term to conduct a scoping exercise. We have planned a series of Curriculum Conversations with key stakeholders from across our organisation to help us consider the implications of the review for all aspects of our work. This includes key conversations with our IT Director about digital infrastructure, our HR Director about recruitment, retention and people strategy and all layers of our teaching workforce. We have used key questions to help people prepare for these conversations, such as:

- *What support do you need to make sense of the Review in this area of work?*
- *What are the key bodies of evidence that we should be considering in our response?*
- *What lessons have we learned from previous work in this subject?*
- *What are the potential risks in the Review recommendations?*

We will synthesise our findings from this alongside the draft programmes of study published over the spring term to report back to our senior executive team and trust board our proposals for realigning our work around the recommendations of the review. In addition, we have asked schools to complete Integrated Curriculum Financial Planning models early so that we can make use of the full lead in time to implementation. Working in this way will allow us to plan systematically and strategically for how we will respond, ensuring that the infrastructure is there to support delivery when it is needed.

Lauren Meadows, Curriculum Development Director, Unity Schools Partnership

Shared language and common mental models

The word 'curriculum' means many things to many people. We believe that

curriculum covers the totality of student experiences in our schools – both what we have planned for and what arises through the culture and rhythm of the education journey. We need to establish a shared language around curriculum and assessment before we begin to respond to the Review. It is through this shared language that the opportunities for us to collaborate across the sector will arise. Alongside this, we can explore how we can create common mental models that underpin the first principles of curriculum and assessment design, so that work can be shared and critiqued across different organisations.

This level of thinking will help us to present a clear and coherent response to our teams – one that they recognise in cross-sector discourse and one that will form the bedrock of authentic collaboration at all levels. This does not mean the homogenisation of practice – it is abundantly clear from all that we have learned over the years that context is key. Sarah Cottingham (2025), for example, states that ‘The best mental models are situation sensitive’.² However, if a common mental model underpins the starting point for consideration, we believe that we will be better equipped to honour and celebrate the individual context of the schools that we represent.

In action: Creative Education Trust

At Creative Education Trust, our Curriculum and Assessment and Teaching and Learning framework sets out coherent structures that anchors a shared language, consistent principles, and high quality practice across the diverse contexts of our schools.

These frameworks not only collate and synthesise the wide base of educational research that informs teaching but also define the essential components of effective curriculum design and pedagogy. These create the common mental models that enable meaningful collaboration and critique across organisations. By establishing aligned expectations, while still respecting the situational sensitivity of our settings, we ensure that teams can work together within and across schools, with clarity and confidence, strengthening professional dialogue and creating space for contextual nuance.

Nimish Lad, Director of Curriculum Development, Creative Education Trust

Collaboration is key

The sector is rife with talent. There are individuals, groups and organisations achieving amazing things and reimagining what we believe to be possible in educational terms. However, it is rare to find an organisation that has all of the expertise that it might need at any given moment. The Curriculum and Assessment Leads Network has undertaken to bring organisations together to share thinking but also, share resource. As part of our inaugural event ‘The Big Think’ we have asked attendees which areas of work they feel they could share thinking, capacity and resource in so that we can build up a picture across the country of where others can go to seek support. Working in this way ensures that all young people have access to the very best thinking in different fields.

Effective collaboration begins with establishing shared mental models so that we are able to have meaningful professional discussion. It also means translating these mental models into strong approaches that are distinctive to our contexts and demographics. The [Challenge Partners](#) network is one example of how

² Cottingham, S (2025). ‘[5 things to know about mental models](#)’. *Cognitive Coaching*.

we can harness the power of peer networks for supporting quality assurance and self-evaluation. The CALN seeks to create similar models of peer review in curriculum and assessment so that we can collaboratively sense-check thinking and development activity as it progresses. In responding to the review, we will need to act as critical friends across the sector, rooting our discussions in strong evidence and an understanding of context.

Sharing expertise in this way enables us to work dynamically as a network, hearing the nuanced and complex way in which many of us have approached implementation with our schools so that we can learn from such experiences and collectively evolve as an eco-system. This speaks to the power of the trust dividend: collating multiple mental models for both curriculum and implementation at scale, identifying what worked and harnessing that for latest reform. It's how we get better, together, quicker for children in our schools.

Making best use of evidence

The Review does not suggest that we start from scratch. Instead, it is a call to curate the best of what we know and do so that all schools can benefit from a refreshed offer that is rooted in evidence about what works in the classroom. To this end, the sector has plenty of sources of evidence to support our thinking. The drive towards evidence-informed practice in recent years has been a welcome one and positions us well to draw on robust research rather than pursuing new or untested solutions.

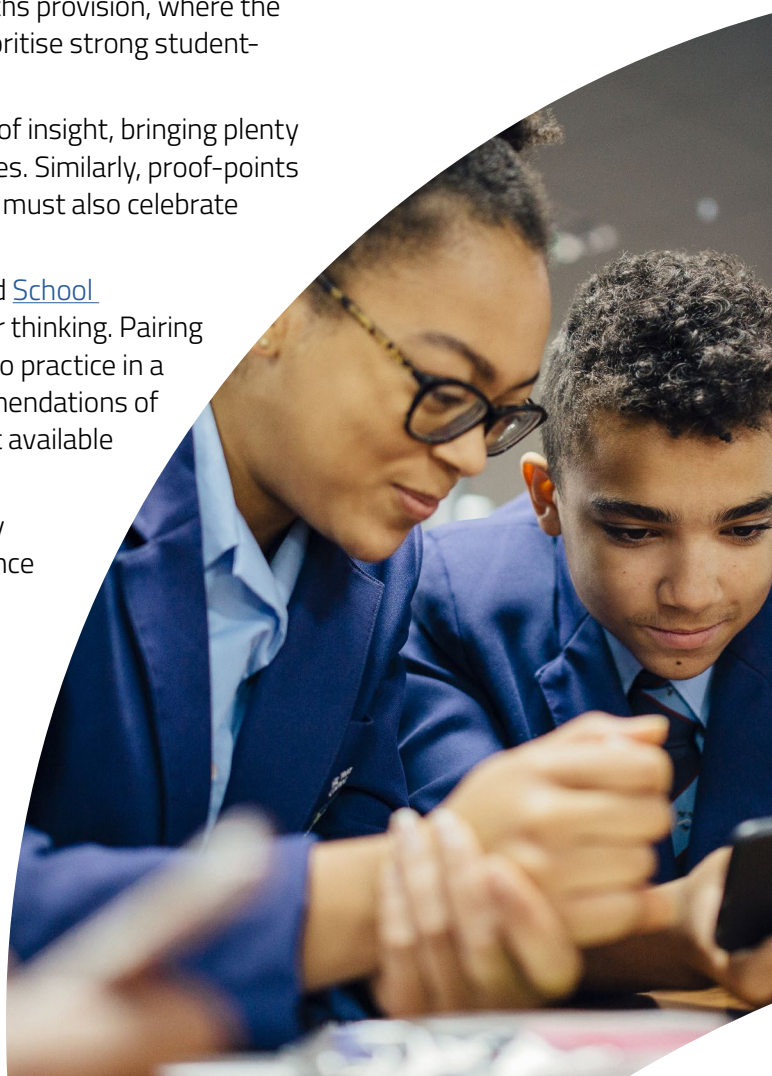
Research organisations have done sterling work in drawing together evidence from across a range of studies and making it digestible for school leaders. It is our ambition to lean into this evidence to inform our responses. Examples might lie in oracy practice, where the [Education Endowment Foundation's curation of studies on oral language interventions](#) points to the importance of integrating its development into existing subject curricula or in post-16 English and maths provision, where the [Education Policy Institute's reporting](#) encourages us to prioritise strong student-staff relationships at the start of the year.

The [Research Schools Network](#) will be another key source of insight, bringing plenty of expertise in testing and distilling best practice approaches. Similarly, proof-points from schools with great outcomes can guide us, where we must also celebrate context and focus on learning from similar schools.

The [CST School Improvement Professional Community](#) and [School Improvement Hub](#) will undoubtedly be a cornerstone of our thinking. Pairing expert advice with tangible examples of how to put this into practice in a trust context, this community will help us distil the recommendations of the review into actionable strategy, making use of the best available evidence to guide our thinking.

However we respond to the updated programmes of study and changes to assessments, we must lean into the evidence around effective implementation, including the [EEF's Implementation Guidance](#). It is our role as systems leaders to ensure that cross-cutting behaviours and contextual factors are attended to when planning implementation. A new curriculum, scheme of work, or pedagogical approach will take time and careful consideration to implement effectively.

By drawing on voices and insights from research bodies, trusts and schools as we respond to draft and final



versions of the curriculum, it is our collective aim to ensure that evidence remains paramount in UK curriculum thinking.

Voices from the classroom

Whilst a focus on the leadership of curriculum and assessment is key, it is important to hold in mind that learning occurs in the classroom under the careful guidance of classroom teachers and practitioners.

Teachers have direct experience of what translates well into the classroom; they can bring valuable insight into how policy informs practice. Teachers are well-placed to identify barriers to implementation and highlight areas needing further exploration. As a group, we must therefore amplify the voices that connect us to this rich supply of intelligence from the classroom.

The notion of collecting and connecting classroom voices is further underpinned by research showing that teachers working collaboratively across schools and networks can help drive improvement.³ Hattie in fact cites collective teacher efficacy as having the single biggest effect size of any factors influencing student achievement.⁴ Harnessing the power of voices from the classroom means engendering the sense that together, we can influence the lives of the young people that we serve.

Elevating classroom voices will form a key part of our strategic response to ensure that teachers across trusts can share and emulate strong practice whilst navigating any potential challenges with the support of those working in other organisations.

In action: Raedwald Trust

As a trust focused on alternative provision, we are absolutely committed to ensuring that we distil the recommendation of the Review into the very specific context of our settings. This means thinking carefully about how we work collaboratively with our team so that we can translate the theoretical recommendations into everyday classroom practice.

To support this, we have established teacher forums throughout the next two terms to help guide our thinking about the implications for different subjects, settings and models of AP delivery.

This is an opportunity for us, as leaders, to sense-check the actions that we will take with those who will realise them. The intelligence from these forums will directly guide our response as a trust.

Gemma Griffiths, Associate Academy Improvement Lead, Raedwald Trust

Creating a culture where collaboration at scale is possible

If our response to the Review is to have lasting and positive impact, authentic cross-sector collaboration is essential and it is the culture of our organisations that will help – or hinder – this.

By pooling knowledge and deepening our sensemaking we will strengthen our

³ Greany, T & Higham, R (2018). *Hierarchies, markets and networks: analysing the 'self-improving school-led system' agenda in England and the implications for schools*. London: UCL Institute of Education Press; Cordingley, P, Higgins, S, Greany, et al (2015). *Developing great teaching: Lessons from the international reviews into effective professional development*. London: Teacher Development Trust; Timperley, H, Wilson, A, Barrar, H et al (2007) *Teacher professional learning and development: Best evidence synthesis iteration*. Wellington: New Zealand Ministry of Education.

⁴ Donohoo, J, Hattie, J, and Eells, R (2018). 'The power of collective efficacy'. *Educational leadership: journal of the Department of Supervision and Curriculum Development*, NEA

ability to provide the very best for the children we serve both within and beyond our school walls. This approach also enables us to identify and share best practice, whilst mitigating against the 'lethal mutations' that may arise from hasty or inaccurate interpretation of policy shifts.

We believe that we can prepare for cultural readiness across trusts in three ways:

Firstly, we can ensure our own trusts are characterised by openness and an appetite to do more together. As trust leaders, we should first seek to break down the silos between phases, teams and types of provision to allow for professional dialogue and knowledge generation that is rooted in shared purpose and cultures of continuous improvement.

These conditions emerge only when leaders actively and deliberately make choices that encourage everyone within the system to ask the question, 'how can we better support the pupils and communities we serve?', without bias, fear of judgment and unencumbered by high-stakes accountability.

Secondly, beginning now, we can forge stronger local and national connections across trusts in readiness to check and test thinking using a broad-based, shared expertise. Dialogue between trust leaders will best serve our teachers when we listen carefully, forming a fuller picture of ways forward before we rush towards quick-fixes or untested ideas.

Shared cross-trust expertise will ensure that, as the curriculum is refined and developed, our responses to the Curriculum and Assessment Review are measured, proportionate and preserve the best of the curriculum design and development that has taken place over recent years.

Thirdly, in programmes of continuing professional development, quality assurance and other activities, we can prioritise time for frontline teachers and leaders to connect with each other. Through these connections, we should provide meaningful opportunities for school leaders and teachers to learn and plan together, as they check and test refinements to existing curricula and deliberate over new approaches. This will allow us to move more seamlessly between our overarching purpose as educational institutions and the day-to-day work of the classroom practitioners in classrooms, who bring the curriculum to life in our schools every day.

In action: LIFE Education Trust

At LIFE Education Trust, we have established a community of practice for professional development leaders that promotes collaboration at scale and develops system leadership across the trust.

Grounded in the work of Etienne Wenger and social learning theory, the community brings together leaders from across our schools to share and engage with cutting-edge research in teacher professional development and best practice, considering its implications both within individual schools and across the wider trust.

By exploring persistent challenges and developing organic, practice-informed solutions, the community fosters a culture that is supportive, ambitious, and committed to continuous improvement.

Lekha Sharma, Head of Learning and Teacher Development, LIFE Education Trust

Conclusion

It is clear that the Curriculum and Assessment Review and linked reforms will become a key driver for all aspects of the work of educational institutions in the coming years.

As a network, we have an ambition to create a climate where it is possible for us to connect, learn, and grow together. Now is not the time to rush through mass change. Instead, it is a time to work together across schools and across trusts, rooting our thinking in evidence-informed best-bets, and a commitment to collective servitude.

For us to realise this ambition, we will need to create space for the necessary thinking to happen and be comfortable that this thinking may not necessarily lead immediately to decision making.

A rumble is a discussion, conversation, or meeting defined by a commitment to lean into vulnerability, to stay curious and generous, to stick with the messy middle of problem identification and solving, to take a break and circle back when necessary, to be fearless in owning our parts, and to listen with the same passion with which we want to be heard. – Harriet Lerner in Brene Brown.⁵

It is also clear that whatever plans we do make over the coming months and years, we must maintain sufficient agility in our thinking and planning to alter course throughout the process. This agility is one of the many arts of systems leadership, and something that needs to be deliberately planned for, so that it is available to us when it is most needed.

We know that groups of schools achieve more together. The maturation of the school trust sector affords us the opportunity to extend this beyond the walls of our own organisations – to truly become schools without walls so that we can collectively serve our pupils better.

The Review offers a moment in time in which we can realise this.



⁵ Brown, B (2019), '[Let's rumble](https://www.brenebrown.com/)'. brenebrown.com

Contributors

- Nimish Lad, Director of Curriculum Development, Creative Education Trust
- Lauren Meadows, Curriculum Development Director, Unity Schools Partnership and CUSP
- Alex Bedford, Curriculum Development Director, CUSP
- Hannah Beech, Lead Practitioner and SCITT Programme Lead, TKAT
- Kevin Blakey, Director of Secondary Education, Unity Schools Partnership
- Matt Carnaby, Director of Curriculum and Assessment, Astrea Academy Trust
- Ellen Clarke, Head of Curriculum, Ark Schools
- Charlie Cutler, Head of Curriculum and Pedagogy, GLF Schools
- Peter Foster, School Improvement Lead, Bridgwater and Taunton College Trust
- Katherine Howard, Executive School Improvement Lead, Windsor Academy Trust
- Gemma Griffiths, Associate Academy Improvement Lead, Raedwald Trust
- Siobhan Meredith, Executive Director of Education, Ted Wragg Trust
- Lekha Sharma, Head of Learning and Teacher Development, LIFE Education Trust
- Jemma Sherwood, Director of Curriculum, Ormiston Academies Trust
- Claire Stafford, Director of Quality Assurance, Transform Trust
- Summer Turner, Deputy CEO, Broad Horizons Education Trust

The Curriculum and Assessment Leads Network is open to anyone leading curriculum and assessment across a group of schools. This includes those working in trusts, local authorities, or other partnerships.

Please email lmeadows@unitysp.co.uk or nimish.lad@creativeeducationtrust.org.uk for information on how participate in the network.





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