



School
Improvement
Hub

Case study

Danes Educational Trust



Confederation
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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: schoolimprovementhub.org for details of how to work with us to develop and share a case study, and help all our schools to keep getting better.



Trust-led school improvement model

The CST conceptual model for trust improvement is structured as a triple helix, consisting of three strands:

Curate clear goals

Defining clear purposes, strategies and goals, so that the trust knows what it's aiming for and how to get there

Build capability and capacity

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

Implement improvement initiatives

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

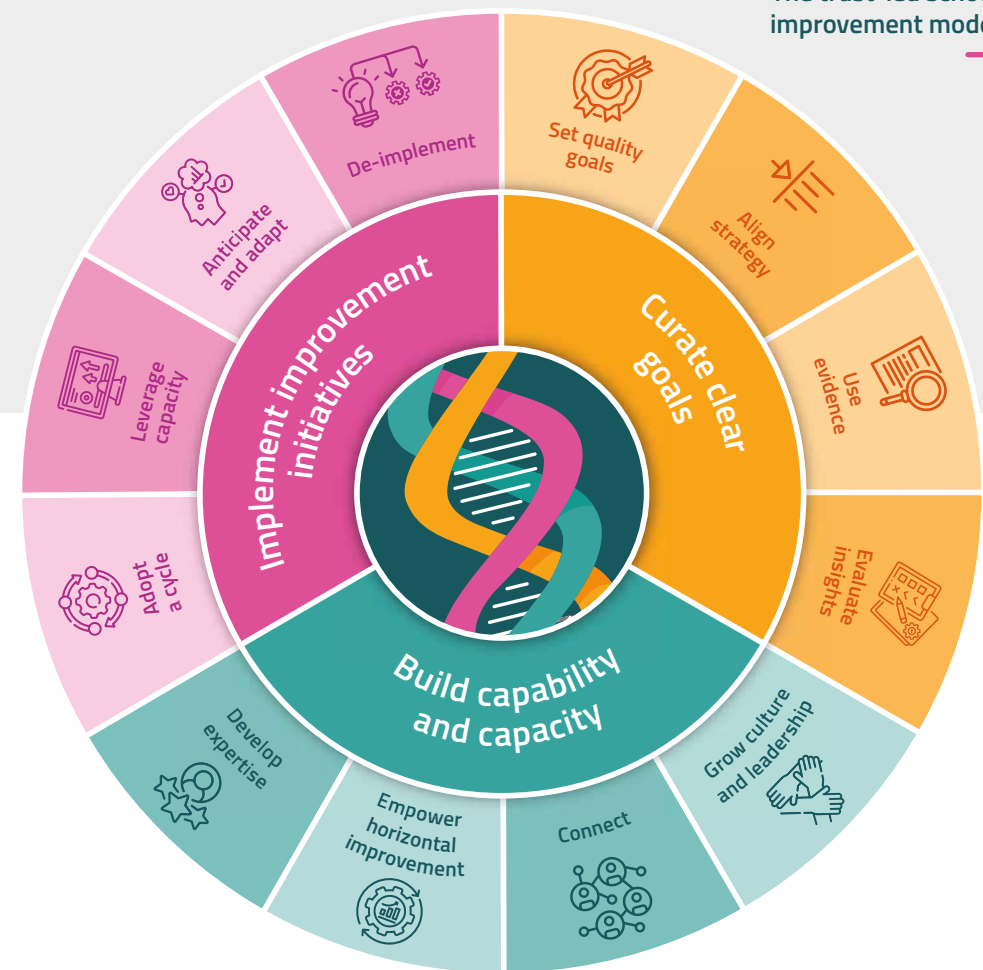
The model outlines the key aspects of how a school-improvement process, strategy or model might be enacted within a trust. Rather than dictating areas for improvement, the conceptual model allows each trust to apply its own understanding of quality and its own improvement goals to each of the three strands. The model is intended to help trusts trace a pathway from the areas their improvement strategy

intends to address towards a broader consideration of how they achieve their improvement goals.

Each of the strands then breaks down into further components. The "Curate clear goals" strand, therefore, breaks down into the following components:

- Set quality goals
- Align strategy
- Use evidence
- Evaluate insights

The trust-led school improvement model



Case study: Danes Educational Trust



DANES
EDUCATIONAL
TRUST

This case study highlights the following components in the conceptual model:

Use evidence

Use evidence to identify the actions most likely to build momentum in the desired direction



Evaluate insights

Use quality evaluative tools to understand the performance of schools and the trust



TRUST OVERVIEW

Trust: Danes Educational Trust

CEO: Dr Josephine Valentine, OBE

Founded: 2016

Schools: Six primary academies and six secondary academies in Hertfordshire

School sizes: The largest school in the trust, St Clement Danes, has 1,595 pupils. The smallest, Roselands Primary, has 292 pupils on roll

Percentage of disadvantaged pupils: 15.4% ever 6 free school meals

Percentage of pupils receiving pupil-premium funding: 14.9%

Percentage of pupils speaking English as an additional language: 20.6%

Key stage 2: No trust performance measures available for 2023, as there have not been at least three schools covering this phase of education in the trust for at least three academic years

Key stage 4: 62% achieved at least grade 5 in English and maths

Attainment 8: 54.9

Progress 8: +0.36

Ofsted: Ten Danes schools have been judged 'good' by Ofsted, and one, St Clement Danes, was judged 'outstanding'. The remaining school has not been inspected since it joined the trust





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***Josephine Valentine, trust CEO
Danes Educational Trust***

BACKGROUND

Danes Educational Trust was established in June 2016, when St Clement Danes School in South West Hertfordshire sponsored a nearby free school, which became Croxley Danes School.

Josephine Valentine, who had been headteacher of St Clement Danes since 1998, became CEO of the trust in January 2018. St Clement Danes had been a National Support School since 2008, and was designated a National Teaching School in 2013. Even before Danes Educational Trust was established, therefore, its staff were working on school improvement throughout Hertfordshire and South Buckinghamshire.

The trust’s priority is to retain and develop existing staff wherever possible – but also to promote talented staff from within. For example, in one school, which was failing when it joined the trust, a talented early-years coordinator was encouraged to step into the role of headteacher. The school now achieves excellent results.

The trust took on three additional schools in January 2024, one of which was failing. Though the legal transfer did not take place until January, the Danes team felt that school-improvement work needed to start immediately. Dr Valentine therefore spent a day a week at this school throughout the autumn term, working with leaders brought in from other successful schools in the trust.

When a new school is doing well, however, the central team will visit less frequently: intervention is in direct proportion to need. And if a system is not working in the case of any individual school, the trust will suspend it and introduce systems that do work.

“We don’t do it formulaically,” Dr Valentine says. “We’re a medium-sized trust, which means that we have the opportunity to really bespoke our approach to school improvement. It becomes very bespoke.”

The trust is considering how its strategy should change to reflect the fact that it now has 12 schools, rather than nine.

“I’m firmly in the camp of: changing your legal entity doesn’t change your school outcomes,” Dr Valentine says. “It doesn’t by default make for school improvement. Just saying, ‘Do what I say. We have a good curriculum model that everyone’s going to follow’ – that’s fine. But sustained school improvement has to be far more nuanced.

“We need to stop, pause, think about what we’re delivering. Whatever objective criteria you choose – outcomes or Ofsted – standing still is not good enough. We need to be improving.”

WHAT DOES EDUCATION LOOK LIKE AT DANES EDUCATIONAL TRUST?

Dr Valentine's own background is in scientific research: she completed a PhD in oral histopathology (histopathology is the diagnosis and study of diseases of the tissues) and worked in hospital research before retraining as a science teacher.

Her background in research has informed the Danes approach to education. "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."

The other central tenet of the trust is its mantra, "One trust". "We're only as good as our weakest school, our poorest classroom, our most challenged teacher," says Dr Valentine.

Alignment in the trust is seen as a way of creating equality of opportunity: if the trust has access to an effective strategy or excellent resource, it shares it among all its schools. Similarly, there is alignment of business and finance models. The central team does, however, acknowledge that every school serves a different type of community.





The central team see themselves as servants to their schools. For example, if a school is having a problem with a contractor, the central team will deal with it, on the basis that headteachers have more important things to be thinking about.

The trust is conscious that it needs to work hard to retain talented staff, who could have their choice of school. Danes therefore runs a series of trust learning-lead secondments. It identifies outstanding practitioners in its schools and pays for 30 days of their time. Those 30 days are used to support schools in difficulty or schools that simply need to hone their practice.

Because the best schools in the trust end up seconding a significant number of learning leads to the centre, the trust allows these schools to overrecruit. "We don't want to rob Peter to pay Paul," says Dr Valentine. "We're creating a culture of one trust. If you're in school A, and school B is struggling, it's all our responsibilities. All the students in Danes Educational trust belong to all of us."

This approach means that, if a school joins the trust and is in need of an interim curriculum lead, for example, one can be seconded swiftly from elsewhere in the trust.

"We need to put school improvement at the top of the agenda," says Dr Valentine. "What's the point of a trust, if you're not improving outcomes for young people?"



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How does this work in practice?

A closer examination of using evidence and evaluating insights to drive school improvement

USING EVIDENCE: Improving attendance

All schools in the trust are funded to conduct one externally reviewed study every year. Four Danes schools recently said that they would like to use this as an opportunity to work on school attendance – a key concern for schools across the country, following the Covid pandemic.

Reviewing attendance data, the trust found that students tended to fall into one of three groups. Those whose attendance was between 92 per cent and 100 per cent were able to catch up on any work missed during their days out of school. Those whose attendance fell below 85 per cent tended already to receive multiagency support to tackle the underlying problems behind the low levels of attendance.

However, the schools were primarily 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 so low to attract multiagency intervention.





The trust therefore decided to look into whether it was possible to quantify to students: "If you are away from school for this many days, this will happen to your academic performance."

The trust piloted the study in two schools. Using key stage 3 performance data, Danes was able to project what students' GCSE maths grades should be, with regular attendance. 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.

The study findings state: "Currently the data shows that those with lowest attendance are furthest away from achieving their target grade."

The following table was shared with parents:

Attendance	GCSE APS
100%	6.3
96-99%	5.3
85-95.9%	5
Below 85%	2.2

"It was a Damascene moment for some young people," says Dr Valentine. "Just doing that little nuanced piece of research was an eye-opener for some: 'If I miss this many days of school, I could lose two grades.'"



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USING EVIDENCE: Developing oracy

The role of a trust and its schools is to provide children with a good education and good GCSE and A-level results. But can it offer them anything more?

Dr Valentine visited schools with a long history of offering outstanding education, looking to find out what they were offering that no-one else was.

Long before it became a buzz word in education, it was clear that these schools were teaching their students oracy. Regardless of background and academic ability, the students at these schools were confident, articulate and at ease with the spoken word.

In order to replicate this verbal confidence at Danes, the trust seconded a number of teachers from across its schools to lead an oracy evaluation. One teacher in particular had done quite a lot of oracy work previously; she therefore began training oracy leads in each of the trust's schools. The trust held a number of oracy forums, bringing teachers together to discuss the work.

The student leadership from the trust's schools were also brought into the project. The Danes Learner Voice Council was launched with more than 60 students from the trust's secondary schools. Each student was tasked with conducting a piece of research, exploring which elements of teaching and learning were having the greatest impact on their education. They explored the issue with staff and

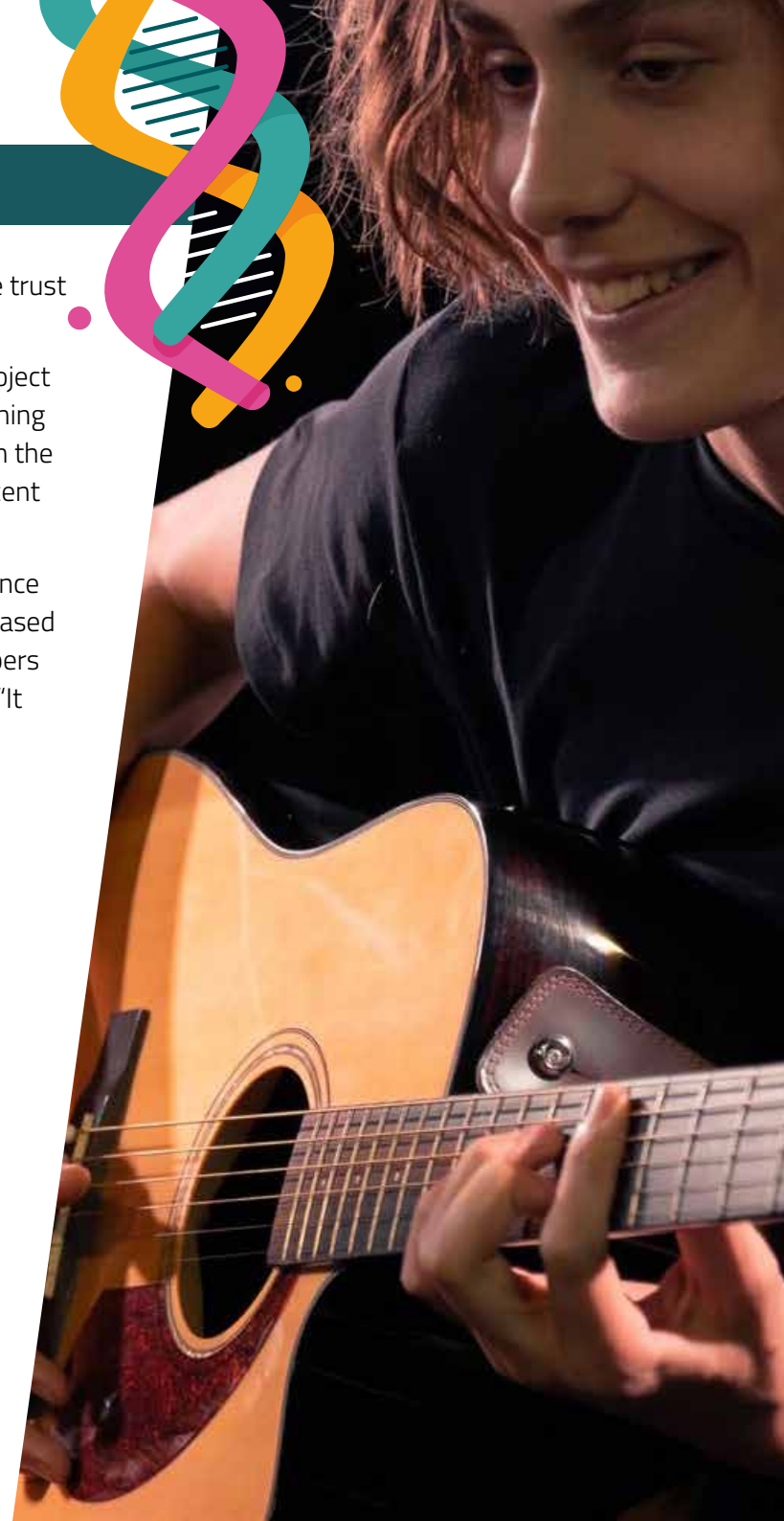
fellow students, and then reported back to the trust central forum, including the CEO.

The evaluation of the Learner Voice Council project revealed that students' understanding of teaching and learning had improved by 83 per cent from the baseline. Their oracy had improved by 50 per cent and their presentational skills by 76 per cent.

Students' wellbeing, self-esteem, self-confidence and teacher relationships had also either increased or hugely increased. And the facilitating members of staff also expressed satisfaction. One said: "It has been a high point in my career... Could not think of a better initiative for a school to run."

The Learner Voice Council project was subsequently rolled out to Danes' primary schools, too. Primary students undergo a structured four-stage process, planning, auditing, implementing and evaluating a chosen aspect of school life – for example, at one primary, they focused on enhancing the classroom to ensure that it catered to all students, regardless of need.

At primary level, students showed increased scores in 15 of the 17 impact measures, between baseline and final data collection. Their scores on measures related to self-efficacy increased between 4.22 per cent and 11.59 per cent.





Oracy is now a key element of all schools in the trust – so much so that it no longer needs to be led from the centre. A visitor to any Danes primary classroom will immediately be greeted by the two classroom ambassadors: “Welcome to our classroom,” they say. “Today, we are learning about these topics...”

The classroom-ambassador roles rotate on a regular basis, so everyone has a turn. The day’s ambassadors wear lanyards, so that they are easily identifiable to their classmates and to visitors. The welcome is now so engrained a part of classroom life that it no longer feels like a performance – instead, it is simply how one greets a visitor.

“Many jobs will be taken by AI in the future,” says Dr Valentine. “So people will want employees who are warm, who are articulate and who have high emotional intelligence. That’s part of our DNA here.”

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EVALUATING INSIGHTS: Measuring teacher engagement

The goal at Danes is not only to improve those schools that join the trust, but to improve them while retaining most – if not all – of the existing staff.

“Anybody can improve a school – or most people in school leadership can, anyway,” says Dr Valentine. “But it’s about improving a school with the same people in place. We always work with what’s in the school, because headteachers aren’t growing on trees.

“It’s about people, and saying they’re very important. Create a great working environment for them. Give them the capacity to do their job, to see that they have capacity for promotion in the trust. It’s all about people.”

The Trust has therefore been using The Engagement Platform (TEP) to look at employee engagement and wellbeing. An autumn trust-wide census was sent out to school staff, looking to flag up areas of concern related to teacher engagement, workload and wellbeing.





Toby Sutherland, headteacher of St Clement Danes – the founding school in the trust – was the first school in the trust to do this work on staff engagement. After he shared the school's findings with the trust, Danes decided to conduct a similar study across all its schools. The aim here was to identify challenges across all 12 schools in the trust, but also to see which schools are doing particularly well in certain areas, so that the trust could learn from them.

Four Danes primaries scored particularly highly for workload, and could therefore provide models of best practice for other schools in the trust. "What can we learn from those four primaries?" says Mr Sutherland. "How can other schools adapt to help with workload challenges?"

This survey process will be repeated three times during the year, in order to develop a more thorough and more nuanced overview. And it will be coupled with conversations with groups of staff, identifying issues and asking for feedback and clarification.

"We're looking for regular, detailed information, which we can build up into a picture and then act on," says Mr Sutherland. "We want to build up insight over time."

EVALUATING INSIGHTS: Ensuring high accountability

The trust aims to create a culture of high accountability – but matched with care, support and high emotional intelligence. “If you just have high accountability on its own, you might as well pack your bag and go, because it will be a horrendous place to work,” says Dr Valentine.

And so the trust has introduced 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.

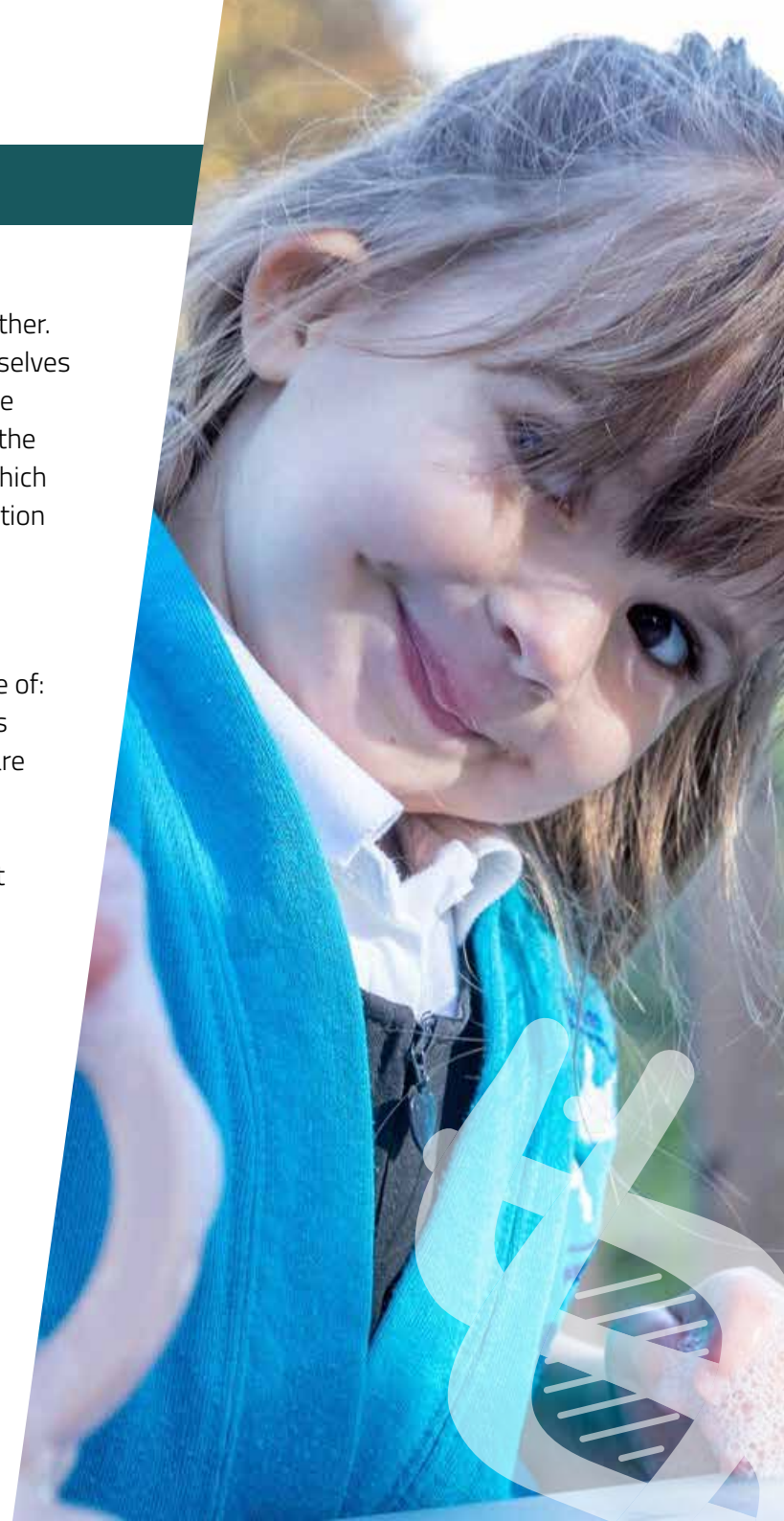
At the beginning of the academic year, all schools in the trust are asked to give themselves a score for each of these indicators. This is quickly followed up, in mid to late September, with a meeting between each school’s senior leadership team a member of the trust’s central education team. The rationale here is, Dr Valentine says, that “You can’t mark your own homework.”

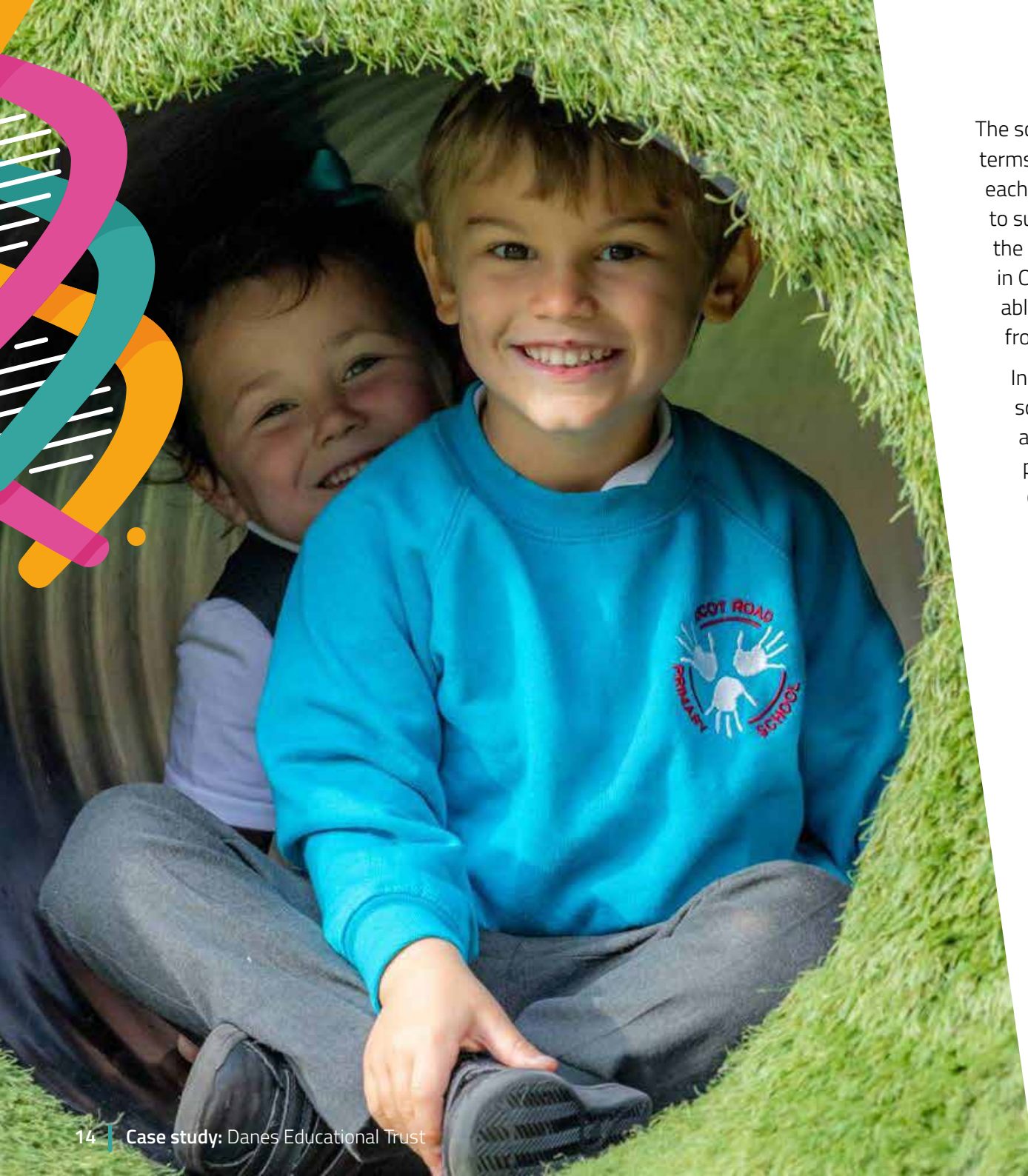
The trust states that the aim of this meeting is: “To review and discuss the school’s evaluation against agreed KPIs; to quality-assure data; to identify the level of support that may be needed for or provided by each school; to agree the effectiveness of leaders in fulfilling the trust’s vision”.

So the central team works with the school, looking at their performance judgements together. Sometimes schools can be too harsh on themselves in their initial rankings; occasionally they can be too lenient as well. Eventually, the school and the trust reach a judgement that both agree on, which is then further scrutinised by the trust’s education committee.

At the end of the review, each school emerges with a verdict against each of the seven key performance indicators. These verdicts are one of: ‘requires rapid improvement’, ‘working towards deep’, ‘have a deep level of understanding’ or are ‘world class’. The descriptors for ‘world class’ are deliberately chosen to go beyond Ofsted’s ‘outstanding’, ensuring that even the strongest schools in the trust are still faced with new challenges.

Using these performance judgements, each school then comes up with between three and five priorities for the year. Because each indicator is broken down into smaller component parts, the school is able to identify exactly where it is improving or declining. Each school’s senior leadership team will report to its local governing board on each of these priorities throughout the year.





The school will also look at what it needs from the trust, in terms of school improvement. And the trust will work with each school to identify where the school might be best able to support other schools in the trust. This then dovetails into the senior-leadership appraisal process, which takes place in October – school leaders look at what they personally are able to offer the trust, and where they might need support from the trust in return.

In the spring term, there is another meeting between school leadership and the trust's education team. Here, again, the school is given a verdict against each of the performance indicators. The trust then brings in external consultants – who are familiar with the trust and its work – to conduct a review. The local authority might come in to offer some support. And it works with Challenge Partners, an organisation that helps trusts and schools to improve.

“In education, we're very bad at stopping and thinking: what have we achieved?” says Dr Valentine. “Is the support we're providing appropriate? Do we need to tweak it?”

In the summer term, schools conduct peer reviews for one another. The trust pairs up leaders from different schools – often taking requests, if one headteacher is particularly keen to see how another head tackles a particular problem.

The trust states: “We have developed a strong culture of collaborative school improvement across the trust, where expertise is identified, nurtured and utilised to enable schools to make rapid and sustained progress.”

Key points

- A mantra of “One trust” emphasises that the trust is only as good as its weakest school – and that all students in the trust are the responsibility of all members of staff.
- A research-based culture, ensures that hypotheses are piloted, reviewed, evaluated and rolled out or abandoned, depending on the resulting data.
- Systems and standards are aligned, but school-improvement support is tailored to the needs of the individual school – and systems can be abandoned if they’re not working.
- Talented staff are seconded to the central team for 30 days a year, at the trust’s expense, to work with other schools around the trust.
- Trust-wide surveys are used to drive improvement, and also to highlight where individual schools might serve as exemplars.
- Joy is considered as valid a performance indicator as pedagogy, behaviour or inclusion.
- Engaged staff are seen as the key to pupil achievement.

