Why a trust-based system?

Confederation
of School Trusts

The voice of school trusts

About the author

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

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

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Introduction

Three years ago, CST published a paper called *Starting with Why: Why join a trust – and why a trust-based system?* This paper made the case for why a trust-based system might be our best bet. It did not deal with technical arguments. Nor was it based in the policy or ideology of any political party.

School trusts have become the successful cornerstone of the education system in England. Most children in England are educated in academies and most schools in England are academies.

- 62% of all children in state-funded in schools are educated in academies.
- 82% of secondary age children in state-funded in schools are educated in academies.
- 44% of primary age children in state-funded in schools are educated in academies.

We have previously set out the positive impact of school trusts.[1] For example:

- DfE analysis shows that the top 10% of school trusts outperform the highest performing local authorities by 0.2 Progress 8 score. For disadvantaged pupils, the pattern is repeated, with a lower absolute but larger relative performance advantage.[2]
- Ofsted's *Fight or flight? How 'stuck' schools are overcoming isolation* report identifies trusts as critical agents in addressing entrenched under performance.[3]
- FFT Education Datalab's analysis, by Dave Thomson, offers compelling evidence of the positive impact of multi-academy trusts on previously failing schools - all but seven of the 142 schools in the study improved to Ofsted good or outstanding after joining high performing trusts.[4]

The growth of trusts has corresponded with an upturn in the performance of the English education system. There are far fewer failing schools in England than a decade or so ago, and evidence from international tests shows children in England have risen up the rankings and are now among the highest performing in the western world.[5]

The English education system, like most systems, has variability within it which must be addressed. It is important we hold onto that drive for improvement and also recognise the strengths in our system: the aggregate picture of the quality of what is happening in our nation's schools is, compared to many other nations, a good one.

1   CST (2025). *From good to great: The positive impact of school trusts in education*
2   Department for Education (2022). *The case for a fully trust-led system*.
3   Ofsted (2020). *Fight or flight? How 'stuck' schools are overcoming isolation.*
4   Thomson, D (2021). *What became of the 'failing' schools of the early 2000s*. FFT Education Datalab
5   Department for Education (2023). '*England among highest performing western countries in education*'.

The challenge is how we go from good to great. We believe that a group of schools working together in a single legal entity is our best bet for achieving this.

We now have a Schools White Paper which proposes that school system must be rooted in partnership and collaboration, so it can achieve higher standards, strengthen professional practice, and deliver better outcomes for children.

We are pleased that the White Paper uses CST's language and narrative. It speaks of an ambition that all schools should be 'anchors' in their communities, collaborating with each other and across public services. This White Paper aims to put collaboration at the heart of the system by moving to all schools being part of school trusts.

So it seems timely to return to, refresh and republish CST's paper on why a trust-based system is our best bet for a system that is designed for children.

1. A system built for all our children

We need to think hard about how we create school environments where all children flourish, ensuring both the optimal continuing development of their intellectual potential and their ability to live well as a rounded human being.[6] This is particularly urgent for children with special educational needs and disabilities and those from the most disadvantaged communities.[7]

If we are to build a school system in England that works for all our children, then groups of schools working together in deep and purposeful collaboration are an essential building block. We need the strength, resilience and scale to be able to perform the functions that a reformed system requires, particularly for children with special educational needs and disabilities. This system will require groups of schools to collaborate in entities with strong financial governance, with direct accountability for advancing education and with the expertise to drive improvement for all children. Our school system must be inclusive by design, mobilising the power of all types of schools, including our vibrant specialist schools, working together so that all our children flourish.

As Tom Rees, chair of the DfE's expert group on SEND and inclusion, said: "This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to build a truly inclusive education system which breaks down barriers to success for every child."[8]

We have a collective responsibility to make this work, and to build a schooling system that works for all our children.

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6   CST, Catholic Education Service and National Society of the Church of England (2024) *Flourishing together*.
7   Newmark, B and Rees, T (2022). *A good life: Towards greater dignity for people with learning disability*, CST.
8   Rees, T (2026). '*We'll fail a generation if we say SEND reform is too difficult*', *Schools Week*.

2. Powerful models of improvement

CST has argued that the trust is a knowledge building structure.[9] The strongest trusts have powerful cultures and codified practices of improvement. Every school in the trust mobilises its improvement capacity on behalf of the group, because they feel part of a single, focused, organisation.

Our theory of change in relation to improvement at scale across the school system in England is deeper than the typical school improvement service because it is centred on curriculum, pedagogy, and the quality of teaching – the substance of education:

- The goal is for every teacher in every classroom to be as good as they can be in what they teach (the curriculum) and how they teach (pedagogy);
- For this to happen, we need to mobilise for every teacher the best evidence from research;
- There is no sustainable improvement for pupils without improvement in teaching, and no improvement in teaching without the best professional development for teachers;
- Strong structures (in groups of schools) can facilitate better professional development through creating and culture and conditions and thus better teaching and improvement for pupils.

Trusts can be knowledge-building organisations focused on the task of improvement. Strong trusts codify the procedural processes of building capacity, undertaking a forensic analysis of need. They support schools by providing leadership, deploying resources, providing access to effective practice, and monitoring improvements in the quality of provision. But if this is without the intentional practice of knowledge building, improvement is not sustainable. It may not result in an enduring change in practice.

The first trusts were established primarily to improve schools where there had been long-term under performance. Since then, as the trust sector has grown, it has been interwoven with the notion of school improvement. CST has begun the work of codifying how we do school improvement at scale in a conceptual model: *The DNA of trust-led improvement*.[10] The school trust sector is positioned at the vanguard of school improvement in England.

This is central to a trust-led system, and it is premised on the specialist nature of the school trust as an organisation that is set up to do one thing – advance education.

9   Bauckham, I and Cruddas, L (2021) *Knowledge-building: School improvement at scale*, CST.
10 Rollett, S (2024). *The DNA of trust-led school improvement: a conceptual model*. CST.

3. Strength and resilience

Resilience is the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties. In organisational resilience theory, it also means the ability of an organisation to shape itself to respond to long term challenges.

The evidence is clear that challenges of Covid-19 have long term economic, health, social and educational impacts. On top of these challenges come more recent perturbations – global economic uncertainty, shifting macro global trends and the impacts of all of this on our children, families, and communities.

We think it is difficult to argue against a contention that we need to build the resilience of the school system in England. We need to do this in at least four ways - and our best bet for doing this is the structure of a group of schools:

- **Structural resilience** through groups of schools working together in a single legal entity with strong, strategic and focused governance.
- **Educational resilience** through the deeper collaboration and stronger conditions for building a culture of improvement.
- **Financial resilience** through greater economies of scale, offering the ability to withstand further perturbations, and with reduced competing demands from other essential services.
- **Workforce resilience** through stronger, shared cultures of professional development, with pathways across schools, bolstering the recruitment, development, and retention of teachers, leaders and support staff.

It is the single governance structure a trust offers that binds schools together in an enduring partnership with an obligation to work through challenges together, rather than to separate at times of difficulty.

4. Deep and purposeful collaboration

In the final paper of a series for the National College for School Leadership in 2012, David Hargreaves wrote about what maturity in a self-improving system looked like. He set out a grid which differentiated between 'shallow, loose' partnership and 'tight, deep' partnership which he described as inter-school integration.[11]

We believe the closest expression of inter-school integration is the school trust: a group of schools working in deep and purposeful collaboration as one entity, under a single governance structure, to improve and maintain high educational standards across the trust. In our view, deep and purposeful collaboration is at the heart of the trust structure. And from our point of view, structures are in fact very important because they create the conditions for this intensely focused collaboration.

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

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

The trust creates a unique type of collaborative framework – and can create the culture and conditions for pupils and education professionals to benefit from it.

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11 Hargreaves, D (2012). *A self-improving school system: towards maturity*, National College for School Leadership.

5. Professional growth and development

A growing body of literature places teacher professional development at the heart of efforts to improve the school system. CST has set out the role of professional development, what it is, why it is important, and how we might be able to do it better in a paper by Jen Barker and Katy Patten.[12] It builds upon the idea that school improvement – in order to be lasting and sustainable - should be underpinned by deliberate and intentional knowledge building. Professional development of teachers is core to these knowledge building efforts.

The paper argues that pupils who benefit from more effective teaching not only learn more, they live happier and healthier lives.[13] The effect is strongest among pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.[14] In order to improve the quality of teaching, we could try to recruit better teachers into the profession, but this is a slow and uncertain route - in part because it's hard to identify a great teacher right at the start of their career.[15] A better, and indeed a more ethical approach, is to focus our efforts on helping existing teachers to improve.

Now we are not talking here of the kind of legacy professional development that may have existed in 'Baker days,' or INSET days. We are talking about the hard task of creating cultures and communities of improvement across professionals in a group of schools designed using the 'active ingredients' of professional development.[16] This is hard to do and not yet the norm in our education system, but we believe that the trust structure is uniquely well placed to do this.

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

In a compelling series of articles, Steve Rollett reflects how trusts can create the conditions for teachers to connect to each other and to professional knowledge in ways that were previously impossible for too many teachers.[17]

The future of the school system resides in building on the best of what has come before. Rollett attempts to describe some of the best practice that existed in some local authorities and explains how these nascent professional connections can be more consistently and robustly built on, deepened, and scaled up by trusts in the coming years.

This is a vision of trusts in which professional connections are not left to chance, or undermined by competing priorities, but rather hard wired into our schools.

12 Barker, J and Patten, K (2022). *Professional development in school trusts: Capacity, conditions and culture*, CST.
13 For example, Jackson, K, Rockoff, J, and Staiger, D (2014) 'Teacher Effects and Teacher-Related Policies.' Annual Review of Economics 2014 6:1, 801-825; and Chetty R., Friedman JN., Rockoff JE. (2013) *Measuring the impacts of teachers II: Teacher value-added and student outcomes in adulthood*. NBER Working Paper 19424.
14 The Sutton Trust (2011). *Improving the impact of teachers on pupil achievement in the UK: interim findings*. Sutton Trust.
15 Wiliam, D (2016) *Leadership for teacher learning: creating a culture where all teachers improve so that all students succeed*. Learning Sciences International.
16 Sims, S, Fletcher-Wood, H, O'Mara-Eves, et al (2021) *What are the characteristics of effective teacher professional development? A systematic review and meta-analysis*. Education Endowment Foundation.
17 Rollett, S (2022) 'Hard wiring connections: Part 1 – Knowing'; and 'Hard wiring connections: Part 2 - Connecting', CST.

6. Solidarity and interconnectedness

What brought many colleagues into education is our strong sense of making a difference, our solidarity, and our interconnectedness – our collective work towards creating a more equal society for the common good. These are much more powerful concepts than an adult- or individual-centred construct of autonomy.

It is our solidarity and our interconnectedness – our shared sense of purpose and our execution of a shared mission – that will make a difference to the children and communities we serve. It is through this that we mobilise education as a force for social justice and wider common good.

As professionals we should share a sense of obligation and accountability for the education of the nation's children. And it is the inherently collaborative structure of a school trust, that can make it more possible for teachers and leaders to put their expertise to best use at multiple schools to help improve the quality of education where their colleagues may be struggling.

As the employers of all staff in their schools, trusts have more flexibility to offer teachers and senior leaders the opportunity to work where they are most needed.[18]

The trust can be also be a protective structure, nurturing talent and building resilience through the shared endeavour of teaching and leading. This movement of talent towards schools with more disadvantaged pupils is potentially very important. It means that leaders who are committed to making a difference in schools in the most disadvantaged communities are supported to succeed through being part of a strong structure that can deploy resources and remain connected to a community of practice.[19]

It is our sense of solidarity and interconnectedness in the pursuit of social justice that is our most powerful weapon for education that can change the world.

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18 There is more to do. NFER's _Teacher Retention and Turnover Research Interim Report_ (Worth, Hillary, and De Lazzari, 2017) showed a more complex picture of retention but conceded that one possible explanation of slightly higher rates of teachers leaving the profession in trusts is that staff moves from a school to central role are counted as leavers in the School Workforce Census, as only school-level data is collected. We need measures that recognise the trust's role.

19 There is evidence that professional 'autonomy' is strongly associated with improved job satisfaction and a greater intention to stay in teaching, see NFER and Teacher Development Trust's _Teacher autonomy: how does it relate to job satisfaction and retention?_ It may be more accurate though to consider teacher agency, rather than autonomy. Surely we are not arguing for a system in which teachers have complete independence from professional practice and can practice teaching free of the influence of research and evidence? No profession would embrace that definition of autonomy. As professionals we have a duty to remain connected to the knowledge and evidence of our profession. Agency is a much more compelling concept, an effective motivator, and is achieved most powerfully through strong cultures of professional growth and development.

7. Civic duty and community anchoring

CST has long argued that school trusts are civic institutions, like universities or NHS trusts. In building a trust-based system, we do not want to create a system of isolated trusts focused only on schools in their own organisation. This is because schools are located in places and a sense of place and context is powerful and important.

We believe that school trusts can and should be 'anchor institutions' in their localities, anchoring schools in place and community.[20] Anchor institutions, alongside their main purpose, play a significant role in a locality by making a strategic contribution to the greater social good and prioritise support for those experiencing disadvantage.

School trusts, drawing on their potential for strategic vision and leveraged resources, can serve an important civic function, helping to situate children, their families and education at the heart of a coherent public services offer.

Whilst many trusts already do important work in ensuring all children can access full opportunities offered by schools, we argue that seeing trusts as 'anchor institutions' opens up longer timeframes and broadens our thinking about how we best address our collective mission to advance education.

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20 Townsend, J, Vainker, E and Cruddas, L (2022) *Community anchoring: School trusts as anchor institutions*, CST.

8. Radical collaboration

School trusts do not operate in isolation, however, and there are a host of systemic challenges beyond the reach of individual organisations. So we require unprecedented collaboration not just between schools but among school trusts. We need trust leaders to foster collective leadership in order to build local systems, particularly in areas where the quality of education has been poor for years and decades.

As Peter Senge points out[21], the deep changes necessary to accelerate progress require leaders who catalyse collective leadership. It requires leaders who act collectively and strategically on – not just in – the system.

Trusts have shown remarkable professional generosity. In addition to supporting schools within their trusts, nine out of 10 trusts also offer support to schools – including maintained schools – more generally. This includes approaches to teaching and learning, as well as financial and operational assistance.

The majority of the government's Regional Improvement for Standards and Excellence (RISE) advisers are drawn from academies, and many trusts operate subject and behaviour hubs.

Through sector-led initiatives like the School Improvement Hub and Inclusion in Practice, trusts regularly share best practice openly.

This culture of sharing is baked into the trust mindset, and the shared charitable object of advancing education for public benefit.

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21   Senge, P (2006) *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*, Random House.

Concluding thoughts: our best bet for a school system that keeps getting better

We believe that the best bet for a school system that keeps getting better is groups of schools working in deep and purposeful collaboration in a single governance structure. As set out above, the trust hardwires the eight elements that we think will ultimately help us to be the best system at getting better:

1. A system built for all our children
2. Powerful models of improvement
3. Strength and resilience
4. Deep and purposeful collaboration;
5. Professional growth and development;
6. Solidarity and interconnectedness;
7. Civic duty and community anchoring; and
8. Radical collaboration.

These things speak to the purpose of why we entered the profession, why we progressed as leaders, why we do what we do - sometimes in the face of adversity.

Not all the conditions described in this paper are the norm now; much of this is difficult to achieve. It is our contention, though, that it is the structure of the trust that has the best potential to be enabling and protective of all that is good in education.

In these difficult and uncertain times, it is up to us now to build a resilient school system that has the capacity and can create the conditions to keep getting better. We believe that this is the potential of a trust-based system.