

Starting with Why: Why join a trust – and why a trust-based system?

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**Confederation
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The voice of school trusts



About Leora Cruddas CBE

Leora is Chief Executive of the Confederation of School Trusts. She has advised successive governments and sits on several Department for Education advisory bodies. She was recently the vice chair of the Head Teacher Standards Review Group, a member of the external advisory group for the Schools White Paper and separately, the SEND Green Paper.

Latterly, she has been invited to sit on the Regulatory and Commissioning Review. Prior to founding CST, she was Director of Policy and Public Relations for the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL). Leora has six years of experience as a Director of Education in two London Local Authorities. She is Visiting Professor at UCL Institute of Education. Leora was made a CBE in 2022.



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 more than three 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.

Starting with Why: Why join a trust – and why a trust-based system?

In 2017, Steve Munby, formerly chief executive of the National College for School Leadership, gave a speech on ethical leadership in which he argued that the wrong question is 'Should my school become an academy?' He said a much better question is:

"How can my school best collaborate with others in a strong and resilient structure to ensure that each child is a powerful learner and that adults have the opportunities to learn and develop as teachers and leaders?"

I think that there is something fundamentally important and powerful in these words. A group of schools working together in a School Trust is so much more than simply the changing of the legal structure of the school.

This paper starts with 'why?'. It attempts to set out why a trust-based system might be our best bet. It does not deal with technical arguments. It is also definitely not based in the policy or ideology of any political party. There has been in my view too much of a compliance mindset in education – we should not do things (or not do things or wait to do things) because this or that government tells us what to do.² We have had a Schools White Paper³ which sets an ambition for all schools to join a strong trust by 2030. As we approach an election, we must acknowledge a future government may take a different view, for example allowing the different school structures to co-exist. It is for us as professionals, with a duty to the children we serve, to strive for what we believe will give every child the best possible start in life.

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¹ Reproduced in Munby, S. (2019) *Imperfect Leadership*. Crown House Publishing p.225

² I am explicitly *not* encouraging people to break the law – we live in a democracy and if a government legislates, we are duty bound to follow the law. But a democracy also means plurality and mature, constructive debate. As Steve Rollett [has said in his CST blog](#), our best bet of insulating the education system from the bumps and scrapes of political change is to build our professional knowledge, to understand *why* we do things, so that we are well placed to speak authoritatively and constructively to governments.

³ [Opportunity for all: strong schools with great teachers for your child](#), 2022, Department for Education.

CST has never argued for the blunt instrument of legislative compulsion which would force all schools to join a trust. It is essential that those who lead and govern our schools believe they are making good *educational* decisions, based on what is best for children, young people and communities, our staff, and our schools. So, we need to make the case that a group of schools working together in a single legal entity is our best bet for building a system that is the best system at getting better.

I make no apologies for writing from purpose. I am cautious to claim that I write from *moral* purpose because I think morality is a complex ethical and philosophical field – and there is much over-claiming of moral purpose to seek a high ground. I will attempt to answer Steve Munby’s beautiful question. I am not claiming that there is only one answer. I hope that this paper encourages the kind of thoughtful and respectful debate that will help our profession reach a maturity of discussion on these crucial issues.

My primary audience is headteachers and governors considering the case for joining a trust. This pamphlet is also for Trust leaders and policy makers as it makes the case for a Trust-based system.

So, why join a trust – and why a trust-based system?



1. Deep and purposeful collaboration

*“How can my school best **collaborate** with others in a strong and resilient structure to ensure that each child is a powerful learner and that adults have the opportunities to learn and develop as teachers and leaders?”*

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.⁴

I believe the closest expression of inter-school integration is the multi-academy trust which we at CST call 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.

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

In 2015, the cross-party House of Commons Education Select Committee published a report on ‘Academies and Free Schools’ in which they said: “Primary heads told us that, whilst becoming an academy had improved their practice and their school, this was primarily because of the advantages generated by the collaborative framework of a multi-academy trust.”⁵

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.

⁴ Hargreaves, D. (2012) *A self-improving school system: towards maturity*, National College for School Leadership.

⁵ Education – Fourth Report *Academies and free schools* (2015) House of Commons Education Committee.

2. A strong and resilient structure

*“How can my school best collaborate with others in a **strong and resilient structure** to ensure that each child is a powerful learner and that adults have the opportunities to learn and develop as teachers and leaders?”*

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 challenges of Covid-19 will 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.

I 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 – ability to withstand further perturbations, with reduced competing demands from other essential services.
- **Workforce resilience** through stronger, shared cultures of career development, with pathways across schools, bolstering the recruitment, development, and retention of teachers, leaders and support staff.

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

3. Every child a powerful learner

*“How can my school best collaborate with others in a strong and resilient structure to ensure that **each child is a powerful learner** and that adults have the opportunities to learn and develop as teachers and leaders?”*

Our philosophy of education needs to go beyond a utilitarian focus on meeting the needs of the world of work (although this too is important). Education is a good in itself. 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. This is particularly urgent for children with special educational needs and disabilities⁶ and those from the most disadvantaged communities.

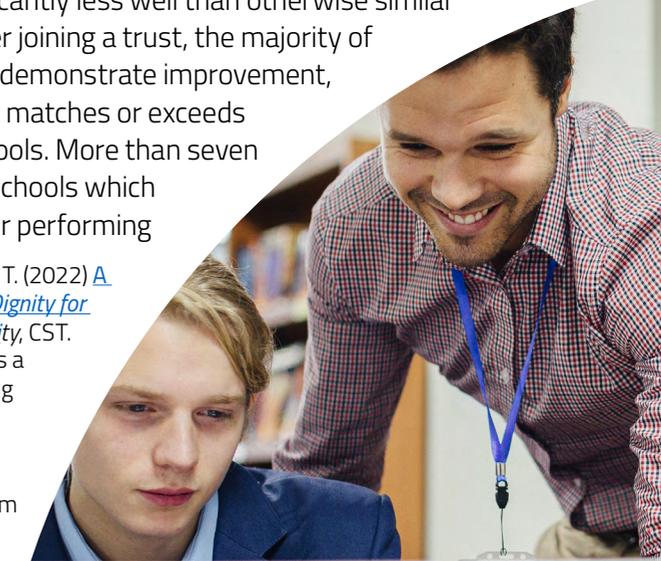
Children are supported and enabled to be powerful learners in all types of school structures. I am definitely not claiming here that it is only the structure of the trust that enables children to be powerful learners.

However, I am claiming that there is emerging evidence that in schools where the quality of education is not good enough, where the conditions are not right for children to be powerful learners, the trust appears to be our best bet for improvement.

Analysis comparing annual cohorts of ‘sponsored academies’⁷ with similar local authority maintained schools shows that, on average, sponsored schools improve more quickly. Before they joined a trust, they performed significantly less well than otherwise similar schools. However, after joining a trust, the majority of sponsored academies demonstrate improvement, and their performance matches or exceeds these comparator schools. More than seven out of ten sponsored schools which were found to be under performing

⁶ Newmark, B. and Rees, T. (2022) [A Good Life: Towards Greater Dignity for People with Learning Disability](#), CST.

⁷ A sponsored academy is a previously under performing maintained school in need of support, and/or judged ‘Inadequate’ by Ofsted, where the law requires them to become academies.



as an LA maintained school in their previous inspection were found to have a good or outstanding rating.⁸

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. 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.

8 [The case for a fully trust-led system](#) (2022) Department for Education.

9 Bauckham, I. and Cruddas, L. (2021) [Knowledge Building – School Improvement at Scale](#), CST.

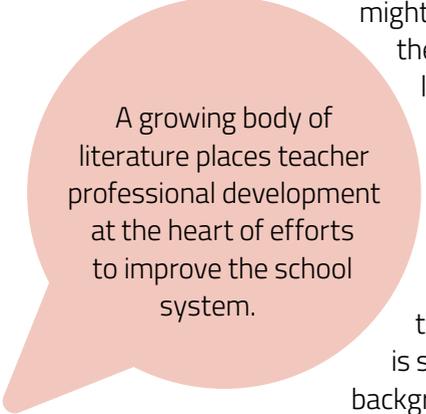
4. Professional growth and development

*“How can my school best collaborate with others in a strong and resilient structure to ensure that each child is a powerful learner and that **adults have the opportunities to learn and develop as teachers and leaders?**”*

A growing body of literature places teacher professional development at the heart of efforts to improve the school system. CST has recently published a paper that seeks to explore the role of professional development, what it is, why it is important, and how we

might be able to do it better.¹⁰ In doing so, 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.¹¹ The effect is strongest among pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.¹² In order to improve the quality of



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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.¹³ 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

10 Barker, J. and Patten, K. (2022) [Professional development in School Trusts: Capacity, Conditions and Culture](#), CST.

11 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.

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

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

the 'active ingredients' of professional development.¹⁴ 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 blogs, 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.¹⁵

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.

5. Solidarity and interconnectedness

I am going to go further than Steve Munby's words now because I want to explore two concepts which go to the heart of the question of 'why a trust-led system?'

One of the enduring points of opposition to joining a trust is that leaders and teachers fear a loss of autonomy. I wonder when this became such a valued construct. Surely it needs a little interrogation? Often what brought us into teaching 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.

Research in 2017 by the National Foundation for Educational Research found that "around one per cent of teaching staff who work in a school that is part of a trust, move to another school within the same trust each year. The largest trusts have more teachers and senior leaders moving to other schools within the same trust, particularly in trusts with schools that are geographically clustered closely together. Senior leaders are also more likely to move within

¹⁴ Sims, S., Fletcher-Wood, H., O'Mara-Eves, A., Cottingham, S., Stansfield, C., Van Herwegen, J., Anders, J. (2021) [What are the characteristics of effective teacher professional development? A systematic review and meta-analysis](#). The Education Endowment Foundation.

¹⁵ Rollett, S. (2022) [Hard wiring connections: Part 1 – Knowing](#); and [Hard wiring connections: Part 2 - Connecting](#), CST Blog.



trusts than classroom teachers. This staff movement within trusts also tends to be towards higher-FSM schools, whereas in general teachers tend to move away from such schools.”¹⁶

The research report recommended that as the legal 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.¹⁷

This shows how the trust can 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.¹⁸

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.

6. Civic duty and public benefit

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. Another enduring, but misleading, argument against a trust-led system is a dislocation from place.

In fact, we believe that school trusts can and should be ‘anchor institutions’ in their localities, anchoring schools in place and community.¹⁹ 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.



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

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.

¹⁶ Worth, J. (2017). [Teacher Retention and Turnover Research. Research Update 2: Teacher Dynamics in Multi-Academy Trusts](#). Slough: NFER.

¹⁷ There is more to do. [The Teacher Retention and Turnover Research Interim Report](#) (Worth, De Lazzari and Hillary, 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.

¹⁸ A quick further word on autonomy. There is evidence that professional ‘autonomy’ is strongly associated with improved job satisfaction and a greater intention to stay in teaching, see Worth, J. and Van den Brande, J. (2020) [Teacher autonomy: how does it relate to job satisfaction and retention?](#) NFER and Teacher Development Trust. It may be more accurate though to consider teacher *agency*, rather than *autonomy* in this context. 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.

¹⁹ Townsend, J., Vainker, E. and Cruddas, L. (2022) [Community Anchoring: School Trusts as Anchor Institutions](#), CST.

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 things that we think will ultimately help us to be the best system at getting better:

- Deep and purposeful collaboration
- A strong and resilient structure
- Every child a powerful learner
- Professional growth and development
- Solidarity and interconnectedness
- Civic duty and public benefit

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.

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 out²⁰, 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.

In these difficult times of upheaval and uncertainty, 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 is the potential of a trust-based system.



²⁰ Senge, P. (2006) *The Fifth Discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*, Random House.



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