De-implementation and following a north star

How a focus on what trusts can do, and stop doing, can make all the difference for school improvement

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Steplab

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Steplab provides a professional development system for trusts and schools that really works. Over 400 school trusts and 100,000 teachers have already achieved impressive results with its Responsive Coaching model.

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Introduction

Effective school improvement relies on a disciplined focus on what matters most. But schools are 'noisy' with competing priorities and leaders are faced with the challenge to reduce this noise and make room for what will make the most difference in improving their schools. As such, there is an increasing emphasis on 'de-implementation': the idea that schools must do less in order to achieve more. For de-implementation to be successful, we need to find a 'north star' to guide our decision-making. This paper explores why many of the most successful trusts have identified professional development as the most powerful lever for school improvement and how prioritising professional development can act as a guiding north star for de-implementation.

Why is professional development such a powerful lever for school improvement?

Effective teaching is likely to be the most important lever for ensuring students achieve their potential (Rivkin, Hanushek and Kain, 2005).[1] Such research highlights the vital importance of professional development (PD) that enables teachers to make regular and sustained improvements to their practice.

Yet, it can be incredibly difficult to find the right professional development methods to deliver the impact we need. Often, although time and money are spent on development, teaching does not improve at the rate we might hope for. Why is this?

A 'noisy' school environment places a barrier in the way of impactful professional development

Even the best development can often fail to achieve impact due to the environment in which they are implemented. Schools are 'noisy' environments (Kennedy, 2016) where teachers are often bombarded with information and tasks that can clash and compete.[2] What matters most this week: a need to tighten up on Year 9 behaviour in the corridors; the recent group professional development session on cognitive load theory; a planning deadline for a new unit of work on Romeo and Juliet, or the upcoming student work review?

Often, important information about how to get better can be lost in a sea of 'noise'. Before we discuss what we can do about this, we'll look at some major sources:

Conflicting messages about what matters.

There are often multiple conflicting messages in school (Kennedy 2016). Should we care about the recent training from the behaviour lead, the curriculum lead or the school professional development lead? What if these don't seem to line up?

Teachers who are faced with many possible areas of focus can often fail to improve

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1   Rivkin, S G, Hanushek, E A and Kain, J F (2005). Teachers, schools, and academic achievement. *Econometrica*, 73(2), 417-458

2   Kennedy, M (2016). How Does Professional Development Improve Teaching? *Review of Educational Research*, 86(4), 945-980

at any of them (Feldon, 2007).[3] Teaching is an incredibly challenging job. Getting better at teaching requires absolute focus. Enabling teachers to improve despite the many challenges they face requires leaders to simplify messaging so that teachers know with absolute clarity what is most important thing to focus on.

Time pressure and stress

When we have too much to do and not enough time to do it, we often lack the mental capacity to focus on getting better (Biesta, Priestly, and Robinson, 2015; Heck, Grimmet, and Willis, 2019; Hobbiss, Sims and Allen, 2020).[4] It's hard to focus on what a professional development leader is discussing if you know that you have 30 books to mark, three lessons to plan, and a full teaching timetable tomorrow.

Professional development that lacks personalisation

Often, the professional development model used by schools and trusts is the one-to-many 'whole-group' session. Yet, when teachers are involved in such a session, how do they know which information applies directly to their practice? What if there isn't any? What if the session is on something that is way beyond current skill levels? What if they've been doing it for years and resent having to waste their time reviewing practices they've always used effectively? Professional development that lacks personalisation can often leave teachers unable to improve (Agathangelou, Hill and Charalambous, 2024).[5]

Why leaders must 'quiet the noise' in order to support teachers to improve

The features of school life outlined here can seem elemental: as though they're part of the very fabric of what it means to be a teacher and school leader.

Thankfully, this isn't the case. It is possible for trust and school leaders to focus and align the messages they send; reduce time-pressure and stress, and provide more personalised professional development.

In fact, focusing on achieving these goals - on providing a professional development programme that really works - can guide our de-implementation.

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3   Feldon, D (2007) Cognitive Load and Classroom Teaching: The Double-Edged Sword of Automaticity, *Educational Psychologist*, 42(3), 123-137
4   Biesta, G, Priestley, M and Robinson, S (2015). The role of beliefs in teacher agency. *Teachers and teaching*, 21(6), pp.624-640; Heck, D, Grimmett, H and Willis, L D (2019). Teacher educators using cogenerative dialogue to reclaim professionalism. *Professionalism and teacher education: Voices from policy and practice*, 137-156; Hobbiss, M, Sims, S and Allen, R (2020). Habit formation limits growth in teacher effectiveness: A review of converging evidence from neuroscience and social science. *Review of Education*, 9(1)
5   Agathangelou, S, Hill, H and Charalambous, C (2024). Customizing Professional Development Opportunities to Teachers' Needs: Results from a Latent Profile Analysis. *The Elementary School Journal*

De-implementation

De-implementation is the topic of Hamilton, Hattie and Wiliam's excellent book, *Making Room for Impact* (2024).[6] In summary, de-implementation requires leaders to:

1. Identify the things that we are going to focus on stopping
2. Design the change by either removing, reducing, reworking, or replacing
3. Implementation of the de-implementation
4. Evaluating the impact

As the book recognises, doing this successfully is far easier said than done. There are many things that we could choose to de-implement in schools, and only a small sample that we should or could choose to focus on.

Let's look at our example of professional development. At its best, it's the most important thing that a school can do to improve outcomes, reduce burnout, and improve staff retention (Kraft and Papay, 2016).[7] At its worst, it's a giant distracting waste of time. Choosing to de-implement professional development isn't a sensible decision. Instead, we need to determine what we can de-implement that would allow professional development to be successful.

In other words, we need to de-implement with purpose. We need to focus on a north star to guide our de-implementation.

A 'north star' to guide our de-implementation

As leaders making decisions about what to do less of, we need to have our eyes firmly fixed on a guiding purpose. Ultimately, what do we want to achieve as a result of our de-implementation efforts?

We could choose to de-implement with the goal of giving teachers more time to plan their lessons, or so that they can leave school promptly at 3:10pm every day. We could aim to provide teachers with space to call every parent every day, or time to mark books every week in three different colours of pen. We could make more space for group work and student-led learning in lessons. Yet, not all of these purposes are equal: some may have a limited overall impact on student achievement, some will do very little and some may be detrimental.

How then, can we identify our north star to direct us towards what really matters and guide our de-implementation? For the trust leaders we work with, their north star is building a programme of effective professional development. But what makes this such a powerful choice for guiding our decisions, and how can doing so help improve our schools?

Focus on impact: start with the end

When looking for a north star to guide our decisions, we must start with our end in mind. If we were to be successful, is it likely that teachers

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6   Hamilton, A, Hattie, J and Wiliam, D (2023). *Making Room for Impact: A De-Implementation Guide for Educators*. Corwin Press
7   Kraft, M and Papay, J (2016). The Myth of the Teacher Performance Plateau. *Educational Leadership*

will make continuous improvements to their practice as a result? Will students be able to learn more effectively? If our north star is likely to guide us towards these ends, then we've chosen wisely.

We could decide that every teacher is going to write a journal at the end of every day to encourage them to be more reflective practitioners. Yet, if we look at the evidence on the impact of teacher reflection on development we can see that even if we achieved this it's unlikely it will help teachers to make regular improvements to their practice (Cohen et al., 2020; Creemers, Leonidas and Antoniou, 2012).[8]

On the other hand, there is widespread and compelling evidence that teacher coaching is the most impactful method of professional development that we know about. Dr Sam Sims finds instructional coaching to be "currently the best evidenced form of CPD".[9] By collating evidence from replicated randomised controlled trials (Allen et al., 2011; Allen et al., 2015)[10], meta-analysis (Kraft, Blazar and Hogan, 2018)[11] and evidence from A-B testing trials (Cohen et al., 2020) Sims concludes that instructional coaching has a stronger evidence base than other forms of professional development in terms of impact on teacher quality and student outcomes.

If we are going to focus our de-implementation efforts on building high-quality professional development, high quality responsive coaching is a good bet. It can act as a powerful north star.

Wider gains: the power of spillover effects

Building a functioning coaching programme, however, may take significant time and effort. If we only start to benefit once we arrive at the destination, perhaps it's not worth it. In the search for a de-implementation north star, we need to select a goal where the journey is as beneficial as the destination.

Sun M et al. (2013; 2017) find that working towards a peer coaching programme, involving mixing teachers with diverse performance levels in a collegiate professional development structure, leads to positive 'spillover effects' where - in addition to the direct effects of collaborative support provided by coaching - there are indirect spillover benefits.[12] It's important to examine why this is:

- First, the collegiate, supportive culture that we must work towards is directly beneficial to all staff. Building a culture of openness to feedback, for example, will improve the quality of teaching more generally, beyond the direct effects of coaching.
- Second, the de-implementation required to provide time and space for supportive collegiate coaching conversations requires us to do less to achieve more. Yet, providing more space for staff to work on their teaching is clearly a

8 Cohen, J et al. (2020). Teacher Coaching in a Simulated Environment. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 42(2); Creemers, B, Kyriakides, L and Panayiotis, A (2012). *Teacher Professional Development for Improving Quality of Teaching*

9 Sims, S (2019). Four reasons instructional coaching is currently the best-evidenced form of CPD

10 Allen, J P, Pianta, R C, Gregory, A, Mikami, A Y and Lun, J (2011). An interaction- based approach to enhancing secondary school instruction and student achievement. *Science*, 333(6045), 1034-1037; Allen, J P, Hafen, C A, Gregory, A C, Mikami, A Y and Pianta, R (2015). Enhancing secondary school instruction and student achievement: Replication and extension of the My Teaching Partner-Secondary intervention. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, 8(4), 475-489

11 Kraft, M A, Blazar, D and Hogan, D (2018). The effect of teacher coaching on instruction and achievement: A meta-analysis of the causal evidence. *Review of educational research*, 88(4), 547-588

12 Sun, M, Penuel, W R, Frank, K A, Gallagher, H A and Youngs, P (2013). Shaping professional development to promote the diffusion of instructional expertise among teachers. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 35(3), pp.344-369; Sun, M, Loeb, S and Grissom, J A (2017) Building teacher teams: Evidence of positive spillovers from more effective colleagues. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 39(1), pp.104-125

good in itself.

- Finally, the necessity for truly responsive leadership - where leaders remain engaged with what's happening in classrooms and coaching relationships - ensures that leaders remain focused on what matters most in schools - the quality of teaching and of professional development.

Therefore, our north star guides us towards both a process and end result that provides far greater good than the practices we have de-implemented. Particularly if we de-implement practices that could be doing harm.

Challenge vs. hindrance: the right kind of demand

In most organisations, perhaps particularly in schools, we can accumulate tasks, processes, practices and systems that can take time that we do not have, slow us down in ways that do not seem justified, and can cause negative emotions. These practices are often considered 'hindrance demands' (Cavanaugh, 2000) as they create stressors, preventing us from using time and resources effectively and stopping us from moving forward.[13]

Our well-chosen north star can help us identify 'hindrance demands' that have a negative impact on resources and wellbeing, providing us with a target for de-implementation. For example, we know that focusing on professional development rather than judgement of performance is better for teacher wellbeing and motivation, and reduces bureaucracy. Our north star guides us to remove the hindrance demands caused by the 'administrative hassles' and 'emotional demands' (Crawford et al., 2010)[14], 'low feelings of autonomy' and 'low job satisfaction and workload manageability' (Worth and Van den Brande, 2020)[15] of completing annual target setting documents as part of traditional judgement-based performance management.

In contrast, an effective professional development programme that provides opportunities for learning, includes personalised goal-setting, and creates conditions for success by focusing on incremental improvement, can increase motivation and wellbeing through 'challenge demands' (Cavanaugh, 2000). These are conducive to professional growth and reduce work-related stress (Podsakoff et al., 2007)[16] whilst also providing potential for 'improved job satisfaction and retention' (Worth and Van den Brande, 2020).

Our north star guides us not just to remove practices that have minimal impact but to de-implement the demands and stressors that act as hindrances and stop us moving forward. In doing so, we can focus more sharply on what matters most in improving our schools: providing high quality professional development that supports our staff and students to achieve their best.

13 Cavanaugh M A, Boswell W R, Roehling M V, and Boudreau J W (2000). An empirical examination of self-reported work stress among US managers. *Journal of Applied Psychology.* 85(1):65–74

14 Crawford, E R, LePine, J A and Rich, B L (2010) Linking Job Demands and Resources to Employee Engagement and Burnout: A Theoretical Extension and Meta-Analytic Test. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 95, 834-848

15 Worth, J and Van den Brande, J (2020) *Teacher autonomy: how does it relate to job satisfaction and retention?* NFER

16 Podsakoff N P, LePine J A, LePine M A (2007). Differential challenge stressor-hindrance stressor relationships with job attitudes, turnover intentions, turnover, and withdrawal behavior: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology.* 92(2):438–454

Case studies

At Steplab, we're privileged to work with hundreds of trusts and thousands of schools. Leaders in those trusts have captured how they've followed their north star to identify what to do, and stop doing, to make a real difference to their schools.

Academy Transformation Trust

> "At Academy Transformation Trust, leaders have made room for context and role-specific professional development and kept focused on their north star through leaders who ensure trust and school priorities align to focus on what matters most."
>
> Cat Rushton, Director of ATT Institute, Academy Transformation Trust

To create sustainable and purposeful professional development programmes for our colleagues we have coordinated trust and academy level professional development priorities to maximise the impact for every individual in our trust.

Our trust-wide subject, leadership and specialist communities of practice provide role-specific opportunities for deep and purposeful collaboration between colleagues across our settings. Our communities have been established over a number of years and most have reached the self-sustaining phase, whereby the positive spillover effects have been: the creation of strong bonds formed between the members; expertise distributed throughout the community; and co-constructed improvement strategies that have a better chance of buy-in and impact.

Given the extensive and effective network of communities, a challenge arises as multiple colleagues from each academy return to their respective settings with implementation priorities, which could create conflicting messages about what matters. This challenge is effectively addressed by our Professional Development Community members, who, as part of each academy's senior leadership team, have the explicit responsibility of coordinating professional development priorities within their settings. Their important role within each school is to manage competing priorities and ensure the academy stays facing its north star of context and role-specific professional development.

The primary focus of the Professional Development Community is the creation of a professional development curriculum for each academy, with members collaborating to cultivate both explicit and tacit expertise in utilising effective mechanisms for professional learning. This ensures decisions at academy level are evidence informed, with all colleagues engaging in role specific inquiry questions and all academies establishing a culture for instructional coaching with Steplab. For this model to be effective, we de-implemented the previous performance management structure of setting three annual targets and replaced this with our personalised inquiry questions. This results in colleagues experiencing a relevant and carefully sequenced professional development curriculum, closely aligned to their individual and academy improvement priorities.

Star Academies

> "At Star Academies, professional development is front and centre of their school improvement model."
> Emma Starkey, Head of Inclusion and Teaching, Star Academies Trust

When designing our Teach Like A Star strategy, we explicitly defined for school leaders how professional development could be implemented in their schools. We asked principals to make time to ensure all teachers access high-quality professional development that followed our three-layer model:

- Universal: all teachers to address whole-school systemic issues (weekly goal, practice clinic and responsive coaching)
- Targeted: departmental support to address subject-specific areas for improvement (weekly goal, practice clinic and responsive coaching by the middle leader)
- Bespoke: bespoke responsive coaching

To provide space for this intentional approach to providing all staff with effective professional development, we repurposed our meeting time and provided sessions every Monday morning to focus on professional development. This was a pivotal moment for the trust and signalled our investment in our people: there is no greater priority than allowing teachers the time and space to sharpen their skills, focused on their highest leverage actions.

For us, the deliberate effort of our teachers to hone their skills deserved to be rewarded with high quality feedback. This was, of course, another (perceived) demand on leaders' time. No principal or senior leader disagreed with the idea in principle; it made complete sense for teachers to have access to effective feedback and ongoing support. They all had the same common question: How do I find the time? How can you not find the time? 'The calendar must reflect your priorities' was an unhelpful response for them.

To make time for great weekly professional development and to ensure the feedback loop was shortened, we had to remove low-impact tasks and review how to communicate effectively. We needed to de-implement actions and activities to make space for what mattered most when improving teaching:

- We removed the need for three formal lesson observations.
- We streamlined all quality assurance activity into two QA windows annually.
- Weekly briefings (meetings) became a weekly bulletin (email or podcast).

The impact of this model has been significant. It has placed teacher development at the front and centre of school improvement. This focus has included strategies for how best to teach our pupils with special educational needs and disabilities. We ensured that our SEND strategy (All Stars Succeed) was completely integrated within the Teach Like A Star strategy.

Our ambition to support every teacher, every day, means the volume of high quality feedback has increased immeasurably. It is undoubtedly contributing to dynamic and responsive leadership in our schools. The codification of great teaching achieved more than simply creating a shared language for leaders and teachers, the positive spill-over effect was that it created a team mentality. The responsive coaching model with Steplab permeates everything we do, and this level of transparency has been empowering for Star teachers. The 'buzz' that was previously experienced in a 'one-hit wonder' professional development session, is now part of the fabric of our schools.

Ted Wragg Trust

> "At Ted Wragg, a focus on consistency, purpose, and personalisation, powered by their responsive coaching model, has helped transform the schools in their trust."
> Siobhan Meredith, Executive Director of Education, Ted Wragg Trust

Our trust is an ambitious and inclusive family of schools. Our mission at the Ted Wragg Trust is to transform lives and strengthen our communities to make the world a better place. Having recently celebrated our ten-year anniversary, we are incredibly proud to be educating 12,500 children across primary, secondary and all-through schools, making us one of the largest trusts in the south west of England. This is what Ted Wragg believed: that education plays a key role in social mobility and the power of local schools working together to be the very best that they can be. We believe high-quality teaching is the most important lever for providing excellent education and improving outcomes for our children and young people, particularly those who are disadvantaged (Education Endowment Foundation, 2021).

To achieve this, we invest in a model of responsive coaching, implemented at each of our schools in ways that are sensitive to the different contexts of their culture, systems, and structure. A prime element of our Key Concept for Education - which outlines our approach to teaching and learning - is coaching, and professional development should build knowledge, motivate, develop techniques, and embed practice.

The introduction this approach meant we de-implemented previous processes for performance management that included one-off lesson observations and reassured our people that coaching is for development, not evaluation. In addition, coaching is not linked to appraisal. We instead support our people to plan for success through our approaches to great management, and holistically, teachers are supported to be excellent educators through informal, specific feedback that is interactive and maintains a two-way dialogue. This is opposed to formal, general feedback, which is a discussion led by the senior leader through a one-way presentation following a formal lesson observation.

As a result of introducing coaching and removing the previous approaches to performance management, the positive spill-over effects have included the removal of bureaucracy linked to pay progression and performance management, so people now automatically progress making the focus far more on development and getting better.

Coaching is now part of our core offer when recruiting and retaining great people within our schools. Coaching activities are included during our interview processes to reflect what it's like to work at our trust, where professional development is at the heart of what we do.

Within our model, to be a coach, you must be a highly effective practitioner. This does not mean that you have to be a senior leader within your school, but you need to be someone who is able to develop vulnerability-based trust, care personally, and have a clear understanding of what the most important thing is right now for your coachee to develop.

Each of our schools has a clearly defined and articulated set of principles of teaching that are used to support professional development. With a culture of practice to hone our craft, we have implemented rehearsal sessions within our schools. These, in some cases, have replaced what would have been an operational morning briefing
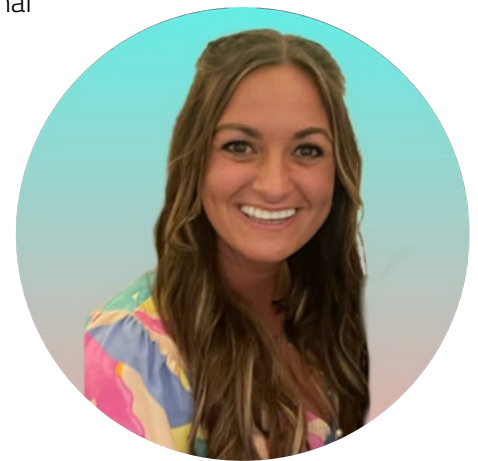
and now instead take the form of rehearsal and scripting of habits. In other cases, we have removed traditional approaches to staff meetings and introduced 'Teacher CPD'. During these sessions, our people know and expect to learn something new. This professional development supports the creation of new habits that can be applied to all subjects, will be evidence-informed, and will provide the opportunity to practise. These sessions are then replicated for our teaching assistants and support staff, who are crucial in providing consistency for routines and approaches, which in turn supports learning.

Every term, we have a Coaching Leaders Network that allows lead coaches from each school to share what they are working on, including approaches to quality assurance, discuss any barriers they are facing to 100% engagement on Steplab, and reflect on any new evidence-based research that could be applied to their coaching models. This network has been key to the effectiveness of the implementation of coaching for new schools within our trust, as well as for schools that want to further develop their systems.

We believe the quality of teaching in our schools has improved because of responsive coaching. It locks in consistent systems and strong habits, creating a predictable, positive learning environment for all students. Plus, spotting and addressing specific teaching and pastoral needs through coaching allows staff to continuously improve and in doing so, our rate of internal promotion has increased significantly. This has quickly become one of our key approaches to school improvement and, when supporting other trusts and schools, we recommend this as an approach to professional development and to improve the quality of teaching. It also helps to craft a supportive and receptive culture within the school, growing strong relationships.

Results in several of our schools have improved since implementing responsive coaching. In 2023, collectively at the end of Key Stage 2, disadvantaged children within our primary schools outperformed those nationally, and notably Marine Academy Primary had progress scores in the top 5% in the country, while 93% of their disadvantaged children achieved their age-related expectations in Reading, Writing and Maths. In the trust performance measures, our trust has a Progress 8 score of above average and higher than the national average of students achieving a grade 5 or above in English and Maths GCSEs.

At the Ted Wragg Trust, we see success as an outcome of being relentlessly positive in our collaboration, having the highest standards and growing great people. Coaching aligns with all of these values and helps every one of us to be the absolute best we can be for the children and young people that we support.

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

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