



School  
Improvement  
Hub

## Case study

# Northern Education Trust



Confederation  
of School Trusts



ImpactEd  
Group

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](https://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

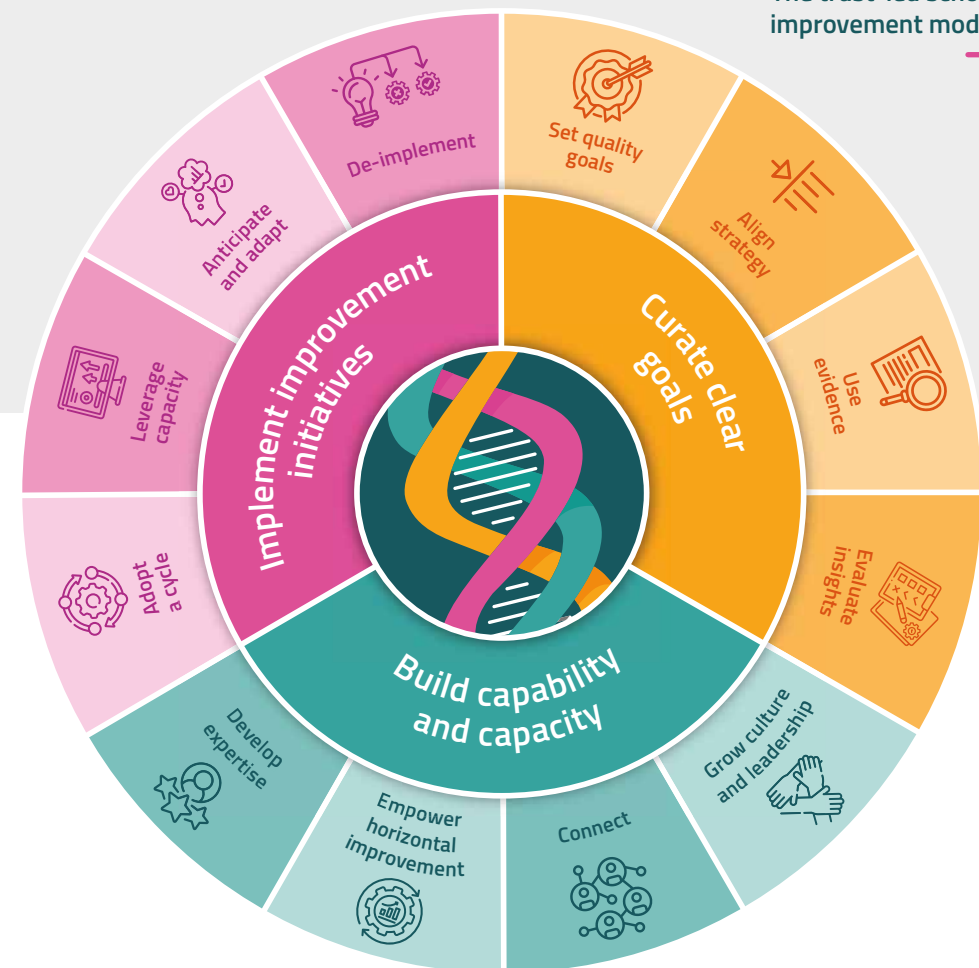
The model outlines the key aspects of how a school-improvement process, strategy or model might be enacted within a trust. Rather than dictating areas for improvement, the conceptual model allows each trust to apply its own understanding of quality and its own improvement goals to each of the three strands. 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: Northern Education Trust



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

## Set quality goals

Define the quality the trust is aiming for, and the specific goals needed to achieve this



## Align strategy

Ensure alignment between school-improvement objectives and wider trust strategy



## TRUST OVERVIEW

**Trust:** Northern Education Trust

**CEO:** Rob Tarn

**Founded:** 2012

**Schools:** 12 primary academies and 14 secondary academies, across the North East and North West of England

**School sizes:** Schools vary in size, from just under 120 pupils on roll at Whitecliffe Academy to around 1,600 pupils at Walbottle Academy

**Pupils:** Nearly half the pupils in the trust – 47.2% – are eligible to receive pupil-premium funding, compared with a quarter of pupils nationally. The proportion of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities is above average

**Pupils speaking English as an additional language:** 7%

**Key stage 2:** 73% of pupils achieved at least the expected standard in reading, writing and maths (combined)

69% of disadvantaged pupils achieved at least the expected standard in reading, writing and maths (combined)

**Key stage 4:** Achieved at least grade 5 in English and maths: 51%

**Attainment 8:** 45.9

**Progress 8:** -0.07

**Ofsted:** At the time of the trust's second Ofsted summary evaluation, in 2023, six NET schools were judged 'outstanding' and 15 were judged 'good'





***“The crucial thing is knowing what we will do within the first six weeks of intervention. Having a consistent school-improvement model with a shared nomenclature and tried and tested systems means that leaders and staff from across the trust can come together to implement the same systems at pace.”***

***Rob Tarn, chief executive  
Northern Education Trust***

## BACKGROUND

**Northern Education Trust was set up in 2012, and it grew quickly. By 2016, when the trust had its first Ofsted summary evaluation, it was responsible for 22 schools, 2,000 members of staff and 15,000 students. Ten of these schools had never been judged ‘good’ by Ofsted; 18 were below floor standards.**

When Ofsted inspected Northern Education Trust in 2016, it was critical, expressing concerns about how the trust was operating. Its report, published in March 2017, stated: “The Trust’s strategies for school improvement have failed to secure urgent and necessary improvements in too many of its schools. Trustees are a considerable way from fulfilling their published aim for all schools to be good or better within three years of joining the Trust.”

Standards remained below average at every key stage. Of the 18 schools that had been inspected since joining NET, one was outstanding, five were good, eight required improvement and four were inadequate. Three – including North Shore Academy – received termination warning notices.

In September 2017, six months after the Ofsted report was published, Rob Tarn was brought in as chief executive. He agreed to apply for the post if trustees had the appetite to review the Scheme of Delegation.

“They were a collection of standalone schools in all but name,” he says. “In my head, I view it as

one school over many sites, with just a long walk between some of the classrooms.”

On his first day in the role, Mr Tarn asked every member of staff to exchange their school lanyards for a NET lanyard. For gate duty, headteachers were given hi-vis jackets with “Northern Education Trust” on the back.

Officially, the trust uses an 80:20 model, described by Ofsted as: “‘80’ for consistent trust strategies such as expectations for learning, curriculum and attendance policies... Leaders in schools ensure these methods work for their school community by devising local ‘20’ variations.”

In reality, however, Mr Tarn says that there is 100 per cent consistency across the trust – new approaches are piloted locally only in agreement with the trust executive team.

“Imagine you get a phone call asking if you can take on at short notice a school in special measures,” he says. “The crucial thing is knowing what we will do within the first six weeks of intervention. Having a consistent school-improvement model with a shared nomenclature and tried and tested systems means that leaders and staff from across the trust can come together to implement the same systems at pace.

“They may have never met each other, but they speak the same language. This can lead to a remarkable pace of transformation.”



## WHAT DOES EDUCATION LOOK LIKE AT NET?

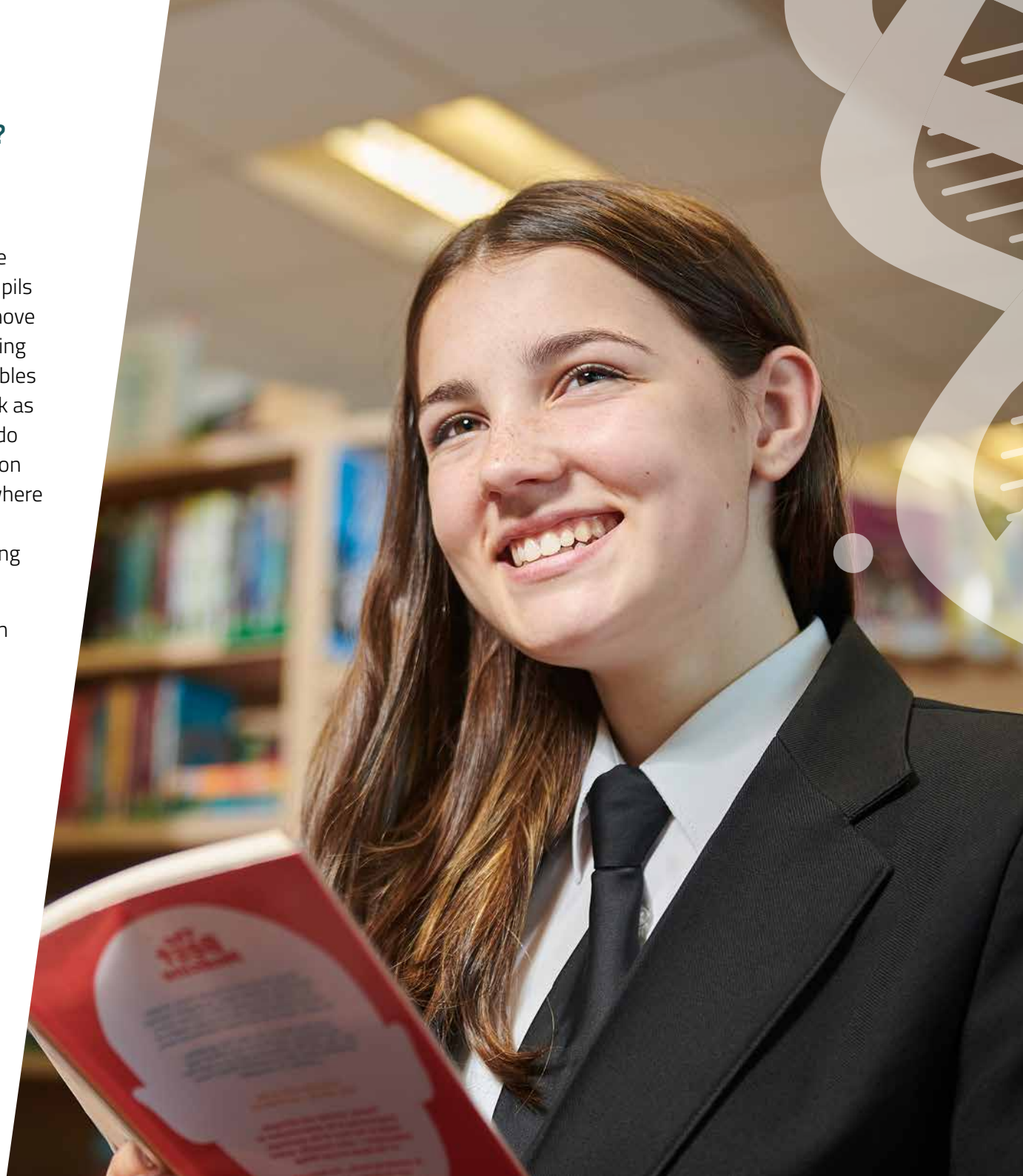
### **The trust has 27,000 centrally distributed lesson plans.**

Lessons are structured in the same way: teachers welcome pupils into the class and put a task in their hands, which pupils complete while the teacher takes the register. They then move on to a starter activity, introducing what is being learnt during that lesson. Pupils work on this collaboratively, sitting in tables of four. The teachers circulate during lessons, marking work as they walk around the classroom. Teachers at NET schools do not take marking home; any marking they do is during lesson time. At the end of the lesson, there is a plenary session, where pupils discuss what they've learnt. The timings of each of these elements is left up to the individual teacher, depending on how they feel the lesson is progressing.

Behaviour systems are streamlined: there is no progression through layers of detentions, as this just creates extra administrative work. There are no rewards points, and no rewards that involve missing learning, such as a day trip to a theme park.

While cultural capital, enrichment activities and soft skills form an integral part of school life, the trust is relentlessly outcomes-focused. This is made explicit in the trust's vision statement, which opens: "We constantly focus on standards as we understand outcomes are paramount."

"It's about kids getting those critical life-chances qualifications," Mr Tarn says, "because that's what's going to affect the opportunities they have for the rest of their lives."



A young boy with short blonde hair, wearing a red school uniform with a white collar, is smiling and holding a book titled 'Castles'. The book cover features a photograph of a castle and the names 'Wendie Freeman' and 'Mike Phillips'. The background is a blurred library or bookshelf.

# How does this work in practice?

## A closer examination of goal-setting and strategy alignment

**GOAL:** All Year 10 pupils should have the literacy skills to access the GCSE curriculum

NET recognises the centrality of reading in education. A reading-strategies overview document discusses “the importance of literacy and reading in improving outcomes and the life chances of our students”.

In its March 2023 summary evaluation of the trust, Ofsted said that reading “runs through the curriculum in each school like letters through a stick of rock”.

The definition of quality in literacy and reading, however, is multifaceted. NET’s literacy strategy is divided into three strands: the mechanics of reading, reading for leisure and pleasure, and reading for knowledge.

Within these three strands, there are 47 systems in place to improve reading in NET schools. All systems were created by NET school leaders and have been adopted by all secondaries in the trust. Examples of these are:

### 1. Mechanics of reading

The trust tests the reading ages of pupils from Year 7 onwards. For those children whose reading ages are furthest from their chronological ages – for example, 18 months younger – it then implements a phonics-based intervention.

“Children do the phonics screening test, and some children fail in Year 1 and will fail again in Year 2,” says Mr Tarn. “Then they don’t revisit phonics again. They don’t continue to learn how to read in terms of breaking down words in a phonics-based approach.

“Then children reach Year 9 and don’t have the reading skills to access the curriculum. But instead of saying, ‘I can’t read,’ they start to misbehave.”

The aim of the NET intervention, therefore, is to provide that missing phonics support. These pupils are taken out their lessons for 30 to 40 minutes a day, in order to do intense, phonics-based reading practice in small groups. The aim is that, by the time they reach Year 10, their reading level is high enough to access the GCSE curriculum.



During a visit to a NET school, an Ofsted inspector questioned the value of a scheme that involves taking children out of class for 30 to 40 minutes each day for six weeks. The trust's response was that these pupils were unable to access the curriculum, anyway – and would continue to be unable to access it for the next four years without this intervention. This was accepted by the inspector.

## 2. Reading for leisure and pleasure

### a. Reading Routes

Every NET secondary has a map on its wall that looks like a giant London tube map. Each map features landmarks of its local area, including NET academies. So, for example, schools around Newcastle have a map that features the Millennium Bridge and the Angel of the North; the map for Middlesbrough schools features the Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art.

The stations, however, are not local areas – they're books. Each line represents a genre of book – there are 18 lines in total, including thrillers, classics, dystopian fiction and adventure novels – and has six stops, or books, along its route.

During the first half of the autumn term, all Year 7 pupils at a NET school attend an assembly where the teacher gives them a brief synopsis of each book on one of the tube lines. The children are given a sheet of paper with the names of all six books on that line; they tick the one they want, and that afternoon the teacher delivers their chosen book to them. As they

progress through the school, they also work their way through different tube lines.

When pupils have read 50 books from the map, they are rewarded with an Amazon Kindle. "I just said okay to that when it was suggested," Mr Tarn says. "I didn't realise I'd be giving away hundreds of them."

### b. Drop Everything and Read

One afternoon each week, schools have a "Drop everything and read" afternoon. First, form tutors read to their classes; afterwards, pupils have a guided-reading session with their chosen book.

## 3. Reading for knowledge

### a. Read Through Me

Children who are read aloud to frequently by adults are much more likely to achieve reading fluency. The Read Through Me strategy therefore provides pupils with the opportunity to hear teachers read aloud to them on a regular basis.

NET teachers are trained to read aloud in a way that demonstrates their thought processes as they read. So, for example, an English teacher might read from a set text, stopping along the way to say: "I'm going to pause here, because there's an ellipsis in the text, and I'm thinking about what's going to happen next."

Pupils who are not fluent readers will not automatically make the connection



between the punctuation marks they see on the page and the way the text should be read. So teachers make that link explicit as they read.

Read Through Me is not, however, limited to English or arts subjects – it is used across the curriculum. So a business-studies teacher might look at a case study with pupils, reading aloud the subtitle and logo give pupils most of the information that they need about the business in question.

Similarly, in maths, teachers will read aloud exam questions to the class, drawing attention to key words: “I know I’m being asked to calculate something here,” or “I need to multiply something.” They will also explain more complicated words – “equilateral”, for example, or “rhombus” – as they encounter them.

This strategy, the trust states: “allows students to view reading as an active process and provides opportunities for precise vocabulary instruction”.

### b. Word Anatomy

NET pupils, a disproportionate number of whom come from disadvantaged backgrounds, often lack the cultural capital to be able to access some of the vocabulary in the curriculum. For example, the trust literacy lead recently had to explain to pupils what a lamb was; they only knew it as Sunday dinner.

This can have an impact on exam performance,

too: a recent GCSE maths question featured the word “apartment”, which was unfamiliar to many pupils. (They would refer to living in a flat.)

The Word Anatomy strategy, therefore, “teaches the students the method of decoding unfamiliar vocabulary and allows them to make links to other vocabulary across the curriculum,” according to the trust.

It does this using morphohology, which is the process of breaking down words into their constituent parts.

In science, for example, the curriculum discusses endothermic and exothermic reactions. Teachers break down the words into prefix, root and suffix. In this instance, the root is “therm”, which pupils might be encouraged to decode for themselves, by linking it to thermal underwear.

And, once pupils know that the prefix “ex” refers to something outside, they are then able to apply that knowledge in different curriculum areas. So, for example, they would be able to work out that external finances in a business-studies lesson referred to finances that came from outside the business.

Every NET lesson includes analysis of one key piece of vocabulary for the relevant topic. The trust subscribes to a platform called Lexonik Cloud – teachers type in a word, and the program breaks that word down for them into its constituent parts – so that teachers do not have to add lexicographic research to their workload.

And one minute of vocabulary work in every lesson ultimately adds up: it means that NET pupils receive an extra 25 minutes of literacy time every week.

### c. Tonne of Knowledge

Every half term, pupils are given a booklet filled with general-knowledge facts: “The collective noun for a group of jellyfish is a smack,” “In Ancient Rome, there were female gladiators known as gladiatrix or gladiatrices” or “The dot over the letters i and j is called a tittle.”

These facts are divided into topics including: history of the world, innovations, numbers and the written word.

One 20-minute tutor period a week is dedicated to discussing the facts in the booklet in more detail. This includes collaborative learning activities, discussion, videos and questions.

At the end of term, teams of pupils are invited to compete in the Tonne of Knowledge Big Quiz, and to celebrate their newly acquired knowledge.

This scheme was motivated by Mr Tarn’s love of pub quizzes. “I’m sick of children leaving school with a nine in science and not knowing what the phases or the moon are, or with a nine in geography and not knowing their capital cities. Sometimes it’s okay to have knowledge just for the sake of having knowledge.”





## GOAL: Continuous innovation, to ensure that the trust is always providing high-quality, effective education for its pupils

**People often question whether it's possible for NET to prescribe what goes on in every one of its schools without limiting innovation.**

And so the trust prescribes the need to innovate.

At NET, innovation is considered integral to maintaining quality. When Mr Tarn arrived at NET in 2016, he brought with him various systems that he knew to be effective. Between 2017 and 2019, the trust went through a period of intense innovation. They examined every system and policy and asked: "Why is that here?" If the answer was: "Because it's always been that way," then they removed it and brought in something new. None of the original 2016 systems remains – every system currently used by the trust was created by an NET staff member.

Teachers and leaders across the trust are constantly challenged to innovate. If they come up with a new idea, the NET central team will show it to the headteachers of each school and ask whether they like it. If they do, then it will be implemented – across all NET schools.

A trust-wide teaching and learning task group meets once or twice a term to question what works and what doesn't, and to look at areas where innovation or change might be needed. And there is a named school-improvement model (a series of points forming the acronym "Northern"), to which the whole trust adheres.

Mr Tarn compares teaching and learning at the trust to a wooden frame placed in a flowing stream. Some systems flow into the frame to replace other systems, no longer used, that are flowing out. Some systems catch on the rocks and change very infrequently, if at all. The framed image changes week by week – but it is always exactly the same across all NET schools.

However, occasionally the trust also asks itself whether those systems that have caught on the rocks should remain constants in the frame – are they now only there because they've always been there?



## 1. Continuous improvement of classroom pedagogy

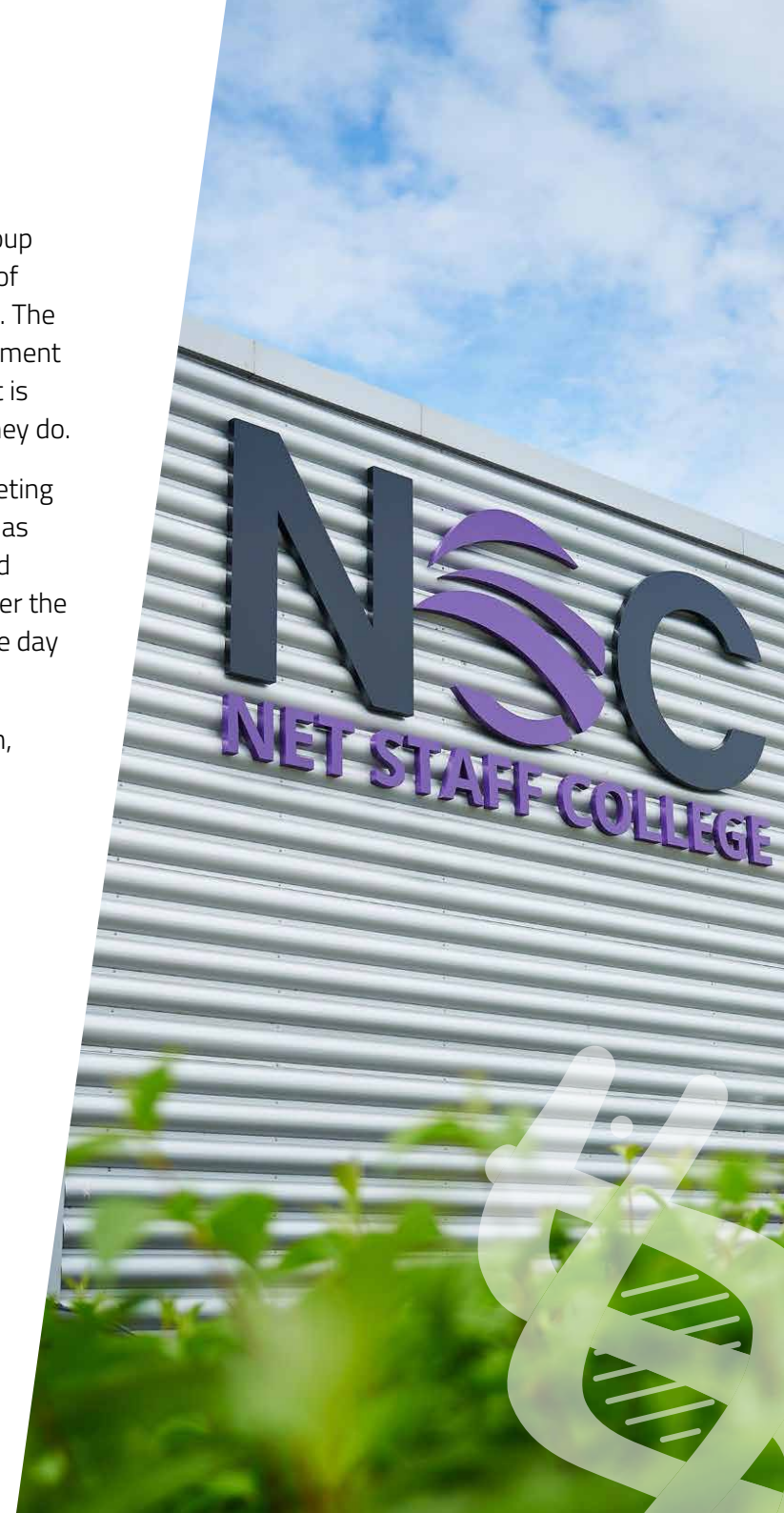
A recent example of the way in which continuous improvement is used to guarantee quality across the trust involved questioning the way that pupils are taught in NET classrooms.

Since 2017, pupils in all NET schools have been taught in collaborative tables of four. English GCSE results have been consistently high across the trust: 67 per cent scored grade 5 or above in 2023, compared with 61 per cent nationally. Maths GCSE results are also above average – 55 per cent achieved grade 5 or above in 2023, compared with 51 per cent nationally – but they are lower than English, bringing down the overall trust score. Heads of maths across the trust began commenting that the system of collaborative learning in groups at NET schools might be holding pupils back. If they had their way, they said, they would put pupils in rows and teach from the front, only moving to collaborative groups when pupils were consolidating what they'd been learning.

So the trust commissioned an exploratory group to take a root-and-branch look at what form of instruction works best, at NET and elsewhere. The group has been holding meetings with department heads and executive heads across the trust; it is visiting schools in other trusts, to see what they do.

Eventually, the group will report back to a meeting attended by the trust executive team, as well as every executive headteacher, headteacher and director of subject from every NET school. After the group's presentation, attendees will spend the day discussing the findings.

And then, at the end of the discussion session, the trust will need to decide what to do. Any decision taken will be immediately rolled out across all the schools in the trust.







## 2. Considering the solution

Any decision about changing how pupils learn in NET classrooms involves broader considerations than simply what is most effective. For example, the trust needs to consider the impact on teaching staff. Standing at the front of the classroom and talking to pupils for half an hour requires significant knowledge, as well as the ability to hold children's attention consistently. It is, therefore, considerably more intensive for the teacher than walking around the classroom, looking at pupils' work and discussing it with them individually.

And, while any change made at trust level will be implemented in all NET schools, do all subjects need to be consistent? For example, could maths be taught differently from art or music? Would that matter, as long as art, music and maths

were taught consistently across all NET schools? "I'm grappling with that at the moment," says Mr Tarn. "We're playing 3D chess between school consistency of delivery and implementation of the curriculum.

"If you put me in a special-measures school, I'll implement everything in six weeks without asking permission. But once schools are high-performing, you risk breaking something that's working if you rush in and change things.

"When you get to the point when you sense you might abandon something that's working, it's terrifying. We're one of the highest-performing trusts in the country. Why would I fundamentally change what goes on in the classroom?"



***"When you get to the point when you sense you might abandon something that's working, it's terrifying. We're one of the highest-performing trusts in the country. Why would I fundamentally change what goes on in the classroom?"***

***Rob Tarn, chief executive, Northern Education Trust***



## GOAL: Trust growth and expansion

**Every school in NET functions in exactly the same way – with exactly the same processes, policies and lesson plans – as all other schools in the trust. When a new idea or innovation is introduced, it is introduced in every school across the trust.**

“The idea of not having consistency terrifies me as CEO,” Mr Tarn says. “Without consistency and without common systems, a school is only as good as its headteacher. And I can’t guarantee that I will always be blessed with the leaders I have today.”

Previously, schools that were absorbed into the trust had been judged ‘inadequate’ or placed in special measures by Ofsted. Headteachers who objected to the centralised NET model left; their successors stayed because they agreed with the model. Sixty-seven out of 74 members of the NET senior leadership team were appointed internally.

“If you rapidly progress from assistant principal to vice principal and then to principal, implementing a school-improvement model that you have contributed to, then the notion of autonomy – or desire for it – are not even in your thinking,” says Mr Tarn. “You love the system.”

More recently, however, schools with strong outcomes have asked to join NET – a development that the trust welcomes on its website: “We believe that any school could reap the benefits and rewards of collaboration as we develop our multi-academy trust.”

Given that these new trust recruits are already achieving good results on their own terms, Mr Tarn has had to ask himself questions about how much the NET model he should be imposing on them.

There are some non-negotiable conditions of NET membership: schools have to adopt the trust’s assessment cycles, exam boards and behaviour policy. “But the rest you can look at as you go along,” says Mr Tarn. “We can talk about it.”

With these schools, there is less enforcement of NET systems, and more exchange of ideas. It may well be that NET sees something in the way that the school operates that it wants to adopt – and therefore introduce across all its schools.

And, equally, the schools see advantages to the NET way of doing things – which is why they asked to join in the first place. Department heads, for example, see that adopting the NET curriculum means receiving a comprehensive series of lesson plans all created by existing heads of departments.

And so assimilation to the NET model happens almost by osmosis. “In the end, five or six months down the line, the systems used at this school will probably be the same as all the other schools in the trust,” Mr Tarn says. “And some systems created at this school may well be used across the trust as well. It’s not a one-way street.”



## Key points

- 100 per cent consistency across all schools: “One school, across many sites”
- 27,000 lesson plans are available for NET teachers – all structured to the NET format
- Staff are asked to innovate – and successful innovations introduced across all schools
- Teaching and learning task group regularly question the status quo
- Headteachers and heads of department are involved in trust decision-making
- System of imposing NET structures on new member schools being questioned as higher-performing schools join – but goal is still 100 per cent conformity

## Resources

- [NET vision, values and school-improvement model](#)
- [NET reading strategy overview](#)
- [Reading Routes overview](#)
- Reading Routes maps for [Northern](#), [Southern](#) and [Central](#) areas of the North East
- Tonne of Knowledge: sample booklets [here](#) and [here](#)
- NET runs regular access days for staff from other trusts, and welcomes enquiries for more information about any of its resources

[schoolimprovementhub.org](https://schoolimprovementhub.org)



School  
Improvement  
Hub