The DNA of trust-led school improvement: a conceptual model

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Introduction

The DNA of trust-led school improvement

In 1953 two Cambridge scientists discovered the structure of DNA and declared they had "discovered the secret of life." Of course, although Crick and Watson's discovery was ground-breaking and laid the way for huge advances in scientific understanding, it was built on the work that had come before, including by the X-ray crystallographer Rosalind Franklin. Theory, experiment and empirical evidence built over many years towards the understanding of DNA we now hold.

While knowledge develops and is legitimised by distinctive processes in different fields, the notion that knowledge often builds on knowledge, frequently in communities of practice, is important. While school trusts may not be grappling with uncovering the "secret of life", they are at the vanguard of attempts to build knowledge about improvement in a group of schools. Just as Crick, Watson, Franklin and others contributed to the discovery of DNA, we are calling on the trust sector to work together to build knowledge about school improvement at scale. This is one reason why we are invoking the notion of discovery in this paper.

A second link we draw to the discovery of DNA is in the structure of the conceptual model we outline. Similar to how DNA is structured in a distinctive double helix shape, the conceptual model of trust-led school improvement is structured into three inseparable and intertwined strands forming a 'triple helix'. It is a theoretical device intended to illustrate the complex and interdependent considerations involved in school improvement.

We hope the triple helix conceptual model is useful to colleagues working in trusts, both to support their own school improvement practice and to work together across the sector to build knowledge about how to improve schools at scale.

A strong trust

In February 2022 CST published a discussion paper, *What is a strong trust?*, which opened up a sector discussion about the facets of effective trusts.[1] This was followed in April by *Building strong trusts*, which identified seven domains of strong school trusts.[2] One of these is school improvement at a scale. The paper argues that in strong trusts, "a strong conception of quality and culture of continuous improvement is pervasive across all the schools in the group."

Similarly, CST's description of a strong trust also highlighted the fundamental importance of 'high quality, inclusive education'. Taken together, these two elements of CST's strong trust description recognise that a trust's fundamental objective is to improve education for the public benefit. As such, the other facets of the trust must be in service of the ongoing

1 Cruddas, L (2022) *What is a strong trust? A CST discussion paper*. Nottingham: Confederation of School Trusts.
2 Cruddas, L (2023) *Building strong trusts*. Nottingham: Confederation of School Trusts

pursuit to enhance education of all children.

Building strong trusts laid down a mission for CST, and for the sector:

> "We are trying to codify how some of our best trusts do school improvement at scale – how they put improvement front and centre of all that they do; how they develop strong theorised models of improvement and then are able to implement/deliver these effectively across their schools. It is important to note that there is not a consensus around the model of improvement and there are different models of improvement which appear to be effective in different trusts and different contexts."

This led to the establishment of CST's inquiry into trust-led school improvement in Spring 2023. The work of that inquiry has helped to shape the approach and conceptual model described in this paper.

The aim of this work is to establish a common set of concepts, language and framework that will allow trusts to explore, capture and compare their models of school improvement so that we can build more knowledge and a stronger evidence base about what is more likely to work when improving schools at scale.

Accordingly, it does not replace or supersede CST's *Building strong trusts* or the accompany assurance framework.[3] Rather, it seeks to 'open the black box' of what is taking place within the domain of school improvement at scale identified in those overarching frameworks of trust quality. As such, it exists within CST's broader framing of what makes a strong trust.

School improvement at scale

The school trust sector is positioned at the vanguard of school improvement in England. The first trusts were established primarily to improve schools where there had been long term underperformance. Since then, as the trust sector has grown, it has been interwoven with the notion of school improvement.

Trust-led school improvement may be seen as a continuation and tightening up of previous collaborative, sector-led approaches, pioneered in London Challenge, the City Challenges and Teaching Schools. What is different in trusts is that these approaches are coupled with formal accountability in a single legal entity.

There is variability in the trust system, but we do know that some trusts have systemically improved schools in regions or nationally. The Department for Education's analysis demonstrates this success:

> "Robust analysis comparing annual cohorts of sponsored academies 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 7 out of 10 sponsored academies which were found to be underperforming as an LA maintained school in their previous inspection now have a good or outstanding rating."[4]

Unfortunately, the empirical evidence base that explains how such improvements have been achieved is not yet sufficiently mature.

In the meantime, the sector must work with the best knowledge it has about trust-

3 CST (2023) *Building strong trusts: assurance framework*.
4 Department for Education (2022) *The case for a fully trust-led system*.

led school improvement at scale. This will require a commitment to theory and system building as well as evidence collection. As Kurt Lewin famously noted, 'there is nothing so practical as a good theory.'

This paper contributes to this by developing a conceptual model for trust-led school improvement; one that is emergent from compelling models from other sectors and evidence from the education system.

The conceptual model

The conceptual model is the output of CST's inquiry into trust-led school improvement, which was launched in 2023. The terminology of 'trust-led' is used to reflect the unique contribution this work is intended to make to the school improvement landscape, specifically focusing on what groups of schools in a single governance arrangement (a school trust) can do improve education at scale. This is on the supposition there are affordances and possibilities a group of schools can leverage that a single school cannot. It should not be taken to imply a particular size, type of trust or the extent of 'central' control exerted within a trust.

Published alongside this paper is a companion paper that offers suggestions about how trusts and other organisations might use the conceptual model, both to improve their own practices and to add to the development of a broader sector-wide understanding and evidence base about trust-led school improvement.

The conceptual model itself can be found in the final section of this paper.

Development of the model

A common conversation

While there is some research into the efficacy of trusts as school improvers (Hutchings & Francis 2018), there is not yet sufficient research into how the most effective trusts are systemically improving schools.[5] Indeed, in that same publication, six years ago, Hutchings and Francis argued: "there is little evidence that… the considerable knowledge base about how to improve struggling schools is being effectively passed... We repeat our call for further analysis and learning from successful chains (and other successful groups of schools), and for opportunities to be created for school groups to learn from each other."

This reflection refers to one aspect of school improvement: 'struggling' schools. But the imperative of improvement is not the preserve of the weakest schools; it is something that all schools strive for. However, it is plausible that how a trust nurtures improvement in a school that is already providing a good quality for its pupils might be different to how it leads improvement in a school that is in need of significant turn round.

This is reflected in Carter & McInerney's (2020) 'four phases of a school improvement journey'.[6] Added to this we can also hypothesise that variances in school and trust context add further complexity, and there will undoubtedly be other factors too.

There is also a linguistic and conceptual hurdle to overcome in the sector. The notion of the 'school improvement model' is one that many trusts seem to recognise, and some talk about, but its meaning seems to vary. In some trusts it's about the staffing structure, while in others it's about specific curriculum and pedagogical approaches. Others prefer to talk about a strategy rather than a model, and sometimes these are used interchangeably.

In part this lack of common vocabulary may be because trust leaders appear think in different ways about how to bring about school improvement (Rollett, 2024), but it also seems to be because the terminology itself lacks an agreed definition.[7]

As a result of the above, it is not yet possible to identify and codify a single evidence-based and highly specified 'school improvement model' or strategy that trusts should follow. Indeed, it may be that due to the complexity involved, it will never be possible – or desirable - to land on a single model, strategy or process; a one size that fits all.

While the evidence about specific trust models of improvement is underdeveloped, there is an abundant literature and evidence base about improvement processes more generally, from industry as well as public services. Starting from these, it is possible to construct an optimal conceptual model that captures what are

5 Hutchings, M and Francis, B (2018) *Chain Effects 2018: The impact of academy chains on low-income pupils*. The Sutton Trust.
6 Carter, D and McInerney, L (2020) *Leading Academy Trusts*. Woodbridge: John Catt
7 Rollett, S (2024) *Trust improvement perspectives*. Nottingham: Confederation of School Trusts

considered to be the most common facets of effective improvement practices.

Such a model can then be calibrated with reference to the available evidence from education, giving us a 'best guess' conceptual framework for the considerations that a trust's own model/strategy for improvement should take account of.

What follows is a summary of the evidence and improvement approaches that were used by to construct such a conceptual model – one that does not prescribe specific practices but identifies the key concerns trusts should think about in constructing and refining their own models/strategies for school improvement.

Improvement approaches in other sectors

Lean is a popular improvement model used in business and industry. It was originally used by Krafcik (1988) to describe processes in Japanese industry that appeared to successfully maximize value while minimizing waste[8], an idea subsequently popularised by Womack et al. (1990).[9]

Lean's focus on defining value from the consumer's perspective is likely to resonate in public services, including education. Benefits of Lean can include reduced costs and improved productivity, although evidence from healthcare reveals challenges in sustaining gains once initial training and support ends, suggesting a need for deeper cultural and organizational change (D'Andreamatteo et al., 2015).[10] Furthermore, a relocation of Lean from business to the public sector may overlook vital differences, such as commissioning and the nature of capacity (Radnor et al., 2012), and the role of government and other agencies in shaping the nature of education through its myriad levers.[11]

That said, Lean has permeated many models of improvement in business and public services, including health care, and as such some of the key principles are reflected in the conceptual model outlined later.

Six Sigma

Six Sigma is a rigorous, data-driven methodology for eliminating defects and variability in business processes. It originated at Motorola in the 1980s and was popularized by GE (Pande et al., 2000).[12]

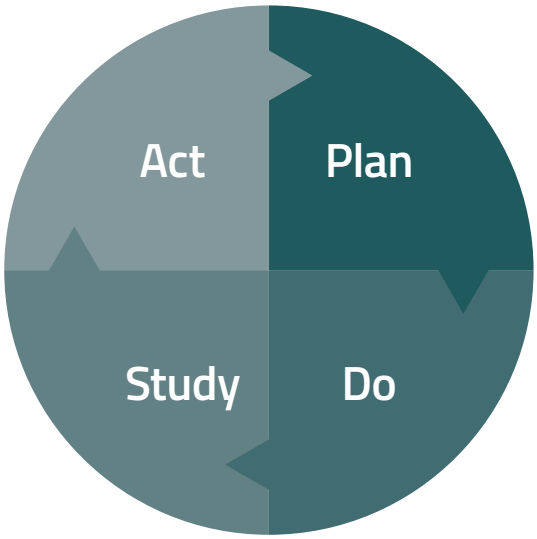
Six Sigma follows a structured sequence of steps known as DMAIC - Define, Measure, Analyze, Improve, Control. Comprehensive Six Sigma implementation requires extensive organizational training. Benefits of Six Sigma in industry include reducing defects and costs, improving quality, and increasing customer satisfaction (Goh, 2010).[13]

However, it requires significant time and financial investment. And there are questions over whether improvement models like Lean and Six Sigma can be applied in public services because "the private sector 'raison d'etre' of Lean is on efficiency and cost reduction – yet public services must also consider effectiveness and equity," (Radnor et al. 2013, 269).[14]

8 Krafcik, J F (1998) 'Triumph of the lean production system'. *Sloan Management Review*, 30(1):41–52.
9 Womack, J P, Jones, D T, & Roos, D (1990). *Machine that changed the world*. Simon and Schuster.
10 D'Andreamatteo, A *et al.* (2015) 'Lean in healthcare', *Health Policy*, 119(9), pp. 1197–1209.
11 Radnor, Z J, Holweg, M, & Waring, J (2012). 'Lean in healthcare: the unfilled promise?'. *Social science & medicine*, 74(3), 364-371.
12 Pande, P S, Neuman, R P, & Cavanagh, R R (2000). *The Six Sigma Way: How GE, Motorola, and Other Top Companies are Honing Their Performance*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
13 Goh, T N (2010). 'Six Sigma in industry: Some observations after twenty-five years'. *Quality and Reliability Engineering International*, 26(2), 221-227.
14 Radnor, Z, & Osborne, S P (2013). 'Lean: a failed theory for public services?'. *Public Management Review*,

Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA)

The iterative Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) model tests small changes through rapid cycles of experimentation and revision leading to wider improvement. It tends to feature, in one form or another, as a component of other approaches such as Lean and Six Sigma.



However, Reed and Card (2016) identify several problems in how PDSA cycles are often implemented.[15] For example, they describe cycles that get stuck in a 'do, do, do' phase, failing to progress to the study phase and thus missing opportunities to support organisational learning. Furthermore, they claim that PDSA cycles tend to be implemented in relation to simple linear activities, rather than wider ranging or deeper changes.

Although a simple PDSA cycle on its own might not be sufficiently detailed and specialized to support the development of a conceptual model for trust-led school improvement, all of the PDSA principles are visible in the model outline towards the end of this paper.

Insights from improvement processes in healthcare

Recent trends in the healthcare sector show quality and improvement models are increasingly focusing more on people. Vanhaecht et al. (2021) argue: "High quality is only possible if we include core values of dignity and respect, holistic care, partnership, and kindness with compassion in our daily practice for every stakeholder at every managerial and policy level."[16]

Furthermore, practice in the health sector situates quality improvement alongside three other aspects of quality management: quality planning, quality control and quality assurance:

> "Quality improvement is a systematic and applied approach to solving a complex issue, through testing and learning, measuring as you go, and deeply involving those closest to the issue in the improvement process. Anyone who has undertaken quality improvement work will testify that it is not easy—you are generally tackling a problem to which we do not know the solution, and where part of the answer is about behaviours, and hearts and minds."
> Shah, 2020[17]

Similarly, Claessens et al. (2022) situate quality improvement within a broader framework of quality management, which includes quality design & planning, quality control, quality leadership, quality culture and quality context.[18]

On the issues of culture for improvement, the Virginia Mason Partnership identified six key drivers for a culture of continuous improvements (Burgess 2022), which emphasises aspects such as cultural readiness, relationships and the importance of embedding improvement routines into everyday practice, some of which are adopted in the conceptual model sketched out below.[19]

15(2), 265-287.
15 Reed, J E, & Card, A J (2016). 'The problem with Plan-Do-Study-Act cycles'. *BMJ quality & safety*, 25(3), 147-152.
16 Vanhaecht, K, De Ridder, D, Seys, D, Brouwers, J, Claessens, F, Van Wilder, A, Panella, M, Batalden, P, Lachman, P (2021) 'The History of Quality: From an Eye for an Eye, Through Love, and Towards a Multidimensional Concept for Patients, Kin, and Professionals'. *European Urology Focus*, 7 (5) 937-939,
17 Shah, A (2020) 'How to move beyond quality improvement projects'. *BMJ* 370
18 Claessens F, Seys D, Brouwers J, Van Wilder A, Jans A, Castro EM, et al. (2022) 'A co-creation roadmap towards sustainable quality of care: A multi-method study'. *PLoS ONE* 17(6)
19 Burgess, N (2022) Six key lessons from the NHS and Virginia Mason Institute partnership. Warwick Business School.

School improvement processes and models

The school improvement cycle has tended to involve auditing current performance, developing strategic plans and interventions, implementing changes, and monitoring/reviewing progress (Hargreaves, 1995). While logical, some suggest such models oversimplify improvement into a linear sequence rather than continuous learning (Maden, 2001).[20]

Other research focuses on specific activities likely to improve schools, rather than an overarching process. Common factors cited include quality teaching, monitoring progress, and high expectations (Muijs et al., 2004).[21] However, critics argue lists of decontextualized factors insufficiently capture the complexity of improvement (Harris et al., 2013).[22]

Park et al. (2013) propose an ecological model recognizing school improvement as an open, interactive, non-linear process involving adaptation to changing contexts.[23] Harris (2011) emphasises the importance of capacity building across the organization, not isolated initiatives.[24] As such, sustained learning is seen to be key to improvement.

Implementing improvement

The process of improving schools reaches beyond just the enactment of specific initiatives. This is why the conceptual model we outline below encompasses a broad view of improvement that takes account of a range of phenomena that are likely to underlie improvement processes in a trust, including objective setting, building culture, and connecting colleagues across the organisation.

That said, somewhere within a trust or school's approach to improvement there will likely be specific initiatives intended to improve particular aspects of education. Implementing these initiatives well is at least as important as the process of identifying the things you want to improve and understanding the associated evidence.

The Education Endowment Foundation's (EEF) guidance on implementation (Sharples, Eaton & Boughelaf, 2024) is a useful reference point.[25] It also takes a broad view of implementing improvement, emphasising the social aspect of effective improvement. It is a slightly different proposition to the conceptual model we outline below because our work is intended to speak to trust-led school improvement, and

20 Maden, M (Ed). (2001). *Success Against the Odds, Five Years On: Revisiting Effective Schools in Disadvantaged Areas*. Routledge.
21 Muijs, D, Harris, A, Chapman, C, Stoll, L, & Russ, J (2004). 'Improving Schools in Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Areas–A Review of Research Evidence'. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 15(2), 149-175.
22 Harris, A, Jones, M, & Baba, S (2013). 'Distributed leadership and digital collaborative learning: A synergistic relationship?'. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 44(6), 926-939.
23 Park, V, Daly, A J, & Guerra, A W (2013). 'Strategic framing: How leaders craft the meaning of data to maximize strategic change'. *Educational Policy*, 27(1), 123-149.
24 Harris, A (2011). 'System improvement through collective capacity building'. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 49(6), 624-636.
25 Sharples, J, Eaton J & Boughelaf J (2024) *A School's Guide to Implementation*. Education Endowment Foundation.

the affordances that may bring, rather than school improvement more generally. But the EEF guidance reflects some similar concepts and is a useful framework to support the implementation of evidence-informed decisions.

The EEF's three recommendations on effective implementation in schools are:

1. Adopt the behaviours that drive effective implementation:
   - **Engage** people so they can shape what happens while also providing overall direction
   - **Unite** people around what is being implemented, how it will be implemented, and why it matters
   - **Reflect**, monitor, and adapt to improve implementation
2. Attend to the contextual factors that influence implementation
   Consider whether an approach is evidence-informed, suitable for the setting and feasible to implement. At the same time, leaders should develop an infrastructure that supports implementation and ensure that the right people are in place who can lead and influence implementation.
3. Use a structured but flexible implementation process
   Treat implementation as an ongoing process of learning and reflection throughout the Explore, Prepare, Deliver and Sustain phases of the effort. Use a range of implementation strategies (not training alone) to support changes in practice.

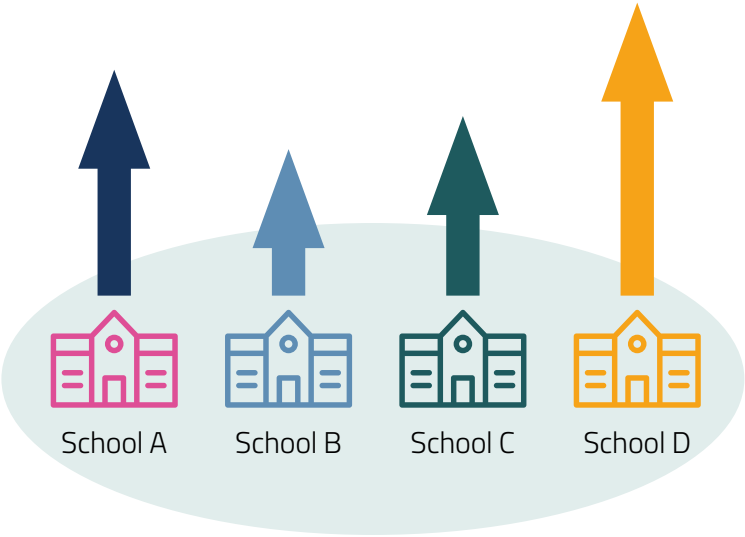
By attending the contextual factors and engaging, uniting and reflecting throughout an ongoing process of continuous learning and improvement, an organisation improves implementation and the way in which the process of change is experienced by staff. This in turn fosters a positive implementation climate which further supports effective implementation (i.e. is self-reinforcing).

We reflect such ideas in the 'Implementing Improvement' part of our conceptual model, but it is important to note EEF's framework is broader than the 'doing' phase alone and you will see helpful overlap between the EEF's guidance and several other components of our conceptual model for trust-led school improvement.

The vertical, horizontal and systemic: seeing trust-led school improvement in four dimensions

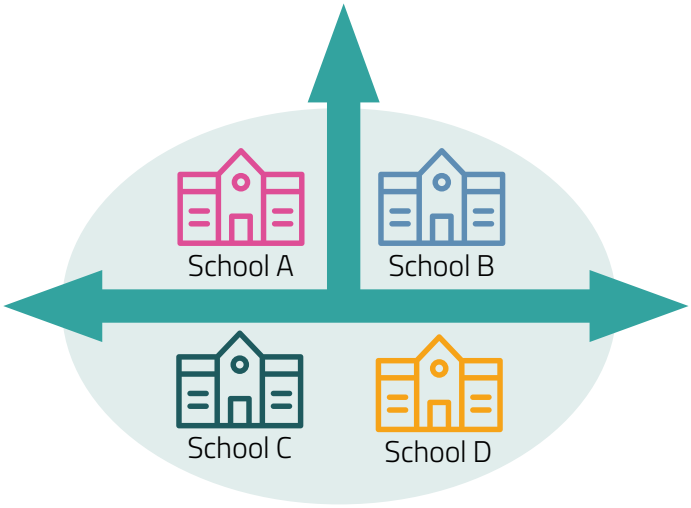
Traditionally, school improvement has been concerned with what can be achieved within and by the unit of the school, over a specified period of time (thereby establishing two dimensions of improvement). This has tended to lead to a model of trust-led school improvement that deals with each school separately, plotting each school's path on an improvement trajectory distinct from the others. In some cases this has meant trusts addressing improvement challenges in its schools sequentially or separately from on another.

We can see some of this in Sir David Carter's (2016) four-stage improvement model and accompanying 'spaghetti' diagram. It's not that this is poor practice. Indeed, it is likely to be inevitable to some degree given the different contexts and strengths/weaknesses schools might have. However, what if there is untapped potential in looking at a third dimension: improvement across the trust, and a fourth dimension: improvement across the sector?



Segmented 'vertical' improvement within a trust

For example, rather than asking how, individually, we might improve the quality of teaching in school A, and then school B, and so on, what if we ask: "How can we use the expertise across the trust to improve the quality of teaching in all our schools?" This is not a question about control from the centre, rather it is about creating a space to consider how a trust can facilitate and enable collective capacity and expertise from across the group, leveraged to maximum effect for all pupils, in every school, first within the trust and ultimately across the sector beyond it.



'Horizontal' and 'vertical' improvement within a trust

If we characterise the traditional segmented approach to school improvement as being vertical in nature (an upward path of improvement for each school in isolation), acknowledging the role of the trust brings another dimension into play: the horizontal. This is the plane that cuts across schools and internal trust boundaries, allowing us to plan and implement improvements that leverage the collective capacity of the trust.

This is where recent theorisation about trusts as knowledge-building institutions comes into play as a key lever for improvement (Bauckham & Cruddas, 2021).[26] It is also the perspective that informs growing efforts in the sector to establish communities of improvement across trusts (Rollett, 2021)[27], and to bring together professional development in new and powerful ways across the group (Barker & Patten, 2022).[28] All of these approaches to improvement are situated in the 'horizontal plane': trust-wide improvement.

Doing so allows us to consider and plan for improvement activity that works in both dimensions: within individual schools (vertical), or across all schools within a trust (horizontal). This brings into sharper focus the additional value of trusts that may not be acquired through the use of external school improvement services or input from third-party organisations: collective capacity and efficacy across the group.

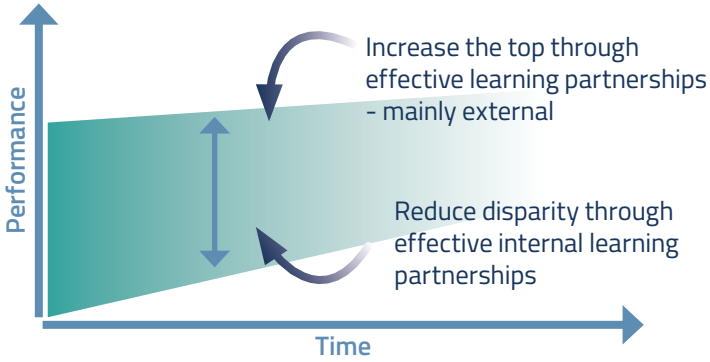
As the sector matures, a further question arises about how to harness the collective capacity of trusts across the system. If we want to improve the life chances of all children, then we need to reduce disparities in performance between trusts as well as within them.

In developing the original Teaching School concept, Berwick and Matthews (2007) emphasised how continued improvement and growth of the top through external partnerships could provide the capacity to

26 Bauckham, I and Cruddas, L (2021) *Knowledge building: School improvement at scale*. Nottingham: CST
27 Rollett, S (2021) *Communities of improvement: School trusts as fields of practice*. Nottigham: CST
28 Barker and Patten, (2022) *Professional development in school trusts: Capacity, conditions, and culture*. Nottingham: CST

accelerate improvement for those with further to travel.[29] As a result the whole system moves up, achieving 'upwards convergence'. Upwards convergence "is about raising the performance of the highest achieving [schools] while reducing the gap between them and the lower achieving".

More recently, Chhatwal (2021) has argued how upwards convergence can apply equally to school trusts.[30] It depends on deep and sustained collaboration between trusts to identify and share effective school improvement practice, based on understanding not just what works, but why and how – a process which can be enabled by robust peer review, and which can drive sector-led systemic improvements.



Berwick's concept of 'upward convergence'

Navigating complexity

The conceptual model is not a manual that specifies in detail how all trusts should go about improving their schools, it is an overarching framework. Schools and trusts are adaptive complex systems (Keshavarz et al., 2010) and it is hard "to predict how social complex adaptative systems such as schools react to change".[31] This suggests that approaches to trust-led school improvement are unlikely to be successful if it is assumed that mechanistic improvement models can simply be replicated from one trust to another.

This is also reflected in Mason's (2008) argument that educational improvement is not only highly contextual but also contingent on a complex range of interrelated dependencies.[32] As such "change in education, at whatever level, is not so much a consequence of effecting change in one particular factor or variable, no matter how powerful the influence of that factor. It is more a case of generating momentum in a new direction by attention to as many factors as possible".

While it is hard to predict cause and effect relationships at the level of whole-school effectiveness, we know more about cause-and-effect relationships at the more granular levels of teacher and leader practice, and thus leaders should particularly attend to these because – taken together - a multi-pronged improvement programme consisting of actions known to yield impact is our best bet to navigate a complex system:

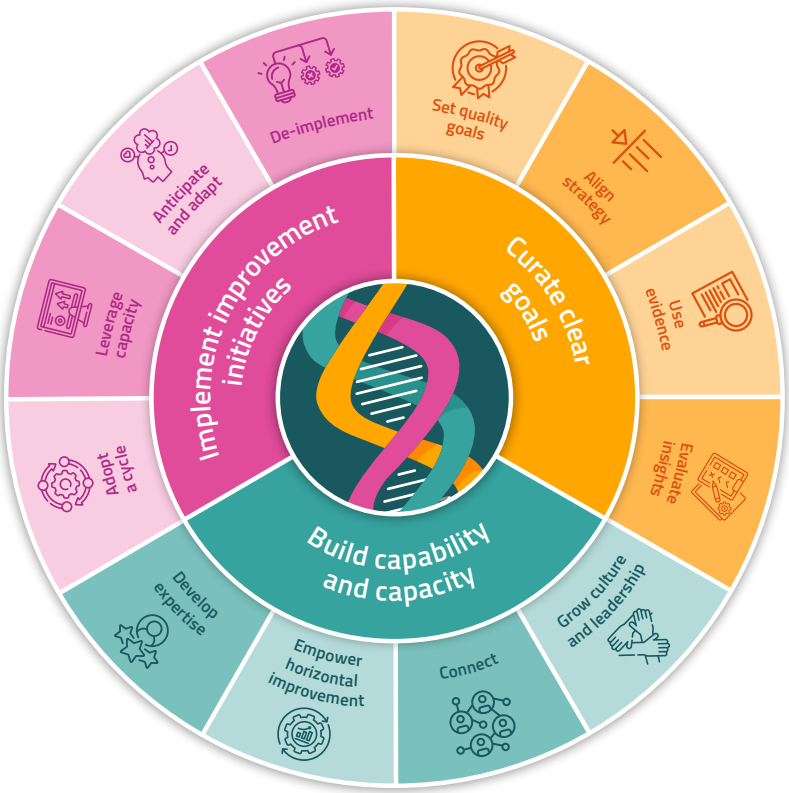
> "Despite complexity theory's relative inability to predict the direction or nature of change, by implementing at each constituent level changes whose outcome we can predict with reasonable confidence, we are at least influencing change in the appropriate direction and surely stand a good chance of effecting the desired changes across the complex system as a whole"
> (Mason, 2008).

29 Berwick, G and Matthews, P (2007) *The Teaching School Concept*. Challenge Partners
30 Chhatwal, K (2021) 'It's All About Trust! Developing Trust Leaders'. *Teaching Times*
31 Keshavarz, N, Nutbeam, D, Rowling, L, & Khavarpour, F (2010). 'Schools as social complex adaptive systems: A new way to understand the challenges of introducing the health promoting schools concept.' *Social Science & Medicine*, 70(10), 1467-1474.
32 Mason, M (2008). 'What is complexity theory and what are its implications for educational change?' *Educational philosophy and theory*, 40(1), 35-49.

The conceptual model

The conceptual model is structured as a triple helix consisting of three strands:

- Curate clear goals
  This strand is about defining clear purposes, strategies & goals so you know what you're aiming for and how you how you plan to get there.
- Build capability & capacity
  This strand is about shaping the people, culture & capacity within the organisation, in order to create the conditions for sustainable improvement.
- Implement improvement initiatives
  This strand is about the ongoing process of implementing improvement, iterating and refining as plans are enacted.



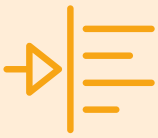
It is important to understand the model does not seek to specify what a trust might seek to improve within its schools, but rather it outlines the key aspects of how a school improvement process, strategy or model is enacted within the trust. Accordingly, it does not assert that particular aspects of school practice, such as curriculum, pedagogy and behaviour should be improved (though a trust might determine they should be).

This allows the model to 'speak to' improvement models and strategies that span the potentially infinite range of things a school or trust could seek to improve. If a trust thinks the curriculum, for example, is central to school improvement, then this would be reflected in various components within the model, including how the trust defines it's conception of quality and improvement goals. It could also flow into other aspects of the model. For example, there might be considerations linked to school culture that are pertinent to curriculum improvement, or the development of expertise.

Essentially, the model is intended to help trusts trace a pathway from what their improvement model/strategy intends to address to a holistic consideration of how they do this.

Curate clear goals

Define clear purposes, strategies and goals so you know what you're aiming for and how you plan to get there

COMPONENT	IN MORE DETAIL	EXAMPLES OF THIS IN PRACTICE
 **Set quality goals**	Define the quality the trust is aiming for, and the specific goals needed to achieve this.	▪ What the school improvement model/strategy says (explicitly or implicitly) is effective practice. ▪ Codifying what effective practice looks like in schools & classrooms. ▪ What the school articulates, for example through job descriptions or a school prospectus, about its aims.
 **Align strategy**	Ensure alignment between school improvement objectives and wider trust strategy.	▪ Embedding wider trust improvement objectives into school level improvement plans. ▪ Having a clear strategy for what is determined as a trust and where improvement planning sits locally, and why. ▪ Having clear & coherent improvement goals & strategies that are understood by all.
 **Use evidence**	Use evidence to identify the actions most likely to build momentum in the desired direction.	▪ Building evidence into improvement models & strategies. ▪ Staff research reading groups. ▪ Evidence/research libraries staff can use.
 **Evaluate insights**	Use quality evaluative tools to understand the performance of schools and the trust.	▪ Using trust peer review to identify strengths & areas for improvement. ▪ Using a common assessment system for reading at Year 7, to allow comparisons across the group. ▪ Using a trust-wide data system to provide insight on where performance is stronger/weaker to inform strategy & deployment.

Build capability and capacity

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

COMPONENT	IN MORE DETAIL	EXAMPLES OF THIS IN PRACTICE
 **Develop expertise**	Put expertise and professional learning at the heart of improvement.	▪ Prioritising CPD within improvement plans. ▪ Encouraging teachers to be part of subject communities. ▪ Investing in high quality leadership development programmes for new leaders.
 **Empower horizontal improvement**	Improve practice across a group of schools simultaneously, rather than just 'one school at a time'.	▪ Trust-wide subject networks & CPD. ▪ Setting shared improvement priorities across the trust. ▪ Bringing together subject leaders across the trust to develop and/or align the curriculum.
 **Connect**	Build connections across the organisation.	▪ Ensure staff don't work in silos by establishing working groups on specific issues. ▪ Holding whole-trust conferences to support improvement. ▪ Participating in professional networks and initiatives beyond the school/trust.
 **Grow culture and leadership**	Establish a culture where leadership and teaching can flourish.	▪ Being explicit about 'how we do it here' (whether at trust or school level). ▪ Consciously curating the leadership behaviours that are valued through mentoring & coaching. ▪ Codifying what standards of classroom behaviour explicitly teaching these to children.

Implement improvement initiatives

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

COMPONENT	IN MORE DETAIL	EXAMPLES OF THIS IN PRACTICE
 **Adopt a cycle**	Adopt the behaviours that drive implementation (Engage, Unite, Reflect). Do this whilst tending to contextual factors and using a structured but flexible implementation process: Explore, Prepare, Deliver, Sustain).	▪ Embedding EEF Implementation guidance in improvement initiatives. ▪ Establishing an improvement cycle that allows for evaluation. ▪ Providing time for staff to reflect on practice.
 **Leverage capacity**	Match improvement initiatives with capacity to deliver.	▪ Deploying expert teachers from a central team to support subject teaching. ▪ Deploying into a school leaders who have prior experience of 'turn around' in the trust. ▪ A budget to support improvement initiatives across the trust.
 **Anticipate and adapt**	Know what's likely to cause failure and how you will spot it. Learning from it and adapting or ejecting the failing action.	▪ Drawing on experience to anticipate likely implementation challenges. ▪ Evaluating & adapting curriculum plans. ▪ Establishing key metrics and milestones that will indicate the path to success.
 **De-implement**	De-implement initiatives that are not effective, or less effective than alternative options.	▪ Reviewing the opportunity cost of low impact teaching initiatives. ▪ Reducing teacher workload. ▪ Having a 'one in, one out' policy when introducing new initiatives. What will we stop doing in order to implement this?

Into the future

Research suggests improvement in complex organisations is not a linear activity, so a vital part of the process is ongoing learning and iteration. For this reason, the three strands of the model should be thought of as feedback loops rather than workstreams to be completed. Although displayed in tables as separate parts for clarity, the reality is that the strands of the model's triple helix are intertwined. It is hoped it proves useful in supporting trusts to think about and refine their own improvement models and strategies, helping to make the implicit become explicit.

The conceptual model is not intended to provide a highly mechanistic or rigid sequence as this may not be the best way to help trusts navigate their own unique improvement contexts.

However, it is hoped this conceptual model provides an evidence-based framework that will help trusts to consider how their own specific improvement models/ approaches address these key aspects.

CST has also published a guide (Rollett, 2024b) for trusts to help them explore and use the conceptual model, which we hope is a useful resource to support trusts and others in their thinking about trust-led school improvement.

As trusts engage with the model and the sector codifies its approaches to school improvement, it is plausible that the model itself will need to adapt and be iterated.

To that end, this paper closes by returning to where it began - the mission to build knowledge. We don't claim to having made a 'discovery' in the way Crick, Watson, and Franklin did in 1953: this conceptual model is not a recipe or an explanation of exactly how trust-led school improvement takes place, but we hope it will support the sector nonetheless to come together and collectively build knowledge over time.

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School Improvement Hub

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.

schoolimprovementhub.org

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