



School
Improvement
Hub

Case study

SHARE Multi Academy Trust



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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

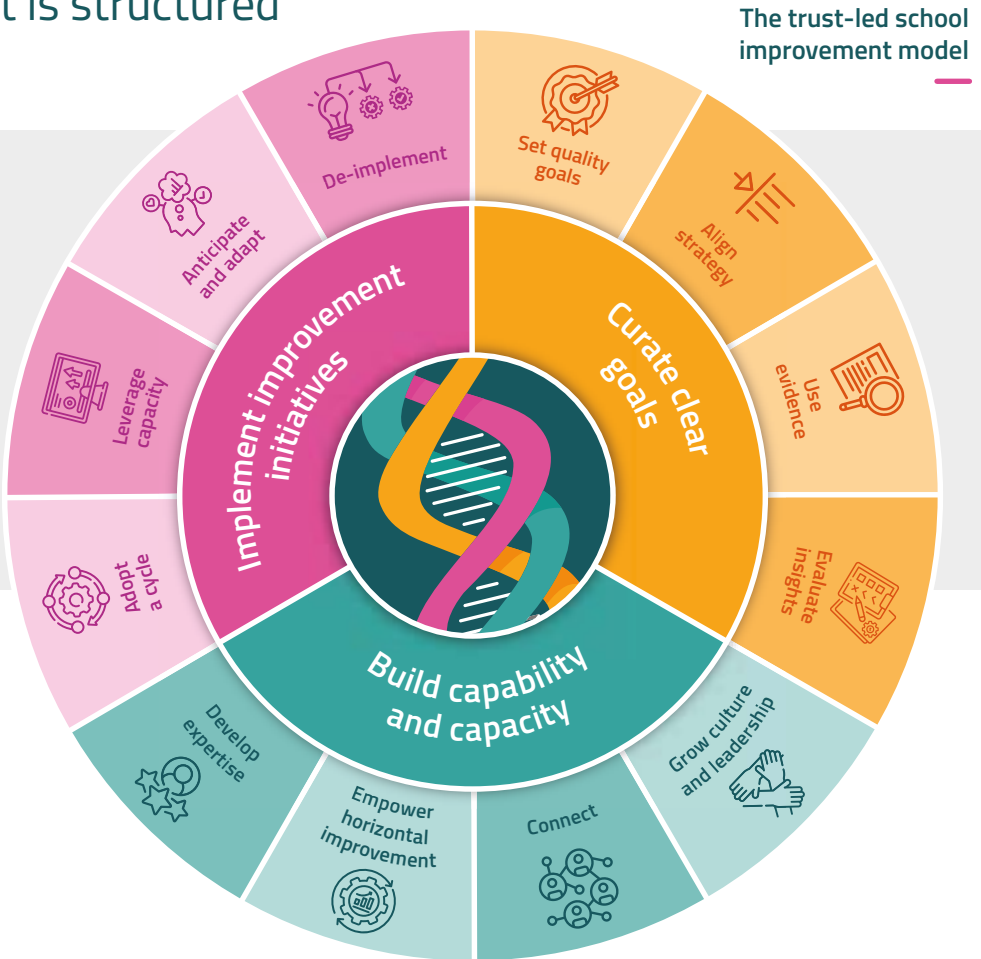
The ongoing process of implementing improvement, iterating and refining as plans are enacted

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



And the "Implement improvement initiatives" strand breaks down into the following components:

- Adopt a cycle
- Leverage capacity
- Anticipate and adapt
- De-implement

Case study: SHARE Multi Academy Trust

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

Evaluate insights

Use quality evaluative tools to understand the performance of schools and 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



TRUST OVERVIEW

Trust: SHARE Multi Academy Trust

CEO: John McNally

Founded: 2011

Schools: Four primary schools and four secondaries, all in West Yorkshire

School sizes: The largest school in the trust, Shelley College, has 1,300 students. The smallest, Woodside Green, has 161 pupils on roll.

Percentage of disadvantaged students: 30% of pupils are eligible for pupil premium – 40% at primary and 28% at secondary

Percentage of students receiving free school meals: 29%

Percentage of students speaking English as an additional language: 18%

MAT Progress 8 score: +0.44 (2022-23)

Percentage of students achieving grade 5 or above in EBacc subjects at GCSE: 22% (2022-23)

Ofsted: Five SHARE schools were failing before joining the trust. Three had been judged inadequate, and two had been rated requires improvement more than once. All five schools are now rated good by Ofsted.



BACKGROUND

SHARE Multi Academy Trust officially came into being in 2014. However, its story begins three years earlier, in 2011, when its founding school, Shelley College, in Huddersfield, became an academy.

Between 2011 and 2014, Shelley College was rated outstanding by Ofsted. It became a National Teaching School and a National Support School.

In 2014, SHARE was officially created, and John McNally, headteacher of Shelley College, was named as its CEO. Two primaries, Millbridge and Heaton Avenue, joined in 2015; a third primary, Woodside Green, joined a year later. Two secondary academies joined in 2018, followed by another secondary in 2022 and a fourth primary in 2024.

All the schools apart from Shelley College serve areas of high deprivation. SHARE staff are very conscious of the challenges this creates for their pupils, including the risk of criminal exploitation in some areas. The trust has therefore invested considerable resources into tackling the problems that arise as a result – safeguarding and attendance are high among its priorities.

“We try to put a lot of support into building trust,” says John McNally. “We want to make our schools welcoming and supportive.”

The central tenet of SHARE’s improvement plan is: “To help more pupils, particularly the disadvantaged, achieve highly. Achievement includes academic success and developing the personal qualities to lead happy, healthy and successful lives.”

This is split into five subgoals: overcoming disadvantage; delivering an outstanding curriculum and pedagogy; recruiting and retaining an outstanding workforce; building outstanding leadership and infrastructure; and building positive communities.

Ultimately, the aim is for pupils and staff members to feel psychologically secure – as a prerequisite for high performance. It is this focus on people that is highlighted in answer to the question “What makes us distinctive?” in the SHARE strategy document.

The strategy states: “We believe education is all about people. Our success is measured in how

we help our children and young people achieve. We can only achieve this success by employing talented, committed staff and working in partnership with parents...

“We believe that helping people feel valued increases the chances of them achieving their personal best, which is the highest standard we can expect anybody to achieve.”

Mr McNally acknowledges that facing such high expectations for personal best can be uncomfortable. “But”, he adds, “by setting goals in the right way and celebrating effort over final outcome, we encourage our staff to buy into our approach.

“The key lies in explaining purpose and roles well, valuing contributions and building positive working relationships, where each person is known and cared about.”



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John McNally, CEO, SHARE Multi Academy Trust

WHAT DOES EDUCATION LOOK LIKE AT SHARE MULTI ACADEMY TRUST?

When things aren't working according to plan, the philosophy at SHARE Multi Academy Trust is not to look outwards for a source of blame, but to look inwards and ask yourself: "What could I have done differently or better here?"

If this sounds like a self-help strategy, it is not entirely coincidental: much of the philosophy of education at SHARE is derived from two self-improvement bestsellers. The first of these, *The Chimp Paradox*, by psychiatrist Steve Peters, was published in 2012, not long after Shelley College became an academy. The book outlines how the human mind works, offering a strategy to help manage thoughts and emotions.

"I read his book, and I got in touch with his company and asked: 'Is there anything you do for students?'" says Mr McNally. "Within a week, he'd come in and set up a programme that ran with us for about four years."

In fact, Professor Peters' work was primarily with staff, rather than with students: his company delivered a series of intensive one-to-one sessions with trust staff over the next few years. "He picked my leadership apart and put it back together again," says Mr McNally. "I thought I was having a meeting, and in the end I realised I'd been sitting on the psychiatrist's couch."

"It was a bit scary working with him, but he drilled into us: if something's going wrong, check yourself first. Could you have done anything better in the first place? It was brutal to hear it at the time, but it was very powerful."

In practice, what this has meant is an emphasis on communication and checking for understanding – including clear goals and explicitly delineated responsibilities. So, for example, trust leaders might follow up a meeting with an email stating: "That was a really useful meeting. I think we all agreed A, B and C. Let me know if I've misunderstood."

The approach also emphasises the need to recognise what is within your control and what's beyond it – it is the things outside your control that often cause stress.

"Ofsted are going to come to a school," says Mr McNally. "They're going to evaluate the school, and you can't change that. You can't change your data once it's been published. But you know they'll look at certain areas – so how can you go about improving those areas?"





“We know what works, so try to refine it, rather than jumping to an unrealistic goal.” John McNally, CEO, SHARE Multi Academy Trust

“I’d never hold leaders to account for an Ofsted judgement or a pass rate. But I would hold them to account for not knowing the strengths of teaching in their school and for not moving things forwards – because all that, they can control.”

Similarly, when a teacher has 30 students in a classroom, each with external influences playing on them, it’s not always possible to ensure that every single student is learning. However, what the teacher can do is use certain classroom techniques that have been proven to work with the majority of students. They can make the classroom as conducive as possible to learning. In this way, teachers are in control of creating an environment in which most students are likely to learn – even if they can’t control how ready each individual student is to learn.

The second book, *Black Box Thinking*, by journalist Matthew Syed, argues that you cannot impose simple solutions on complex systems. Instead, you need to trial a solution, then refine it based on the outcomes, repeating this process again and again.

Syed points out that those tech companies that tried to create a perfect product before launch tended to fail. By contrast, those tech companies that are now household names released their product early, taking on feedback and refining what they offered, until they eventually achieved multibillion-dollar success. Syed uses this as a way to demonstrate that evolution leads to faster, more robust solutions than on-the-page planning.

“We know what works, so try to refine it, rather than jumping to an unrealistic goal,” says Mr McNally. “Something like no detentions – that’s not achievable. But asking people to work on behaviour and refine it – that’s achievable.”

“Teachers are often guilty of trying to be too perfect. But it’s an imperfect system, because you’re working with too many variables. So it’s just about refining techniques as you go along.”



How does this work in practice?

A closer examination of evaluating insights and anticipating and adapting

Evaluate insights: Improving attendance

In common with many trusts, one of SHARE's goals for the 2023-24 academic year was to improve attendance, particularly for disadvantaged pupils.

SHARE's data analyst set up a monitoring service that allows trust and school leaders to review live attendance data – and therefore see how each school's attendance rates compare against others in the trust. This means that leaders can spot trends in what is working and what is not.

Using this analysis, the trust was able to identify that one of its schools was outperforming others when it came to attendance. Central trust leaders analysed the approach taken by this school, adapted and refined it, and then tested it in other schools.

They found that pupils and parents responded best to a member of staff they already knew and trusted. They also realised that issues of attendance should be tackled with an approach that Mr McNally refers to as "relentless kindness".

"It starts with identifying the problem," he says. "Then you look at what you can do to fix the situation. And that hopefully leads to preventative measures, rather than being trapped in a vicious cycle."

What this means in practice is that the attendance lead acknowledges the challenges the child or the family is facing, but returns repeatedly to the support that is on offer if the child comes into school.

This approach has been formalised in the trust attendance strategy, which states: "The tone of the communication is designed to be supportive and to build highly effective relationships with our families."

This personal approach was backed up by telephone scripts and letter templates that are standardised across the trust – though these, too, are delivered in a tone that is supportive, understanding and relentless.

Using *The Chimp Paradox* approach, principals and attendance leads were encouraged to think about what they could not control – external influences on pupils – and what was within their control. Specifically, they were able to examine the evidence and examples of good practice given to them by trust leaders, and use that to inform their own approach.

Each attendance lead developed an approach that worked in their own school context – but also remained open to refining it as new evidence came to light. Attendance leads visited one another's schools, to observe how they had implemented the same systems. They were encouraged to observe good practice and use evidence-based evaluations to inform this constant refinement.

"They're a competitive bunch," says Mr McNally. "One of the unintended consequences of tracking the live data is that they compete with each other on attendance."

One of the SHARE executive principals then visited all the other schools in the trust, reviewing their implementation of the attendance strategy. The executive head provided feedback to each individual headteacher, highlighting any gaps in practice, and comparing their implementation of the attendance strategy with the way that it was run in the school with the lowest absence rates.

Using the *Black Box Thinking* approach of constant evaluation and refinement, the trust will continue to monitor the impact of its strategy. If the live data shows that another trust school is outperforming the others at any stage, then trust leaders will examine their strategy, refine it to suit a whole-trust model and consider rolling it out across all other schools.



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Anticipate and adapt: Tackling behaviour problems

Two SHARE secondaries are in areas where pupils are at particular risk of criminal exploitation outside school. This then feeds into school life, affecting behaviour and attendance.

The trust's approach had previously been to raise awareness among pupils, but this was not having the desired effect. SHARE headteachers also work to ensure that schools are welcoming and supportive, so as to encourage students to disclose any exploitation – but students don't always disclose information, even in a supportive environment.

In common with schools around the country, SHARE academies are working to reduce exclusions, particularly among disadvantaged pupils. Their approach is – as advocated in *The Chimpanzee Paradox* – to check their own understanding first. So SHARE staff have a series of red flags that they use to trigger an in-depth examination of what might be going on for a particular child. For example, if a student is excluded, that would lead to an investigation into everything from reading ability to underlying safeguarding concerns.

"We look at: is this a symptom for something else?" says Mr McNally. "Then we try and do a full diagnosis."

Rather than simply doing this on a case-by-case basis, however, the trust attempts to pre-empt

the risk of exclusion – or similar sanctions – by anticipating underlying problems that might affect SHARE pupils.

On Inset days, SHARE staff examine how to identify patterns of failure, so that they can explore potential underlying causes.

In one school, staff were all given training in supporting dysregulated pupils: how to use appropriate language and de-escalation techniques. This later became a trustwide strategy of anticipating dysregulation and taking action to address it before it escalated into problematic behaviour.

SHARE senior leaders and pastoral leaders patrol potential hotspots in their schools, seeking out pupils who may have arrived in school dysregulated or more generally out of sorts. They then tackle it with the same relentless kindness used to address student absence.

The trust is also keen to anticipate and address teachers' and leaders' blind spots. Approximately every two years, SHARE runs an in-depth review of behaviour and safeguarding in its schools. A recent review highlighted the fact that the leaders in one of the schools weren't making the





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connection between pupils’ behaviour and the possibility of safeguarding issues or undiagnosed special educational needs. This left certain causes of poor behaviour unaddressed, allowing them to escalate.

“I was upfront about saying, ‘There’s a gap,’ and identifying the potential problem for them,” says Mr McNally.

Trust leaders directed the headteacher towards other SHARE schools where the link between behaviour and safeguarding or SEND had been made explicit, and pointed out that it was working. And, when school leaders were sceptical, they pressed the point.

“We wouldn’t let go,” says Mr McNally. “We kept asking, ‘What are you going to do?’ But it has to be the headteacher and leadership team who actually find the solution.”

Twelve months later, that headteacher now actively seeks out safeguarding training. And another leader at the same school has undertaken an NPQ in SEND, in order to understand better any symptoms and potential solutions.

Accountability at SHARE, Mr McNally says, is not solely about numbers – it’s about actively seeking out solutions. So, for example, while he will talk to school leaders about their exclusion rates, they are not held to a specific target. Instead, he wants to see what processes and strategies leaders are using to tackle poor behaviour and bring down the number of exclusions – and he will hold them accountable for those.



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*John McNally, CEO,
SHARE Multi Academy Trust*

SHARE’s philosophy for teaching, learning and assessment is similar to its policy on behaviour and attendance.

The trust-improvement handbook outlines it as follows: “We believe in a supportive common practice framework to secure the highest standards but we also recognise leaders need flexibility, to meet the needs of their pupils and circumstances.”

There are certain elements that each SHARE school is required to include in its subject plan and approach. However, subject teams are free to write their own plans, taking into account their own contexts. In science, for example, some schools have the capacity to teach all three sciences with separate specialists, whereas other schools will share the three subjects between two teachers.

But there is also a trust-wide commitment to sharing ideas, resources and practice, and continually evaluating performance. Curriculum accountability runs from each school’s subject lead to their school senior leadership team – but also the trust’s subject director. The trust subject director has to balance respect for individual schools’ autonomy with evidence-based, trust-wide alignment.

This is another area where the SHARE central team has found it helpful to anticipate potential problems before they occur. “When we started, schools would join our trust and we’d build a good relationship,” says Mr McNally. “But then the subject leaders might go in and have a different understanding. We had to work hard to get everybody on the same page.”



For example, English departments often had very strong feelings about which exam board they taught, which meant that it took a lot of time and effort to persuade everyone to agree.

“As a result, we’ve got much better at communicating pros and drawbacks, and communicating who’s responsible for which decision,” says Mr McNally. “It’s about setting up the framework in the right way in the first place.”

Central leaders also attempt to tackle problems pre-emptively, by mediating discussions between school and trust subject leaders. The aim is to encourage the school subject leader to see their trust counterpart as a source of support and guidance, rather than a threat.

“There’s always tension in an academy trust: push from below or direction from above,” says Mr McNally. “But you can marry the two if you get everyone talking, so they can understand each other.”

Anticipating this source of tension, the trust also attempts to make as few impositions as possible from above. “We never do something just for the sake of it,” says Mr McNally. “We do things to make it easier to work together.”

“If someone felt very strongly about doing it the other way, we’d let them. But then we need to check the evidence. If it’s not working, we’d say: ‘Come on – look at the evidence.’”



Key points

- Trust and school leaders are encouraged to question themselves continually: what could they have done differently or better?
- By asking themselves what they can control – and what is outside their control – school leaders are able to minimise stress and focus their energy where it matters
- Perfectionism is the enemy of change: instead, the trust encourages staff to try out imperfect ideas and engage in a constant process of refinement
- Pastoral concerns are tackled using a policy of “relentless kindness”: staff are supportive, but also relentless in seeking out a solution
- Poor behaviour is treated as a warning signal, rather than a problem in itself. By looking for the underlying causes of misbehaviour, staff can prevent those causes from escalating into much larger problems
- When trust-wide decisions are taken, an evidence-based rationale and clear communication are seen as the most effective ways of preventing potential tensions arising over school-level decision making
- By constantly monitoring live attendance data, leaders are able to tackle problems early on, seeking solutions from those schools with better attendance data

SHARE Resources

- [Trust improvement handbook](#)
- [SHARE strategic plan](#)
- [Attendance strategy](#)

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