



School  
Improvement  
Hub

Case study

Ark



Confederation  
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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: [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

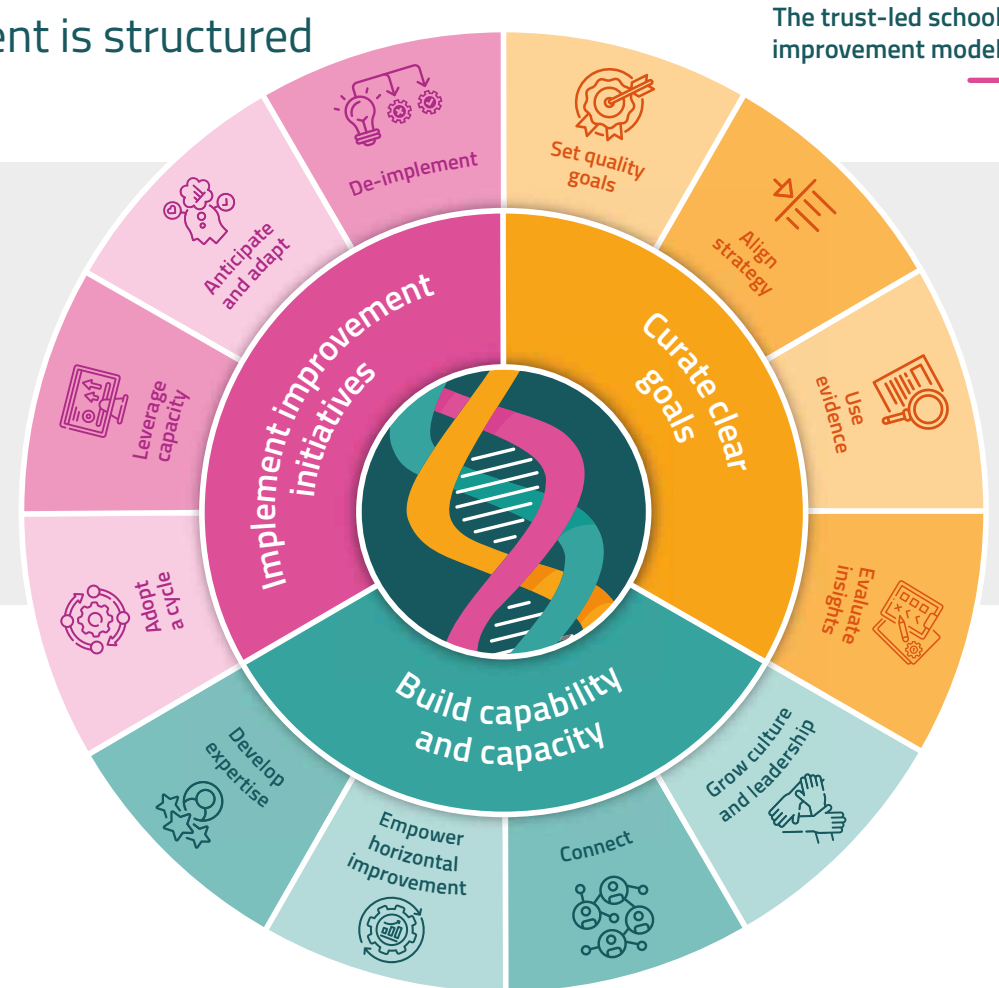
The ongoing process of implementing improvement, iterating and refining as plans are enacted

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 these components:

- Set quality goals
- Align strategy
- Use evidence
- Evaluate insights



And the "Build capability and capacity" breaks down into the following components:

- Develop expertise
- Empower horizontal improvement
- Connect
- Grow culture and leadership

# Case study: Ark



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



## Develop expertise

Put expertise and professional learning at the heart of improvement



## TRUST OVERVIEW

**Trust:** Ark Schools

**CEO:** Lucy Heller

**Founded:** Ark Schools was founded in 2004; its first school opened in 2006

**Schools:** Thirty-nine schools – 16 secondaries, 16 primaries, and seven all-through schools – in Birmingham, Hastings, London and Portsmouth. The largest school in the trust, Ark John Keats Academy, has 1,771 students. The smallest, Ark Bentworth Primary Academy, has 184 pupils on roll.

**Percentage of disadvantaged students:** 45% of pupils are eligible for pupil premium – 41% at primary and 47% at secondary

**Percentage of students receiving free school meals:** 45%

**Percentage of students speaking English as an additional language:** 46%





## TRUST OVERVIEW (continued)

### PRIMARY:

**Early years:** 78% of pupils show a good level of development, compared with a national average of 68%

**Key stage 2:** 76% of pupils achieved the expected standard in 2024, compared with 61% nationally

**Pupil premium:** 69% of children receiving pupil-premium grants achieved the expected standard in 2024 – eight percentage points higher than all children nationally, and 23 percentage points higher than children eligible for pupil premium nationally

### SECONDARY:

**Progress 8:** +0.18

**Percentage of students achieving grade 5 or above in English and maths at GCSE:** 48%

**Percentage of students achieving at least three A\*-C grades at A level:** 62%

**Percentage of students achieving at least three A\*-B grades at A level:** 35%

**Percentage of sixth-form students going on to university:** 83%

New schools founded by Ark are four times more likely to be rated outstanding than other schools nationally. And 90% of schools rated inadequate or put in special measures by Ofsted before joining Ark are now rated good or outstanding.





## BACKGROUND

Ark was founded in 2002, as a charity with the aim of making the greatest possible impact on the lives of children. Ark has supported a wide variety of education, health and development projects and programmes nationally and internationally. Ark has also incubated more than 20 ventures, including Ambition Institute, Now Teach, Frontline and its latest venture, education hub EdCity.

In 2004, Ark Schools was founded. Its first school – Burlington Danes Academy in West London – reopened as Ark Burlington Danes in September 2006. When Ark took the school on, it was in special measures. By January 2009, Ofsted had rated the school as good.

The trust expanded its London cluster over the next few years, with a combination of converter and new-start schools. By 2012, Ark was responsible for 15 schools in London and Birmingham and along the South Coast. That same year, it launched the Ark Teacher Training programme.

The trust chooses to work in communities where it can make biggest difference to children's lives through education. Today, the Ark network has 39 schools, serving more than 30,000 children in Birmingham, Hastings, London and Portsmouth.

*“We very much have a concept of ‘One Ark’ – we are all responsible for the pupils in Ark schools.”*



*Jane Witheford, director of standards and performance, Ark*

“We very much have a concept of ‘One Ark’ – we are all responsible for the pupils in Ark schools,” says Jane Witheford, Ark’s director of standards and performance. “It’s about collective responsibility: sharing practice and working together so we can develop all our schools.”

This shared responsibility is integral to Ark’s cultural ethos. While each of the trust’s schools has its own unique character, they all subscribe to a shared set of core principles and participate in practices that encourage collaboration. There are trust-wide network groups across leadership responsibilities; similarly, subject teachers come together three times a year for trust-wide network days.

## WHAT DOES EDUCATION LOOK LIKE AT ARK?

**Ark schools share a set of values that inform how they approach their work and how they work together. These are: aim high; be brave; be kind; keep learning. These values are embedded across the organisation.**

While each of Ark's schools has its own character, they are all supported by Ark's six pillars:

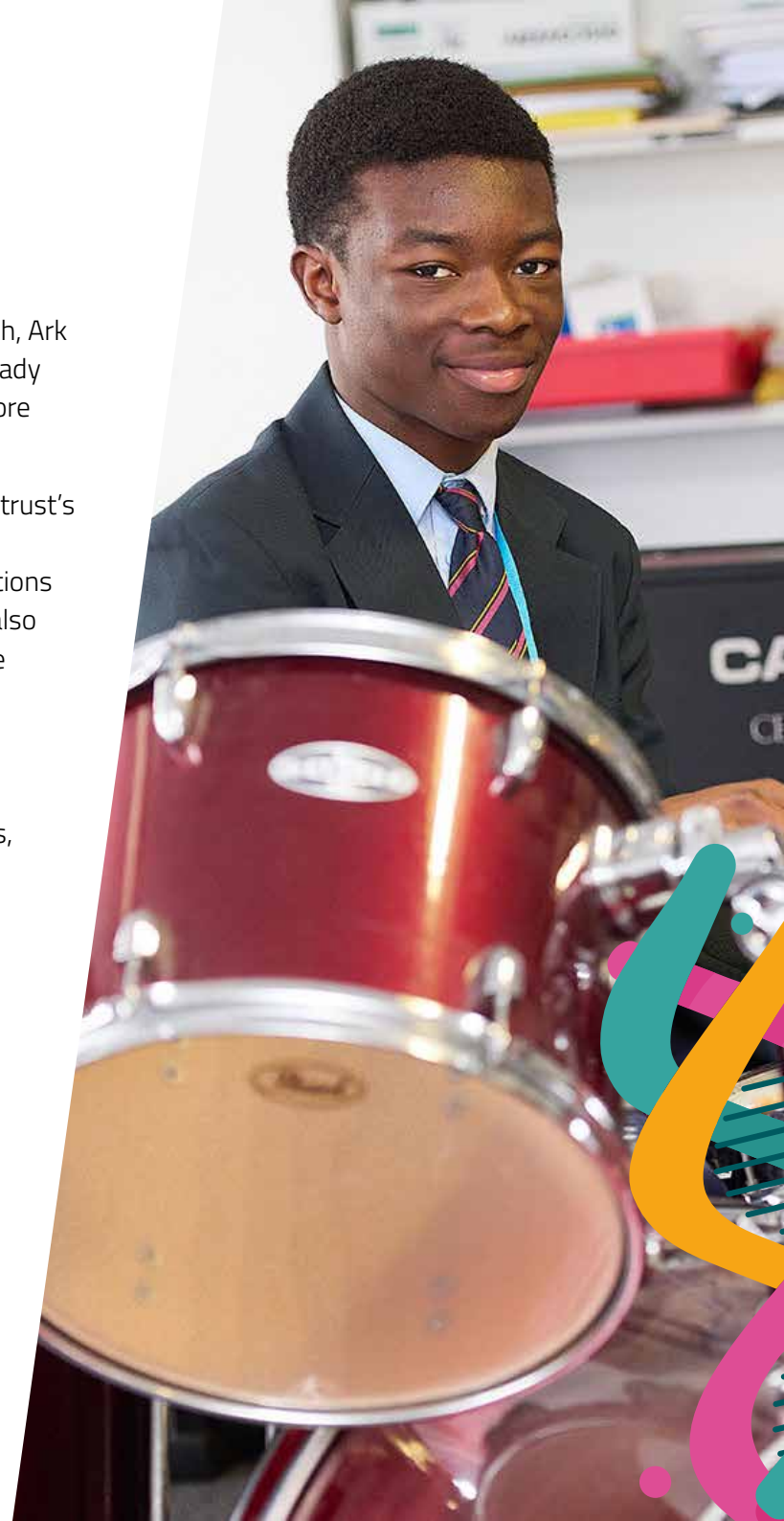
- **High expectations:** Every child can achieve great things
- **Excellent teaching:** This has the biggest impact on outcomes, so the trust prioritises teacher development
- **Knowing every child:** Every child is known well by the adults in the school and is supported academically and pastorally. The trust also builds relationships with children's families
- **Depth for breadth:** Ark prioritises depth in English and maths to give pupils the best chance of success in every subject
- **Exemplary behaviour:** Creating respectful environments where teachers can teach and pupils learn
- **Always learning:** Inside and beyond the classroom, for teachers and pupils alike.

Rather than taking a one-size-fits-all approach, Ark recognised that not all its schools would be ready for the same thing at the same time. It therefore developed the Ark Model.

This model (on which more later) sets out the trust's approach to education, including its minimum expectations, which it believes lay the foundations for all other school improvement. The model also provides guidance on how to implement these expectations in the most effective way, and it serves as a roadmap for developing practice towards excellence.

Ark also provides a toolkit of shared strategies, which school leaders can choose from to plan school improvement. This allows leaders to pull the right levers at the right time for their schools.

"We're clearer now than we've ever been about alignment," Ms Witheford says. "I don't mean we mandate more, but we're clearer about where we think it's helpful for people to align. Where does it serve us to do things in the same way to support school improvement across the network?"





## How does this work in practice?

A closer examination of setting quality goals and developing expertise

### Set quality goals: Ark Model

**The Ark Model sets out Ark’s approach to all aspects of education – from its vision for excellence to the questions leaders should be asking, as well as strategies and resources to move the school forwards.**

This project started with the belief that school improvement could be accelerated if schools were provided with clear information about the foundations that excellence is built on, and about the strategies that were working across Ark schools.

“We have always shared best practice across and between our schools,” says Ms Witheford. “But we wanted to build a model that helps schools to chart their own school-improvement path, with a recognition that 39 schools will not all need the same things at the same time.”

The trust worked with school leaders and principals for 18 months to define its model of education. The finished version is an online interactive platform, which all Ark schools are able to access. “We wanted it to be really accessible for school leaders, and for it to have a strong focus on practical examples from our schools,” says Ms Witheford.

The model’s homepage (see page 8) currently offers access to 15 different areas of education. The information in each area is underpinned by the latest research and evidence of what works – nationally and, most importantly, in Ark schools.

## Set quality goals: Ark Model (continued)

The Ark Model homepage

# Ark Education Model

The Ark Ed Model describes Ark's approach to ensuring that all children within our schools benefit from the same high-quality education - shaped by teachers and leaders across our network. It has progression at its heart so wherever you are in your school improvement journey, you can situate yourself, jump in and plan your next steps. In each area, the foundational expectations make clear the non-negotiables and underpin the rest of our work.



Ed Model Overview



Foundational Expectations



Curriculum & Assessment



Planning



Teacher Development



Reading



Digital Learning



Behaviour



Attendance



Personal Development



SEND



Safeguarding



Principal Leadership



Outcomes



Early Years



Sixth Form



Leadership at Ark



## Set quality goals: Ark Model (continued)

Each of these different areas is divided into six sections. The first section is entitled **“The what and the why”**. When users click through to the curriculum and assessment area, for example, “The what and the why” states:

### The what and the why

Reading is a source of knowledge and agency. All children should have equitable access to the benefits and pleasure of being able to read well, and the opportunities that it provides in their lives. Children who attend Ark schools should expect to be able to read at or above their chronological age – it is their entitlement and our responsibility.

We aim to rapidly close the provision gap to enable all pupils to read at or above their chronological age. While we've made good progress in this, there are still too many children who are not able to access the curriculum and are in danger of falling further behind.

We will address this by building teacher and leader expertise in reading across our schools, deploying interventions which rapidly improve reading, ensuring that across the curriculum and beyond pupils get ample reading practice to build fluency. Carefully selected and skilfully enacted strategies will support all pupils to access well-chosen and engaging texts and thus establish a culture which places reading at the heart of the provision.

The section following this is entitled **“Key leadership questions”**. The aim of this section is to provide school leaders with a clear outline of quality in this area. Leaders can then use this to judge how well their school is performing in any given area, to reflect on what could be missing when things aren't working as well as they could, and to support leadership discussions.

So, for example, the key leadership questions for curriculum and assessment are:

### Key leadership questions

- Do all teachers, support staff and leaders understand the vision for reading at your school?
- Is reading prioritised in your AIP?
- Is reading embedded into your wider review cycle?
- Are you confident that your reading age data is accurate, and your diagnostic assessments ensure interventions match specific need?
- Do you have capacity in place for all pupils that are behind in their reading to get the right intervention and remain on it until they have caught up? What plans are in place to build/sustain capacity to ensure consistency of high quality intervention provision for all pupils in need?
- Do you know which interventions are having an impact? Do you take action to ensure any weaknesses are identified and addressed swiftly?
- Do teachers and other staff confidently model reading aloud across and outside of the curriculum?
- Does the curriculum, as appropriate to subject, include well written and engaging texts which support the learning intention?
- Do you ensure all pupils gain the reading practice (eyes on text) they need to build fluency?
- Are teachers considering accessibility of text and how strategies might support this when planning their lessons?
- Have you considered appropriate book match for pupils (reading age and interest) in all strands of your provision?
- Are library visits high leverage?
- Do you know how your pupils feel about reading, how often they read and what they think about the text choices within the curriculum?
- Are parents actively engaged in supporting their children to read?
- Do you have a clear plan to develop the culture and profile of reading over time? provision.

The section following this is entitled **“Foundational expectations”**. “These are the must-dos,” says Ms Witheford. “The foundational expectations are essential, because we believe that without them we can't deliver a good standard of education.”

These expectations are agreed in consultation with principals and other senior leaders. Schools then work to ensure these are secure before moving on to other things.

### Foundational expectations

Annual NGRT Test for all pupils >

Accurate diagnosis of need >

Well-targeted intervention for all below CRA >

Phonics Programme >













Reading assessment and intervention model strategies >

For example, in the reading area of the education model, there are five foundational expectations (above right).

School leaders can then click through for more information and links to related resources (see page 10).

## Set quality goals: Ark Model (continued)

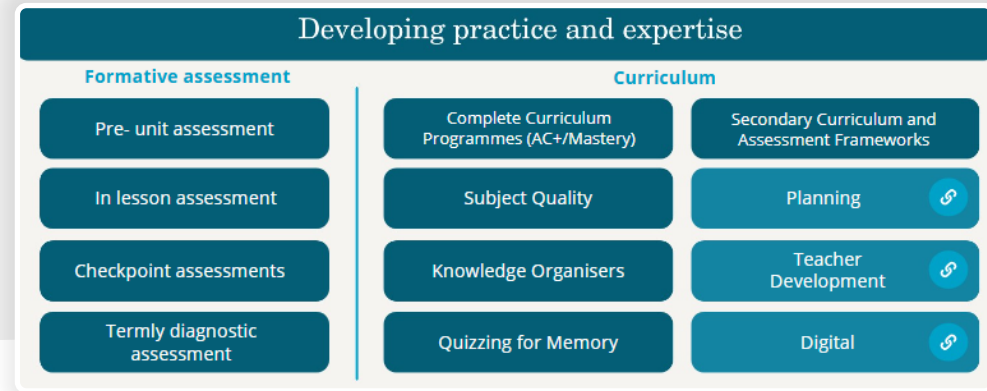
More information and resources related to the foundational expectations for reading

| Foundational Expectations   | Key Features   | Resources   |
|---|--|---|
| <p>Annual NGRT Test for all pupils </p>              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NGRT tests embedded within calendar and tests conducted with fidelity at the end of the academic year (except newcomers, Y2 and Y7 who are tested on entry)</li> <li>• All teachers and leaders trained on how to interpret and use NGRT (and other assessment) SAS data and reports</li> </ul>   | <p> Reading Assessment Resources</p> <p> NGRT Training: Pre-testing and Post-testing Essentials</p>                           |
| <p>Accurate diagnosis of need </p>                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pupils that are below CRA have further diagnostic testing</li> <li>• Diagnosis supports accurate choice of intervention - Reading Intervention Flow Chart is available for primary and secondary</li> </ul>   | <p> Secondary Reading Assessment and Intervention Flowchart</p> <p> Primary Reading Assessment and Intervention Flowchart</p> |
| <p>Well-targeted intervention for all below CRA </p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Targeted and well-established programmes used for intervention and delivered with fidelity</li> <li>• Interventions are timetabled and follow the recommended frequency</li> <li>• Interventions begin as swiftly as possible no later than October half term</li> <li>• Regular assessment in place for pupils on intervention</li> <li>• For each programme, progress of pupils is evaluated regularly and additional support / changes are made where needed</li> <li>• Leaders ensure that the reading offer responds to the pupils' reading needs</li> </ul> | <p> Interventions</p>  |
| <p>Phonics Programme </p>                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Timetabled phonics programme in place for all pupils that need it</li> <li>• Appropriate book match in place for pupils on phonics programme</li> <li>• Regular (6 weekly) assessment in place</li> <li>• All phonics interventions led by an adult trained in phonics</li> <li>• Primary only: education staff trained in phonics</li> </ul>   |   |
| <p>Interventions led by trained adults </p>        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All adults leading interventions have been trained in the intervention they are delivering</li> <li>• They have a clear understanding of progress</li> <li>• They receive feedback and support for their teaching in line with the school's wider approach</li> <li>• Reading leads attend all recommended Network and other reading programme training</li> </ul>  | <p> Ark Early Reading Guide for Secondaries</p> <p> Ark Early Reading Guide for Primaries</p>                             |

## Set quality goals: Ark Model (continued)

Following on from foundational expectations is the “Developing practice and expertise” section. This is a set of strategies and resources that school leaders can review as they build towards excellence, including examples from other schools.

The strategies for curriculum and assessment are shown on the right:



Each of these tabs then clicks through to a toolkit, including a summary of important information and implementation guidance.

Shown right is an example from the reading page:



*“As a network, we have developed impactful strategies, but we recognise that we need to also share tips of how to get them working on the ground. This is where the step-by-step guides are really helpful.”*

*Jane Witheford, director of standards and performance, Ark*

## Reading fluency and comprehension

**Building reading fluency**

**Building reading comprehension**

### Closing the 'practice gap'

The most important factor explaining variation in pupils' decoding fluency is amount of exposure to text. There are stark differences in the amount of reading practice children get both inside and outside the classroom. If children are to become fluent readers, 'they need to read a lot'.

### How schools can close the 'practice gap'?

Outlined below are a range of actions for closing the 'practice gap' to build reading fluency and comprehension. Each school may adopt a different pattern of activities, to provide children with adequate reading practice. One constant remains: children need ample reading practice to become fluent readers. For example, some children in Year 1 struggle to make the leap to the highest levels of RWI because they are not yet reading with necessary accuracy and speed. The same obstacle affects pupils in Year 6 who struggle with the reading SAT.

One to one reading with an adult

Class reading in English lessons and across the curriculum

Reading interventions

Reading clubs

Independent reading

## ← Strategies for whole class reading

Click on the links below for details of each strategy. The links can be used to help which strategy teachers decide which strategy for whole class reading will best serve the needs for the lesson.

### Paired reading

Can be used to support decoding, fluency and comprehension

### Repeated reading and paired repeated reading

Can be used to support decoding fluency and comprehension

### Guided annotation

Supports comprehension of text. Encourages pupils to actively monitor comprehension through e.g. clarifying pronouns, cohesive ties and vocabulary.

### Control the game

Can be used to support decoding fluency and comprehension

### Individual silent reading

Can be used to support decoding fluency and comprehension

## Strategies for decoding and comprehension of individual words

### Hear See Say

Supports decoding and sight recognition:

### Speed Words

Supports decoding

### Inside/outside/beyond

Encourages pupils to habitually consider the meaning of unknown words. Expands pupils' knowledge of morphology and etymology to apply to working out the meaning of unfamiliar words.

### 6-step Vocabulary

For teaching selected tier two words, chosen for high frequency and utility. Facilitates depth and breadth of understanding of these words.

## Set quality goals: Ark Model (continued)

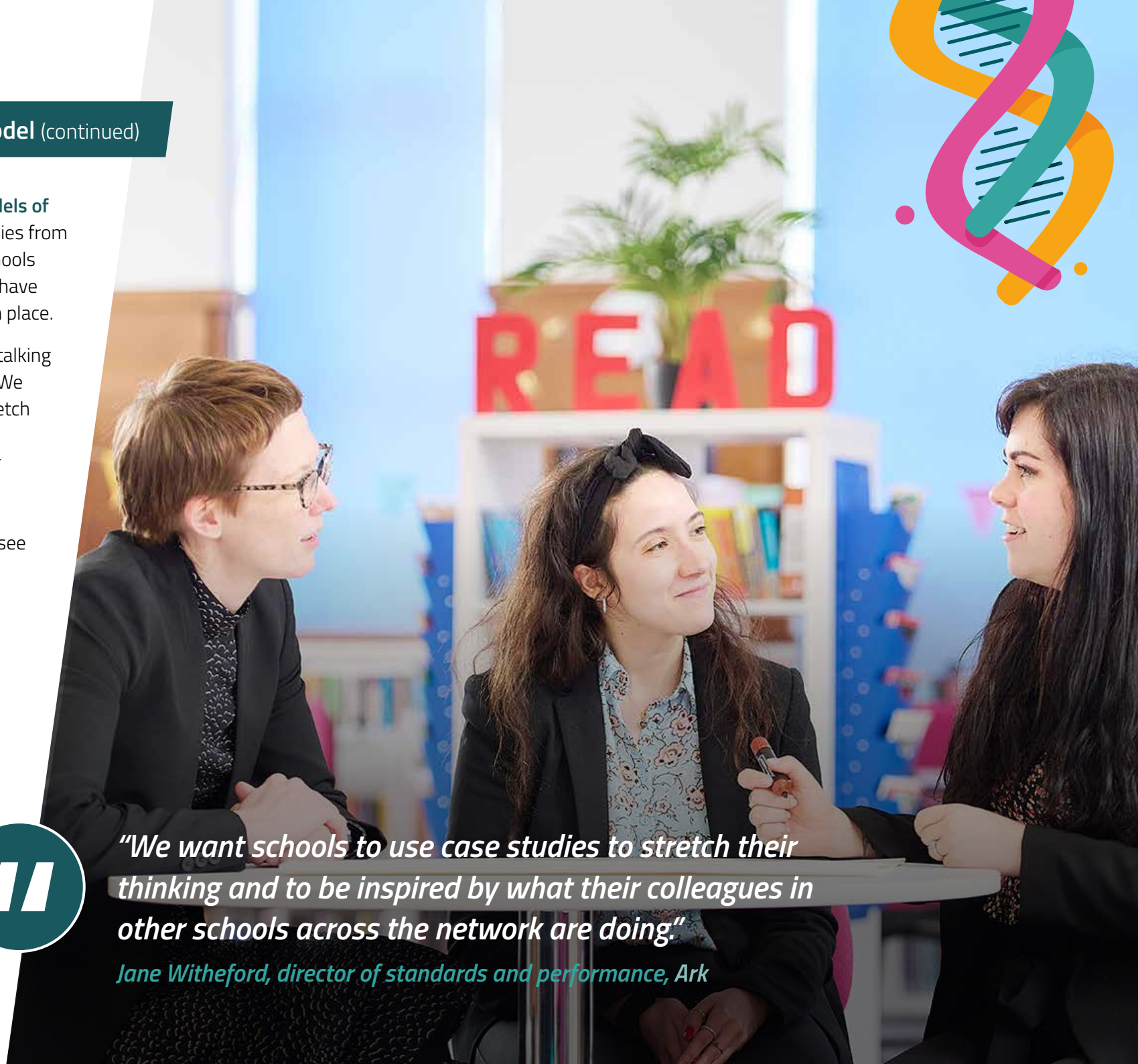
The final section is entitled “**Models of excellence**”. These are case studies from across the trust, showcasing schools that perform particularly well or have particularly innovative practice in place.

“These case studies are leaders talking to leaders” says Ms Witheford. “We want schools to use them to stretch their thinking and to be inspired by what their colleagues in other schools across the network are doing. We also arrange senior-leader visits to these schools to see the model in action.”



*“We want schools to use case studies to stretch their thinking and to be inspired by what their colleagues in other schools across the network are doing.”*

*Jane Witheford, director of standards and performance, Ark*



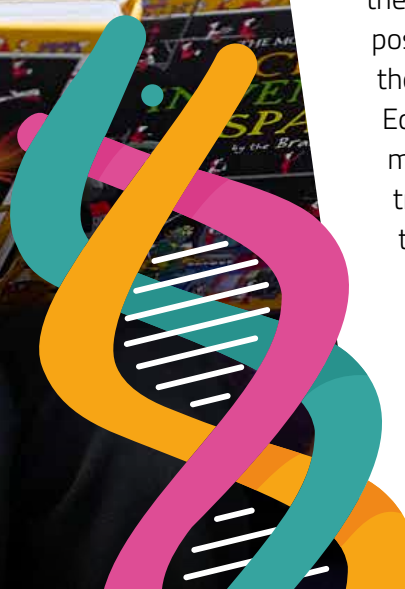


## Develop expertise: Professional development

For Ark, professional development is at the heart of what goes on in its schools. Every teacher in the trust has 10 training days a year: double the usual number. For three of these days each year, all Ark schools shut, so staff can take part in cross-trust training. These days tend to have a subject-teaching or leadership focus: teachers come together in subject-network groups for training relevant to their subject; principals, vice-principals and other leaders also come together in groups.

For the remaining seven days, schools determine their own professional-development provision. However, they have access to a variety of tools and resources. Ark Learning Institute also provides a comprehensive professional-development offer to support schools. Teaching and learning leads from each school come together across the network to share practice and engage in professional development. There is also support available from the trust, particularly for leaders who are writing professional-development plans for their schools for the first time.

To help schools build their own professional-development programme, the trust provides a comprehensive training offer that is as flexible as possible for schools to use. Teachers and leaders are able to choose their own training modules, self-directing to relevant areas of study. Equally, leaders who identify an area where a teacher might need more support can then point that teacher towards an asynchronous training session. There are also modules that leaders can use to train their teachers in specific areas, using a train-the-trainer model. In addition, school leaders can choose to send members of staff to in-person courses run centrally by the trust or delivered via a partner.



## Develop expertise: Professional development (continued)

The trust tailors professional development to meet the needs of teachers and leaders at all stages of their careers, from initial teacher training to expert teacher and extending to senior leaders, including principals and executive leaders. Ark also provides a development offer for support staff, and runs a growing number of apprenticeships for operational and non-teaching staff.

To help tailor professional development to need, Ark devised the Great Teacher Rubric in 2021. This rubric is intended as a path Ark teachers can follow to great teaching. Acknowledging that teacher development is a long-term and continuous process, the trust describes the rubric as:

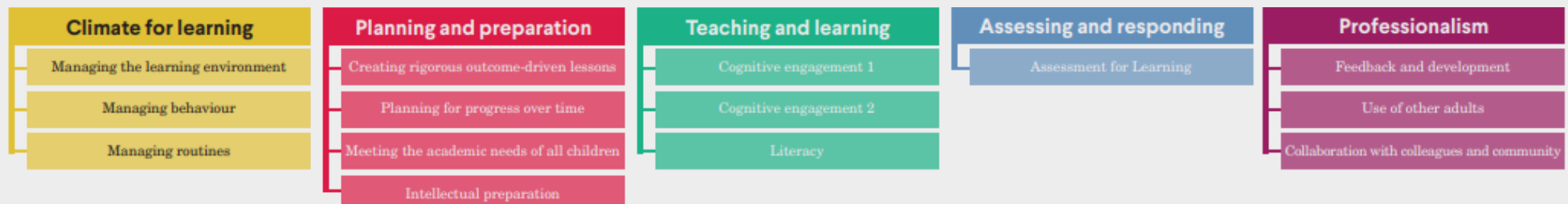
“A set of shared principles for effective teaching, enabling teachers to understand where they are on the improvement journey and what the destination looks like.

“This also enables schools to design professional development according to strengths and areas of development for their staff.”

The Great Teacher Rubric (GTR) encompasses four stages of teacher development, matching the likely progression of a teaching career: attempting, foundational, proficient and exemplary.

The GTR is divided into five strands, each representing a critical area of teaching practice. Each of these five strands is then divided into further substrands:

### Five strands of the Great Teacher Rubric (GTR)



## Develop expertise: Professional development (continued)

It then offers an overview of good practice for each strand, according to the teacher’s level of development. So, for “Climate for learning”, good practice is itemised as follows:

### Good practice, according to the teacher’s level of development

| ATTEMPTING   | FOUNDATIONAL   | PROFICIENT   | EXEMPLARY  |
|--|--|--|--|
| <b>Climate for learning</b>  |  |  |  |
| Teachers have learnt a selection of management strategies and have a good theoretical understanding of how they work and their importance. They take action to develop positive attitudes to learning but do not always apply strategies effectively. Learning time may be lost and there may be inconsistent climate. | Teachers have learnt a range of strategies for building culture and establishing behaviour for learning, and know broadly how and when to deploy them. As a result, their classrooms are mostly calm, orderly and purposeful. There may still be inconsistencies between groups or in the execution of strategies. | Teachers have created a consistently positive climate for learning and are very intentional in their use of language and a range of strategies. Their focus is on the children and their learning and they understand why they are using their chosen approaches and the impact they are having. | Climate for learning is characterised by high levels of learner focus, curiosity and engagement seemingly without obvious intervention from the teacher, even though they have a wide range of strategies at their disposal. Their climate is a model of exemplary practice. |

For each substrand, there is a more detailed breakdown of teaching practice. So, for “Managing the learning environment”, the GTR provides the following:

### Detailed breakdown of teaching practice

| <b>Managing the Learning Environment</b> <span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">TS1</span> <span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">TS2</span> <span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">TS4</span> <span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">TS7</span> |   |   |  |  |
|--|---|---|--|--|
| THEME  | Attempting  | Foundational  | Proficient   | Exemplary  |
| <b>SAFE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT</b>   | The teacher attempts to create a positive environment and to build relationships with all the children they teach. They attempt to manage their own emotions to build mutual respect and trust although they are not always successful. | <b>1a</b> The teacher is beginning to create a reliable environment based on respect and trust. They show an understanding of children’s emotional needs and they manage their own emotional state effectively, so that all children feel safe. | The teacher is consistent in creating a learning environment built on respect and trust between all parties. All children feel comfortable to take risks and share difficulties because the environment is emotionally safe and respectful of individual identities. | In addition to “Proficient,” the teacher uses an in-depth knowledge of each individual child to carefully create a classroom characterised by genuine warmth and curiosity. Children feel valued for their contributions to the environment. They respond to the teacher as well as each other with respect and empathy. |



## Develop expertise: Professional development (continued)

Ark also trains staff to become experts in reviewing and developing teachers. This training process educates staff about observer bias and the processes for achieving consistency.

Every Ark school shares insights and analysis from its evaluations with the trust. This allows the central development team to spot gaps in provision and adjust its offer to include more or different learning opportunities. Around four years ago, for example, the trust realised that it needed to do more to support the implementation of the curriculum at lesson level. It therefore put together a planning toolkit, providing step-by-step guidance. This covered topics such as “How do you plan lessons?” and “How do you plan for the medium or long term?” Ark then sent trainers to each school to develop planning across the entire team.



## Develop expertise: Enhancing subject teaching

**Around a decade ago, Ark Curriculum Plus (AC+) developed as an offshoot of the Ark network. Now a non-profit organisation in its own right, AC+ aims to help teachers provide consistent, high-quality subject teaching to students.**

AC+ originated the Mathematics Mastery and English Mastery programmes, and now offers subject-excellence programmes and associated resources in maths, science, history and geography at primary level, and English, maths, geography and science at secondary level. Ark has also developed curriculum frameworks for Spanish, French and history, though these do not have accompanying resources.

The AC+ programmes are based on the best available research and international best practice in each subject, along with knowledge of what works across the varied contexts in which Ark operates. The focus is on raising outcomes for children from all backgrounds and starting points. The programmes provide a high-quality curriculum, and are supported by integrated teaching and assessment resources. An EEF evaluation found that students who follow the Mathematics Mastery curriculum achieve half a grade more than their peers across the UK.

But the aim is to improve teaching as well as learning. AC+ provides a subject expert to guide schools through an improvement journey, with professional development for teachers and leaders at every stage.

While AC+ is an outward-facing programme, available to schools and trusts beyond the Ark network, it is also used within the trust. "There's no mandate to use it in your school," says Ms Witheford. "But these are high-quality resources, so most schools use them in the subjects where they're available."

***"There's no mandate to use Ark Curriculum+ in your school, but these are high-quality resources, so most schools use them in the subjects where they're available."***

***Jane Witheford, director of standards and performance, Ark***



## Key points

- The Ark Model provides foundational expectations – the non-negotiable elements of effective education – which are made explicit to school leaders
- Teachers and leaders are provided with background information, key reading and case studies from other schools in the network, as well as strategies and resources
- Professional development is seen as a cornerstone of trust improvement, and every teacher and leader in the trust is given 10 training days a year
- A mandatory trust-wide rubric provides a standard against which school leaders can measure teaching, in order to plan their school professional development
- The trust produces a vast array of training modules, which staff can access – or be directed towards – asynchronously or in person, according to individual or school need

## Ark Resources

- [Ark Model – sample](#)
- [Great Teacher Rubric – introduction](#)

