



School  
Improvement  
Hub

**Case study**

# WISE Academies



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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

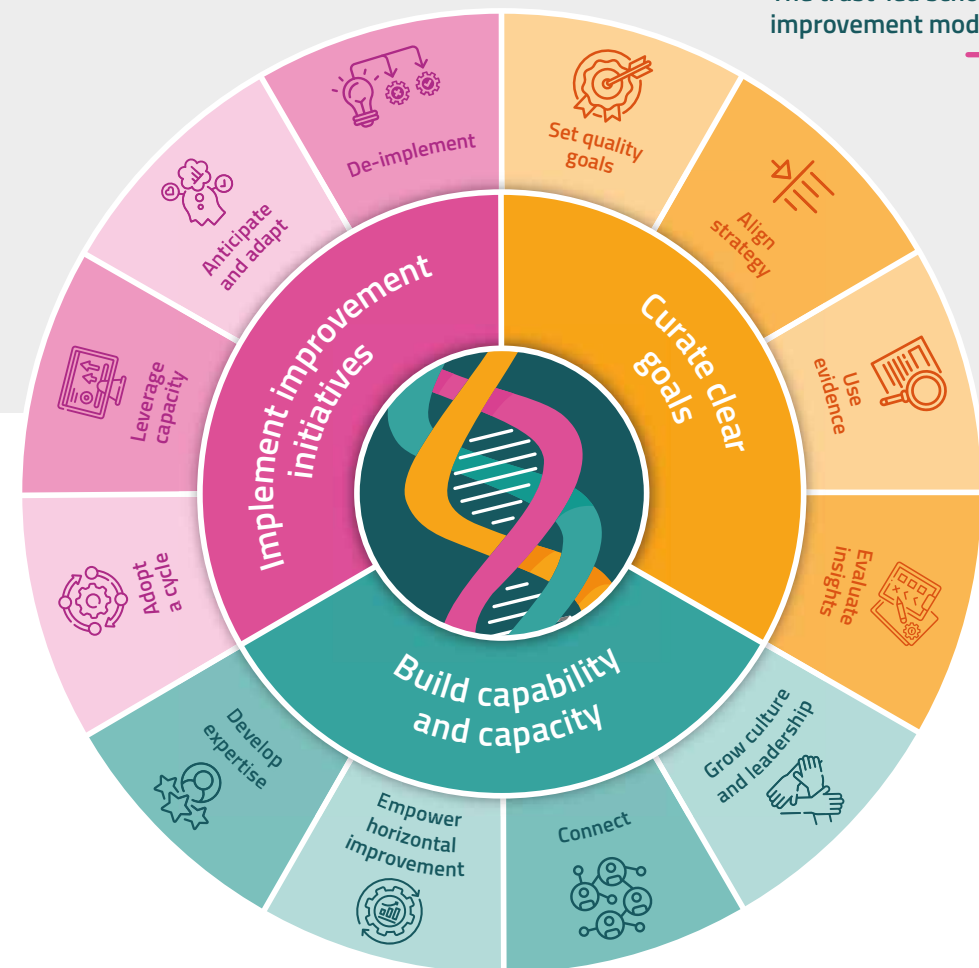
The model outlines the key aspects of how a school-improvement process, strategy or model might be enacted within a trust. Rather than dictating areas for improvement, the conceptual model allows each trust to apply its own understanding of quality and its own improvement goals to each of the three strands.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

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

The trust-led school improvement model



# Case study: WISE Academies



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

## Grow culture and leadership

Establish a culture where leadership and teaching can flourish



## TRUST OVERVIEW

**Trust:** WISE Academies

**CEO:** Zoe Carr, OBE

**Founded:** 2011

**Schools:** 16 primary academies, including one SEND primary, across five local authorities in the North East of England

**School sizes:** The largest school in the trust has 450 students. The smallest has 80 students on roll.

**Percentage of disadvantaged students:** 55% Ever 6 free school meals

**Percentage of students receiving pupil-premium funding:** 55% (ranging from 25% to 80%)

**Percentage of students with SEND:** 34%

**Key stage 2:** 64% of pupils achieved at least the expected standard in reading, writing and maths (combined)

**Ofsted:** As of the start of the 2023-24 academic year, five WISE schools were judged outstanding by Ofsted, and eight were judged good. The others had not been inspected as part of the trust. On joining the trust, six of the schools had been rated inadequate, two requiring improvement and one declining.



## BACKGROUND

WISE Academies – the “WISE” stands for “We inspire success and excellence” – was established in 2011. Two federated primary schools in Sunderland came together to form one of the first multi-academy trusts in the area.

In 2012, the trust took on two more primaries: one in special measures and the other struggling. Both serve areas with very high levels of deprivation.

Zoe Carr was associate headteacher at one of the two original primaries. In 2012, however, she returned from maternity leave to discover that the fledgling trust was having leadership difficulties; she stepped up as acting CEO. She was officially appointed CEO in 2013.

The year after that, both of the struggling schools were judged good by Ofsted.

The trust grew gradually over the next few years, taking on two rural schools with fewer than 100 pupils, as well as one larger school. Then, in September 2018, the trust brought in six schools in one go.

“That was quite a challenge, in terms of having to reshape the trust,” says Ms Carr. “Until then, it had been me as CEO, overseeing our schools. Now we needed to do it differently.”



*“Every problem is a shared problem. We have a culture of shared ownership and mutual support.”*

*Zoe Carr, CEO, WISE Academies*

The trust established three regional hubs, each with its own hub leader (one of whom was Ms Carr) to oversee its schools. This has now grown to four hubs. Each hub leader works closely with the headteachers of their schools and knows the staff and priorities of each school. All hub leaders are required to be trained as Ofsted inspectors, so that they can provide mentoring and support to school senior-leadership teams before, during and after inspections.

Every week, the hub leaders meet in order to share knowledge and ask for help and advice from one another (and sometimes for extra funding for their schools).

“I never, ever want headteachers to hide anything,” says Ms Carr. “Every problem is a shared problem. We have a culture of shared ownership and mutual support.”

The trust went down to 12 schools when a middle school was absorbed into a two-tier system. But then, in 2022, the trust took on another school in special measures. A further three schools joined the trust in September

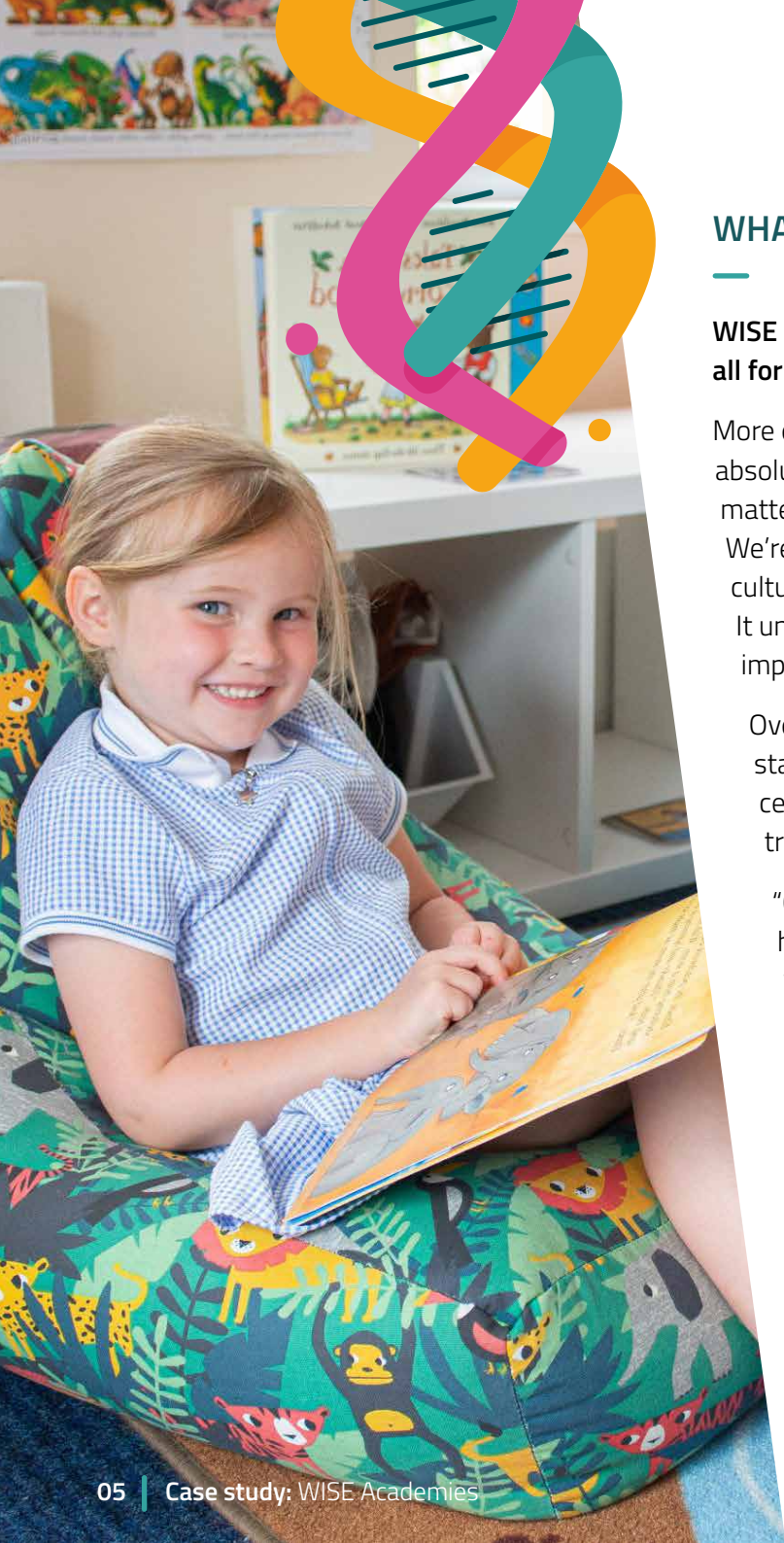
2024, taking the total to 16 schools, across five local authorities.

The trust applied for research-school status in 2023 and was successful: Town End Research School is now one of 33 research schools in the country, specialising in primary literacy. Another WISE school is an Early Years Stronger Practice Hub: one of 18 in the country.

Ms Carr’s aim for the trust is that it should always be self-reflective and eager to learn from others in order to become stronger. “There are always bumps along the road, but we come back stronger because of them,” she says.

“There’s a danger in portraying everything as easy. That’s not the lived experience on the ground. It’s never as easy as waving a magic wand and everything is rosy ever after. It takes a lot of hard work from brilliant dedicated staff to transform schools. Fortunately, we have an abundance of these great people in our trust, who have been key to our successes.”





## WHAT DOES EDUCATION LOOK LIKE AT WISE ACADEMIES?

**WISE operates on the Three Musketeers principle: all for one, and one for all.**

More explicitly, Zoe Carr says, “People are absolutely, incredibly important to us. Everybody matters. Each person is crucial to our success. We’re in this together. We’re one team. The trust culture is critically important to the way we work. It underpins everything we do to support and improve our schools.”

Over the last four years, a trust-wide anonymous staff survey has consistently found that 97 per cent of staff members enjoy working for the trust.

“Our staff team is like a huge jigsaw – everyone has their unique place to fit,” Ms Carr says. “When everyone knows their value and how their role complements all others, we all work perfectly together for the good of our pupils.”

The culture at WISE is one of shared responsibility and accountability. Everything produced in the trust belongs to everyone who works there; resources are shared to save time. Staff regularly come together to work on different models and to share strong practice.

“In order to keep everyone together, it’s been vital to keep promoting the culture,” says Ms Carr. “When new schools are thinking of joining, we discuss the culture of the trust first and foremost, to see if it’s right for them. If they’re not going to approach things in the same way, it’s not going to be a harmonious match.”

The trust places similar emphasis on the importance of the right culture for its pupils: one of its guiding principles is that childhood is incredibly precious, and that pupils should be able to enjoy their formative years. The WISE childhood pledge guarantees every pupil 40 experiences designed to broaden their horizons and develop their character. Related challenges and activities are woven into the curriculum; each child has a childhood-pledge passport, and they receive a stamp after every new experience.

To ensure that a high-quality curriculum is in place in all its schools, the trust established 10 curriculum-design principles. The trust’s hub leaders help their schools to audit their curriculum models to ensure that they meet these principles. Leaders often work on curriculum models together – for example, a cross-trust working party is currently revisiting the approach to early writing. The trust also offers teachers access to shared resources to support curriculum delivery.

"We want to help with workload – we're trying to take away some of the burden from teachers," says Ms Carr. "Then they can concentrate on pedagogy."

"But we don't want to do so much for teachers that they don't have to think. I believe that if you have to think – if you have carefully thought through what your pupils know and the most important next steps for their learning – then you'll deliver a better lesson. Picking up a curriculum designed by others without a clear understanding of its intention and your pupils' needs is not going to result in high-quality learning for all."

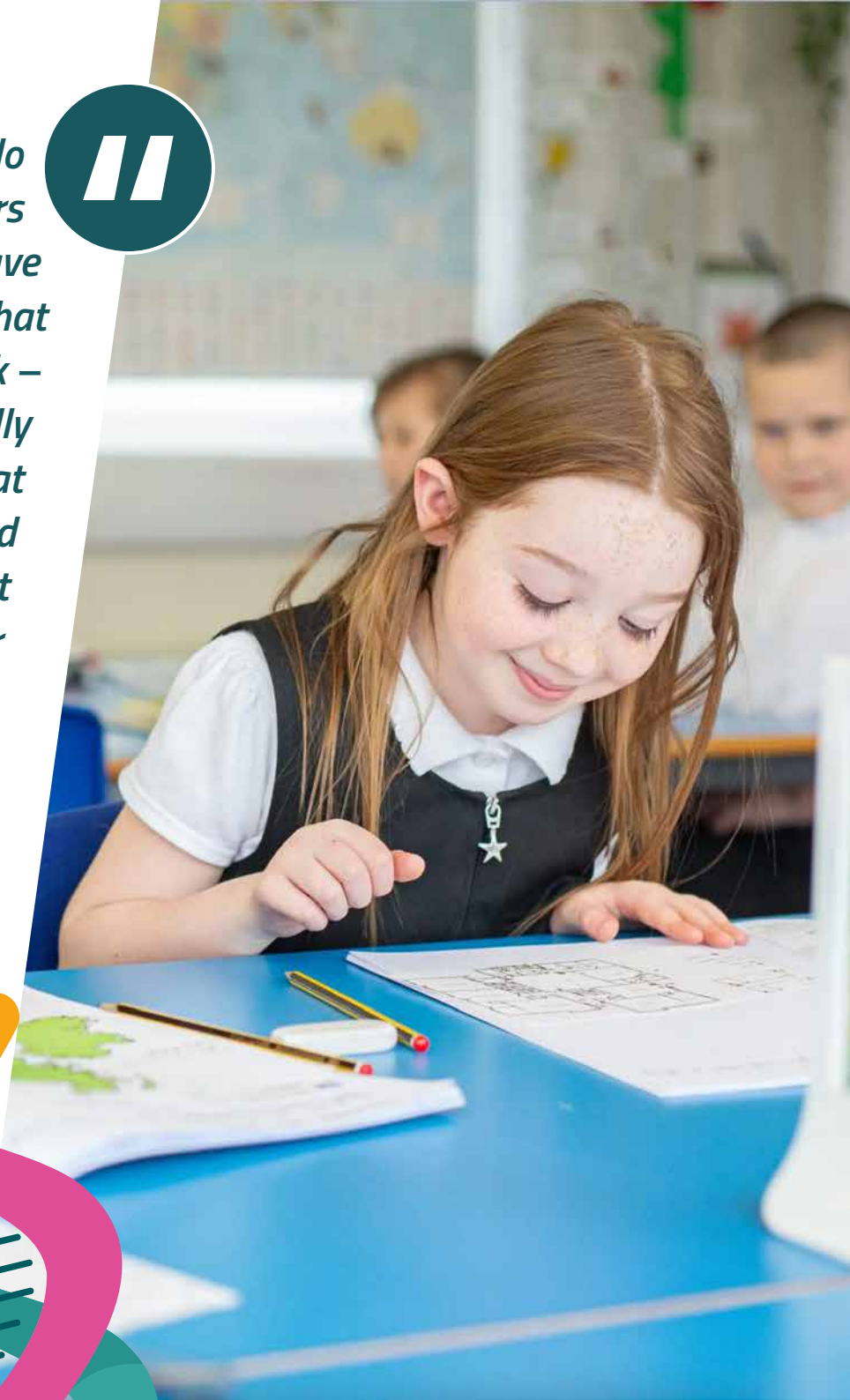
"It's a balance between reducing workload and giving teachers the opportunity to think about their own personal delivery."

Trust priorities are built into school-level improvement plans. As a result, individual school curriculums share a lot of commonality – but the trust also values personalisation according to context. Every year, headteachers decide three key priorities that are specific to their context, which they want the wider trust staff to support. Hub leaders then match these priorities with the skills and expertise of individuals from across the trust.

The trust also emphasises the importance of the history and heritage of each individual school's community. "We want to become part of each school's local community," says Ms Carr. "We recognise that we have to gain the trust of local people and deliver on our promises to deliver a great education to their next generation."

***"We don't want to do so much for teachers that they don't have to think. I believe that if you have to think – if you have carefully thought through what your pupils know and the most important next steps for their learning – then you'll deliver a better lesson."***

*Zoe Carr, CEO,  
WISE Academies*







## How does this work in practice?

### A closer examination of growing culture and leadership

#### Grow culture: Establishing a trust-wide ethos

**The trust believes that its culture is key to its success. In an effort to make this culture tangible and create a shared sense of belonging, WISE presents each new member of staff with a copy of its Little Purple Book.**

The first page of the book states: "This book will help you to understand our values and behaviours and the way we make decisions as a team and as a family of schools.

"We believe that by adhering to our vision and working with our values in mind we can behave in a way which will ensure the right results for the people that matter most – our pupils and their families."

The book outlines the trust's values – integrity, accountability, partnership and trust – as well as the specific behaviours associated with those values. So, for example, the behaviours associated with partnership are: "We value one another. We work together. We are open to ideas. We listen and learn. We are accessible."

"As we've grown, one of the hardest things has been to make sure that things we held dear at the outset are still held dear by everyone," Ms Carr says.

"The Purple Book sets out our mission. It sets out our vision. Values don't necessarily mean the same things to different people, so that's why we thought about the behaviours associated with those values."

The Little Purple Book continues to outline how WISE Academies should interact with pupils, parents and the outside world, by recommending that staff use a tone of voice that is: "knowledgeable but not patronising; confident but not self-important; reflective but not rooted in the past; friendly but not casual; professional but not corporate".

Because it outlines the trust values, the book has become part of any discussion around an individual's professional growth within the trust: how are they able to help create and contribute to the culture outlined in the book?

*"As we've grown, one of the hardest things has been to make sure that things we held dear at the outset are still held dear by everyone."*

*Zoe Carr, CEO,  
WISE Academies*

The trust has changed the way it appraises staff, moving away from performance-related pay, towards a model that focuses on staff improvement – "It's about improving, not proving," Ms Carr says – and the Little Purple Book is part of this process.

"The Purple Book helps us talk about how to inspire success and excellence, drawing on everyone's strengths," Ms Carr says. "It's a key part of the DNA of how we work together."







## Grow culture: Valuing members of staff

**In a teacher recruitment and retention crisis, WISE has made it a priority to ensure that staff enjoy working at the trust and feel valued there. It has therefore introduced termly events to recognise and celebrate members of staff.**

Each school has recognition boxes for staff, as does the trust central team. Staff members are encouraged to recognise one another by putting an appreciative note in the box, remarking on something positive they have seen a colleague do or say.

At the end of term, each school puts all the appreciation notes into a hat, and one is drawn out. The member of staff mentioned in the winning comment is awarded a prize hamper.

Then, once the prize has been given out, the other appreciation notes are pulled out of the hat one by one, and read out to all staff members. The senior leadership team in each school keeps a close eye on the

recognition box over the course of the term, to make sure that every member of staff will hear at least one positive comment about themselves at the end-of-term event. After all the notes have been read out, staff have a buffet lunch.

"It's the power of peers praising peers," says Ms Carr. "It can be a really emotional, uplifting time. It's really nice to hear the things people say about each other."

The trust is also keen to ensure that staff members feel that they have a role to play in shaping the trust ethos, and that their voices are heard. An employee engagement forum fosters open communication between staff and the CEO, as well as the HR director (now renamed the people and culture director – see below). The aim is to foster trust-wide relationships and to promote integrated ways of working.

And WISE has recently developed a recruitment and retention working party, which gathers staff feedback on what matters most to them and what they'd like to see the trust doing to improve their experience as employees.



***"It's the power of peers praising peers."***

*Zoe Carr, CEO, WISE Academies*

## Grow leadership: Creating opportunities for talented staff

**WISE recently changed the name of its HR team to the people and culture team. This ties in with its decision to abandon performance-related pay. Instead of measuring success, the role of staff appraisals is now to initiate a conversation about career aspirations and professional growth. This includes identifying relevant professional-development opportunities within the trust.**

The WISE professional-growth policy document states: "This policy is designed to change the way we view accountability and continuous professional growth. Professional growth within WISE Academies is 'done by' our employees, not 'done to' them."

To help with this, the trust produced a careers-pathways booklet, which helps employees to identify potential for career progression. It spells out clearly the opportunities available for staff members in every position across the trust.

In particular, it points out that there is no such thing as a single career path, and that education professionals don't necessarily take a straightforward vertical path to school leadership.

The careers-pathways booklet states: "Staff working within the academies may seek to move into a different role within their school or the trust, some examples of this might be:

- **Teaching Assistant training to be a HTLA or Qualified Teacher**
- **Lunchtime Supervisors may wish to train as a Cook or move to Educational Support as a Teaching Assistant**
- **Teachers may wish to progress into Senior Leadership or the Central Team, supporting the development of Teachers within the academies**
- **Administration Assistants and Office Managers may want to move into the central People, Finance, or Governance teams**
- **Site Supervisors may wish to move into the Health & Safety team or maybe into Educational Support."**







There is a similar chart outlining the career opportunities available in the trust's central team, including secondment roles for teaching staff.

Most of the promotions in the trust are internal appointments, and retention figures are very strong. Voluntary turnover during the 2022-23 academic year was 10.61 per cent, compared with an education average of 38 per cent.

"It's so incredibly important that we retain people," Ms Carr says. "People might start in one school and then move to another school in the trust. They've worked with different sets of people. That strengthens internal dialogue and those bonds within the trust.

"We want to recognise their aspirations and make sure people feel valued. If we have people who genuinely enjoy coming to work, we're going to have better outcomes for pupils. Happy people make great schools."

As well as encouraging staff to identify their own promotion opportunities, the trust actively creates roles to ensure that talented staff feel recognised and seek promotion within the trust, rather than elsewhere.

## 1. Teaching and learning advocates

In September 2023, the trust appointed a group of teaching and learning advocates, drawn from each school. Every headteacher identified teachers who would benefit from additional responsibility. In smaller schools, this was one person; in larger schools, headteachers nominated two people.

The advocates were provided with additional training for the role. They then delivered CPD to their colleagues in their own academies, passing on what they had learnt.

They also worked together with the director of the Town End Research School to define and develop the trust's approach to teaching and learning. These sessions ultimately led to the delineation of nine clear teaching and learning principals for WISE schools.

"It was important that the trust learned from research and best practice," says Ms Carr. "So these teaching principles are research-based best bets, rather than hunches about what makes good teaching."

The director of Town End Research School regularly delivers training on these principles across all schools. And the central director of research and her team help the advocates to evaluate the impact of training against the nine principles, and to look at whether staff might need additional training in any areas.



## 2. Targeted secondments

WISE creates regular trust-wide secondments, with each role lasting a year. School staff members then apply for these secondment roles, in order to deliver programmes across the whole trust.

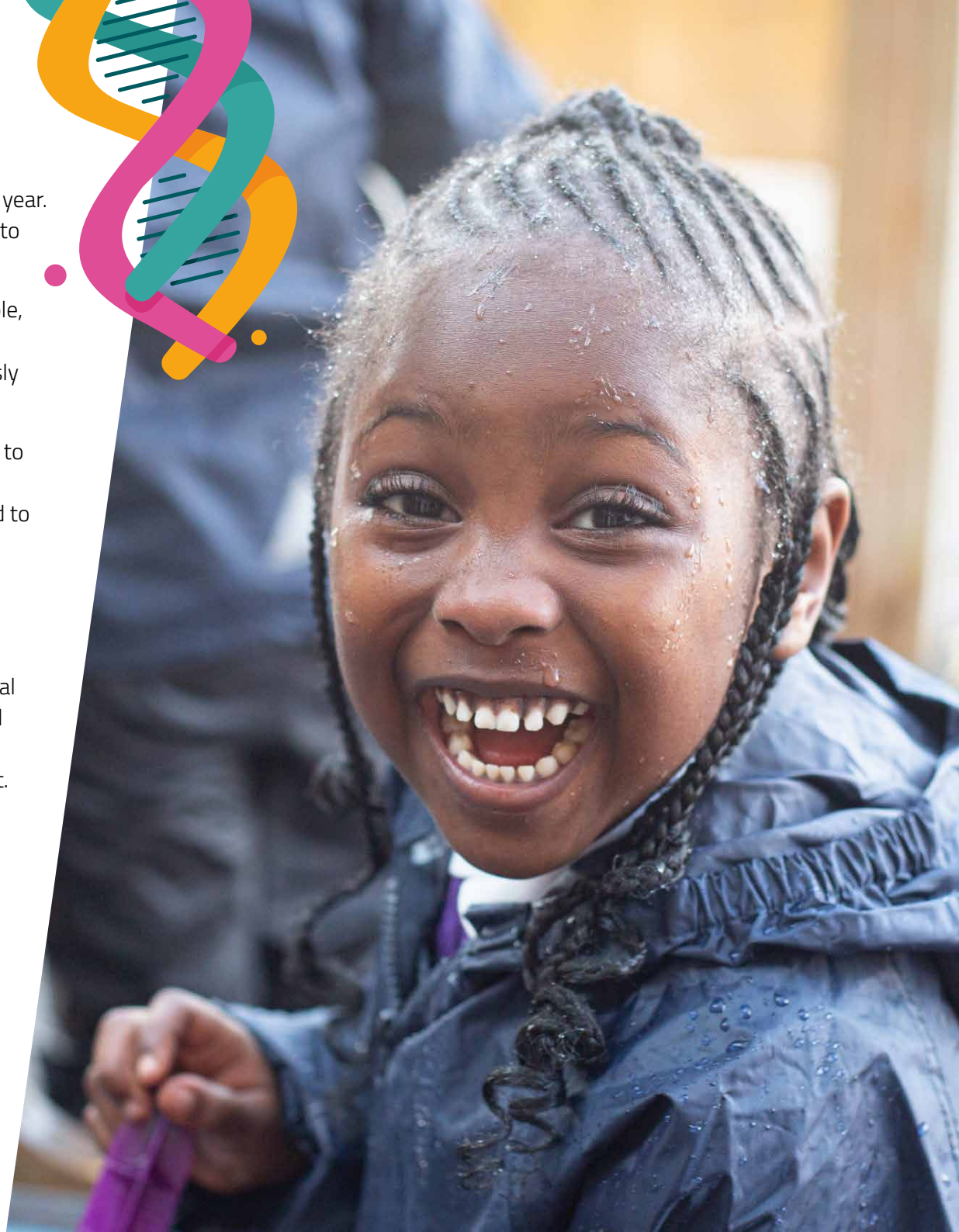
The scope of some of these secondments is clearly defined. For example, when Ofsted's 2019 framework brought curriculum to the fore, WISE advertised across the trust for nine curriculum leads, who had previously developed their own curriculum ideas.

Successful applicants were released from their role for one day a week to support trust curriculum thinking and to develop curriculum materials. They also identified areas of the curriculum where the trust might need to improve.

Other secondments are more loosely defined, with space for creating opportunities for pupils. For example, teachers working on the WISE Memorable Moments programme created large-scale trust events in notable venues across the North East. Thus the Gateshead International Stadium hosted the WISE Olympics, and a WISE art exhibition was held at the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art. The Memorable Moments programme was so successful that it has now become an annual event.

Such secondments are open to all trust staff, not just teachers. A teaching assistant who was involved in bringing the Outdoor Play and Learning programme to key stages 1 and 2 at their school was asked to support the development of outdoor play in other schools across the trust.

"It's really exciting how these things develop – it gives people an opportunity to lead across the trust," says Ms Carr. "There are lots and lots of opportunities for people to come together with purpose. It develops staff relationships and it builds the culture of the trust."





### 3. Aspiring leaders

The trust is keen to identify and encourage aspiring leaders. Members of the central team speak to each headteacher and ask them to identify potential future senior leaders.

Where talented staff have been identified but there are not yet any relevant posts to offer them, the trust creates “aspiring” positions. So, for example, a talented deputy headteacher might be appointed as an “aspiring headteacher”. Most recently, four aspiring deputy headteachers and six aspiring assistant headteachers have been appointed – each role receiving a number of strong applicants.

In September 2024, WISE created an additional regional hub, requiring the appointment of a fourth hub leader. In advance of this, an “aspiring hub lead” position was advertised internally, and one of the trust’s headteachers appointed to the role.

The “aspiring” positions also allow staff members to access professional development that will be relevant to their next role, so that they are well prepared for those positions when they become available.

“The current climate is tough for recruitment in schools,” says Ms Carr. “So it’s really important that we put time and energy into staff development.”



## Key points

- The central executive view a positive trust culture as key to the success of the whole organisation
- The trust operates on the principle: “All for one and one for all” – all trust staff bear responsibility for the success of all schools
- The trust’s mission, vision and values, as well as the behaviours associated with those values, are outlined in the Little Purple Book, a handbook given to all members of staff
- Centralised resources are available to reduce teacher workload, but the trust believes that individual teachers understand how best to deliver the curriculum and respond to their pupils’ needs
- Staff are celebrated and recognised at termly appreciation events
- The trust abandoned performance-related appraisals in favour of a conversation about career aspirations and professional growth – complete with career-path suggestions
- Talented teachers are encouraged to apply for secondments, releasing them one day a week to implement trust-wide projects
- “Aspiring” positions are created for talented staff, marking them out as potential senior leaders even before relevant positions become available

## WISE Academies Resources

- [The Little Purple Book](#)
- [Career Pathways booklet](#)
- [Professional growth policy](#)
- [Crafting the curriculum](#)
- [WISE childhood pledge](#)
- [WISE teaching and learning principles](#)

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