



School
Improvement
Hub

Case study

Windsor Academy Trust



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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 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

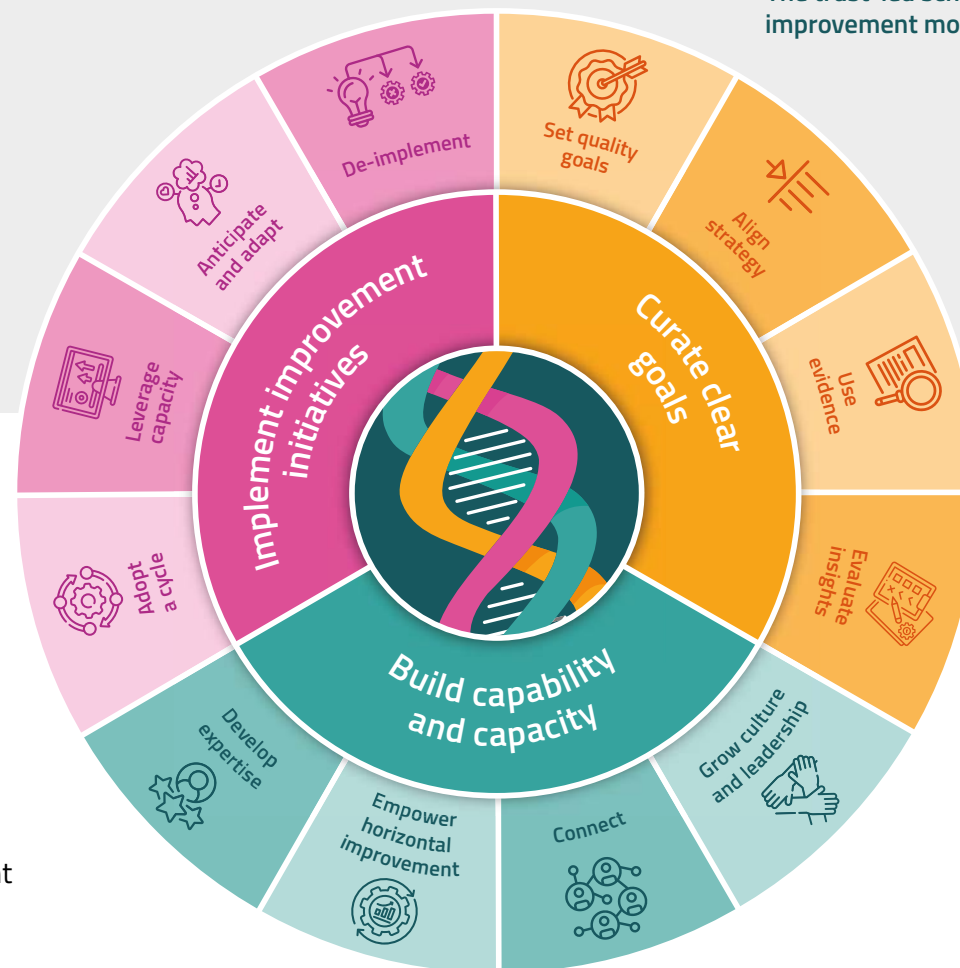
The model outlines the key aspects of how a school-improvement process, strategy or model might be enacted within a trust. Rather than dictating areas for improvement, the conceptual model allows each trust to apply its own understanding of quality and its own improvement goals to each of the three strands. 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 "Build capability and capacity" strand, therefore, breaks down into these components:

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

The trust-led school improvement model



Case study: Windsor Academy Trust



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

Empower horizontal improvement

Improve practice across a group of schools simultaneously, rather than just one school at a time



TRUST OVERVIEW

Trust: Windsor Academy Trust

CEO: Dawn Haywood

Founded: 2011

Schools: Seven primaries and eight secondaries, all in the West Midlands.

School sizes: The largest school in the trust, Windsor High School and Sixth Form, has 1,800 students. The smallest, Tenterfields Primary Academy, has 210 pupils on roll.

Percentage of disadvantaged students: 29% of pupils are eligible for pupil-premium funding – 36% at primary and 25% at secondary.

Percentage of students receiving free school meals: 28%

Percentage of students speaking English as an additional language: 14%

Key stage 2: 72% of pupils achieved the expected standard in all three of reading, writing and maths.

Progress 8 aggregate: 0.02

Ofsted: Ofsted judged three Windsor Academy Trust (WAT) primary schools inadequate before they joined the trust or when the trust began working with them. Two had received a judgement of requires improvement. All WAT primary schools are now rated good or good improving.

Four WAT secondary schools were judged inadequate or requires improvement before joining the trust or when the trust started working with them. All are now judged good or outstanding.



BACKGROUND

Windsor Academy Trust (WAT) was established in 2011, with Windsor High School and Sixth Form, in the West Midlands town of Halesowen.

The trust now has 15 schools, made up of converter academies, new schools and sponsored academies. WAT has another free school in the preopening stage. Supporting what the trust describes as “our family of schools” is the education directorate, a team of senior leaders whose mission is to direct strategy and coordinate school improvement to achieve the trust’s moral purpose: “to unlock academic and personal potential”.

“That simple moral purpose drives everything we do,” says Dan Owen, WAT director of education. “We place equal emphasis on academic and personal potential and the two are deeply interrelated, reflecting the government’s opportunity mission ambition for all children to achieve and thrive.

“You’ll not really hear us talk about ‘the trust’. We use the word ‘family’, because family describes who we are much more precisely: we are a family of schools with 1,300 staff collectively serving 10,000 pupils. There is a shared sense of purpose that all schools serve all children, and this informs our decision-making and day-to-day leadership behaviours.”

This carries into WAT’s quality-assurance and improvement work, too. “The family sees quality assurance and improvement as multifaceted,” says Kat Howard, executive school-improvement lead. “Firstly, it validates quality against our definition of excellence. Secondly, it develops colleagues’ mental model of what it means to quality assure with intention.

“All our quality assurance uses our ‘set plays’ as concepts of quality. Our set plays aim to make the complex business of education simple: clear strategic plans using evidence-informed best bets while still empowering staff to be flexible, creative and contextual, and intentionally developing people to do this.”

Set plays cover areas such as attendance, curriculum or student engagement, which provide clear concepts of quality and a shared language. The education directorate then co-constructs its insights with school leaders when they undertake quality-assurance and improvement work – seeking colleagues’ views on what they should look at during this process and how they interpret what they find.

Educational improvement, through academic and personal potential, can only be unlocked if the trust excels in a number of crucial areas. These areas form the “WAT School Improvement Pyramid”, a school-improvement version of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs.

At the base of the pyramid is safeguarding, followed by attendance. After that comes engagement, curriculum and teacher and learner effectiveness, leading to outcomes at the peak of the pyramid, with wellbeing and personal potential threaded through all aspects of school improvement. Improvement is seen as being boosted by digital technology, underpinned by excellent diagnosis of need – and, most importantly great people. The trust considers the staff its most cherished asset.

Bringing all of this together, WAT expresses its values and approach succinctly:

WAT values	The WAT approach
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Pride in excellence▪ Respect▪ Responsibility▪ Collaboration▪ Bold and innovative	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ The WAT way: game plan, set plays and empowerment Inspire and develop people▪ Grounded in research▪ Keep things simple and communicate clearly▪ Civic and system leadership





"We are deeply and intentionally collaborative, regularly challenging ourselves to act with boldness, innovating in new spaces."

***Dan Owen , Director of Education,
Windsor Academy Trust***

"We make no apology for having high standards across all that we do, and coupling this with respect for one another as colleagues, students, parents and the communities we serve," says Mr Owen.

"As colleagues, we take responsibility not just for standards, but one another. We take our responsibility for system leadership seriously, too. We often support schools and colleagues outside of our family, in local authorities and other trusts. We are deeply and intentionally collaborative, regularly challenging ourselves to act with boldness, innovating in new spaces."

Around 60 members of WAT staff spend part of their week working across the family, improving teacher and learner effectiveness as well as the curriculum more broadly. These cross-trust networks work on pyramid-based issues such as safeguarding, attendance and behaviour, as well as digital technology.

WHAT DOES EDUCATION LOOK LIKE AT WINDSOR ACADEMY TRUST?

Windsor Academy Trust aims to unlock the academic and personal potential of every student in its care.

WAT understands that success extends beyond exam results, encompassing the development of character, resilience and the skills needed to navigate an increasingly complex world.

The emphasis on personal potential is evident in WAT's commitment to developing the whole child. They actively cultivate traits such as resilience, empathy, and integrity, recognising that these qualities are essential for success in education and in life. This is achieved through a range of extracurricular activities, mentoring programmes and character-education initiatives. For instance, some students participate in community-service projects, developing a sense of social responsibility and empathy.





How does this work in practice?

A closer examination of empowering horizontal improvement

Empowering horizontal improvement: School-improvement summits

WAT undertakes annual school-improvement “summits”. These include a series of activities that seek to: gain an insight into the school-improvement journey so far; capture examples of excellence; and inform capacity giving and receiving across the family. Activities are dialogical, data informed and highly developmental, and they encompass side-by-side work with school leaders.

The aim is to visit each school in the family and conduct a summit, ideally within the first half-term of the year. This is a bigger challenge with 15 schools than it was when the trust was smaller; this year, 13 summits were completed before October half-term.

Each member of the education directorate has a portfolio of schools, and they will regularly visit those schools, talking to pupils and staff. In a pre-summit briefing with staff, there is space for each school

leadership team to determine the emphasis of their own summit. “The foci are not the same in each school,” says Mr Owen. “We look at the set play on student engagement – or attendance, or whatever we’re focusing on for that summit – and look with each school at their areas of excellence and what’s next.”

The leader from the education directorate – the WAT term for this is “coach” – will then work with the school senior leadership team to decide which classrooms and colleagues to meet, depending on the individual school and its stage of development within the trust.

Essentially, the summits allow the education directorate to take a detailed look at one of the WAT set plays, and to engage in a high-level conversation about its implementation, in individual schools and across the family. WAT is then able to make objective decisions and plans, based on the evidence gathered.

SAMPLE SCHOOL-IMPROVEMENT SUMMIT: STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Student engagement and attention is key to meaningful learning. Too much information at once can be overwhelming, but with focus and participation, students think more deeply and retain knowledge more effectively. After the challenges of the Covid pandemic, nurturing attention is an important focus, in order to rebuild children's confidence, curiosity and love for learning in the classroom.

Sonya Lanckham, WAT deputy director of education, describes one of the more recent set plays on student engagement: "We started by asking the question: 'If you walked by a classroom and student engagement was high, what would you see?'"

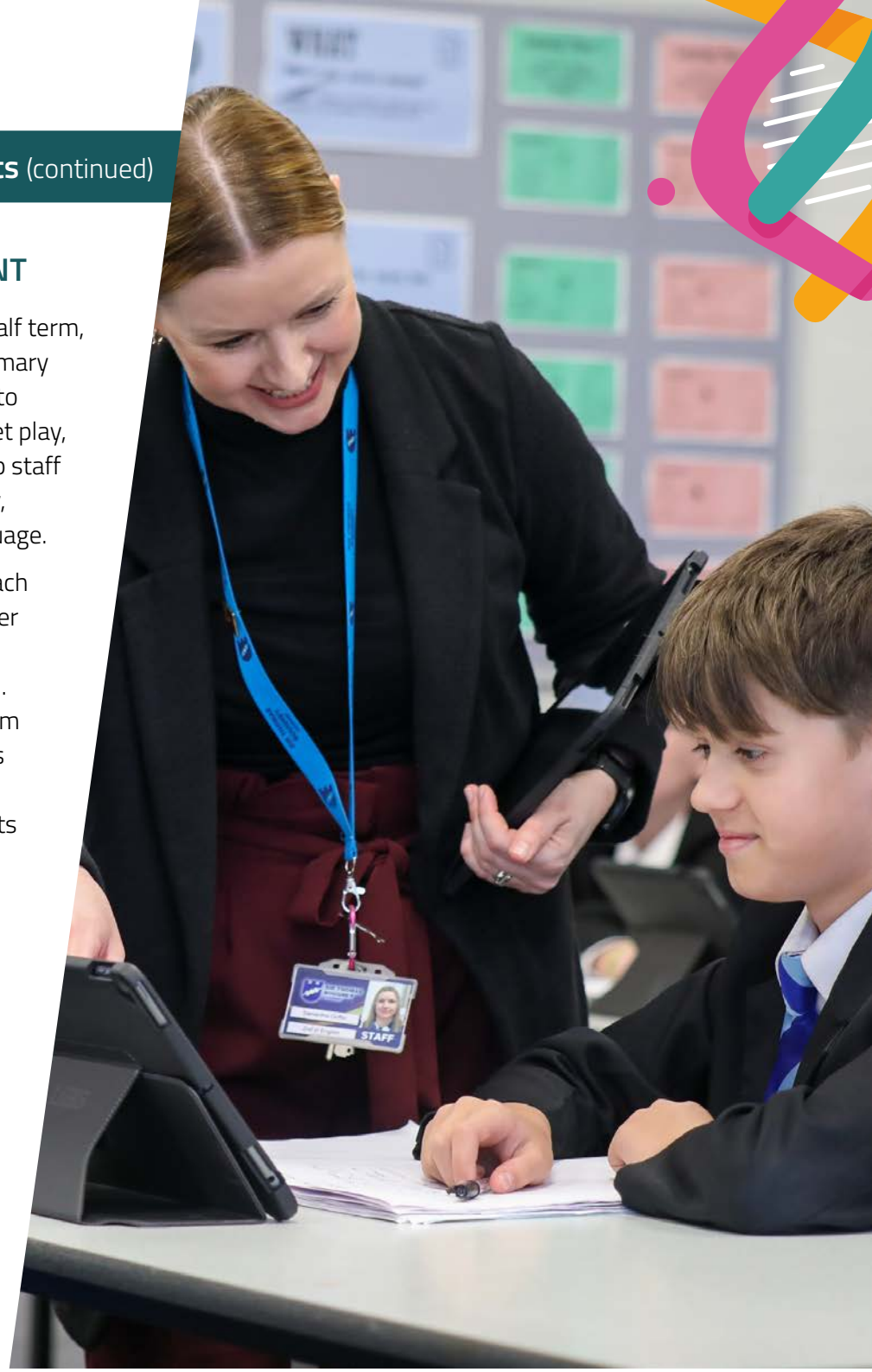
"When we think about student engagement in lessons, we think about seeing students who are motivated to participate – by listening, but also by speaking, reading and, crucially, by valuing their thinking enough to develop it in writing. We were clear on our goal – increased participation and deeper thinking."

The trust was inspired here by education author Doug Lemov's Teach Like a Champion model, with its a focus on maximising engagement and active learning through thoughtful participation, meaningful dialogue, writing and revision of work.

Over the course of the ensuing half term, Ms Lanckham consulted with primary and secondary leaders and staff to co-construct their approach or set play, identifying key techniques to help staff implement this vision with clarity, consistency and a common language.

The student-engagement approach is underpinned by the trust's wider teaching and learning model – referred to as its Sunshine Model. This model uses core insights from evidence-based teaching reviews to provide a clear framework for teachers to plan all the ingredients of an effective lesson.

For example, "connect and engage" in the Sunshine Model is the starting point of every lesson. The trust's student-engagement strategy takes this further, providing specific observable actions for teachers and students, within the "look fors" described on page 9.





Empowering horizontal improvement: School-improvement summits (continued)

CREATING IMPACT

At the start of the academic year, the education directorate works with the school senior leadership team to come up with their specific areas of focus.

In the 2024-25 academic year, leaders wanted to zoom in on “wired classrooms”: a specific area within the set play on student engagement. Ms Lanckham, alongside the senior leaders of teaching and learning, established a set of “look fors” within this focus area:

- Strong start to the lesson
- Habits of attention: how well students are tracking teachers. Are they making eye contact and listening when the teacher is speaking?

- Tracking their peers: for example, when a student uses an impressive word or phrase in response to a question and the teacher highlights it, will other students listen and learn from their peers?
- Habits of discussion: when students are asked to turn and talk, do they know who their partner is? Are they facing their partner? Are they respectfully agreeing and challenging each other, building on each other’s views?

These look fors informed the WAT lesson-visit look-for tool, a shared framework designed to ensure consistency and focus among leaders during lesson visits. “Even with the best intentions, two colleagues watching the same lesson may diverge in their focus,” says Ms Lanckham. “By co-constructing ‘look fors’ around a common focus, this tool enhances the validity and reliability of the data collected, enabling more precise and meaningful insights.

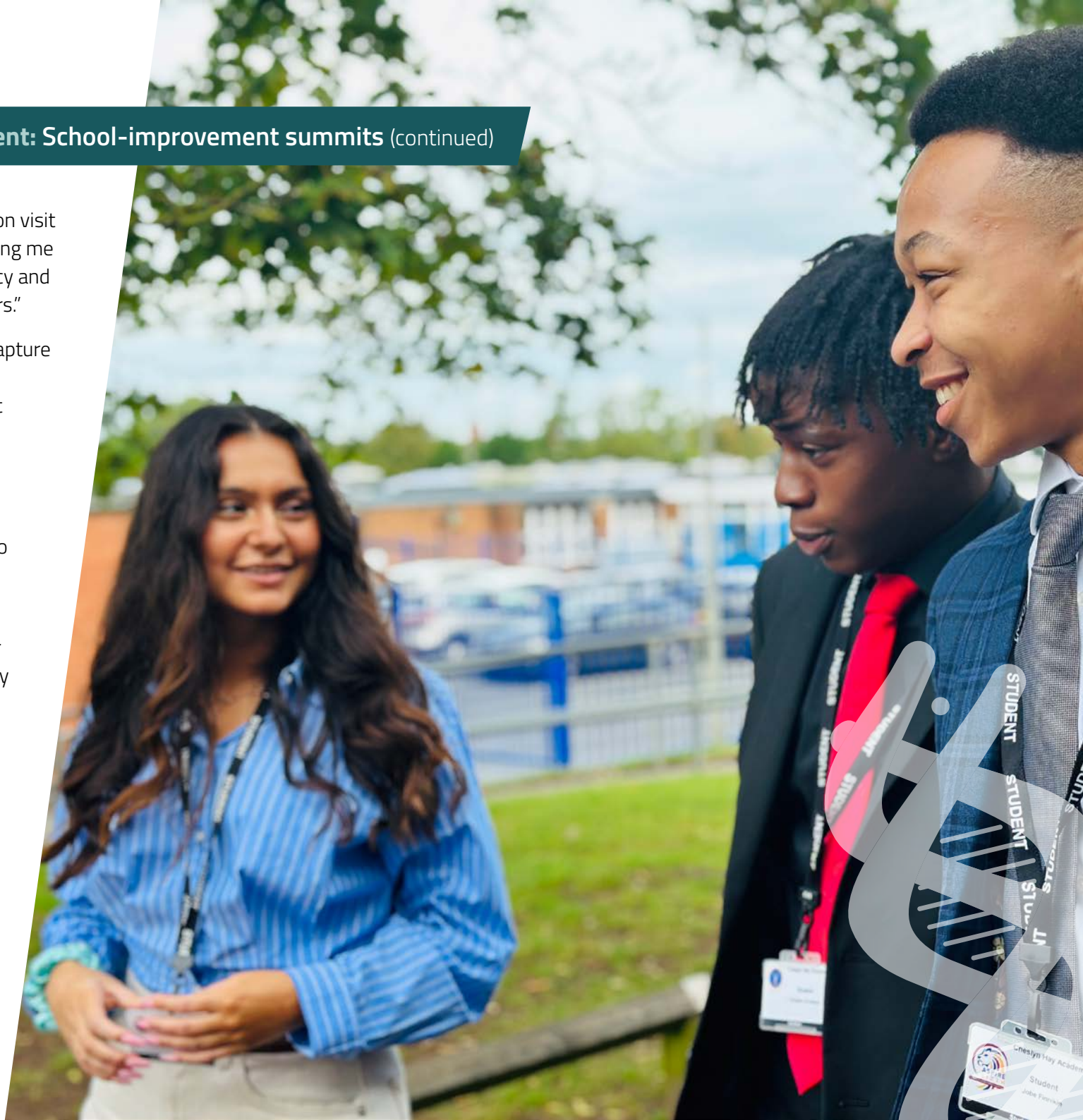
Empowering horizontal improvement: School-improvement summits (continued)

"At the start of each summit, I lead a pre-lesson visit briefing with the team of leaders who are joining me on lesson visits, to establish clarity, consistency and an understanding of our protocols and look fors."

WAT's approach to lesson visits doesn't just capture teaching quality, but the sense of belonging cultivated in the classroom. "It's not just about increasing levels of student engagement and active learning," says Ms Lanckham. "It's also about active belonging – a culture of students who feel academically safe in classrooms. We want young people to feel that they're going to be listened to, and that their voices matter."

"I want to see excellence – bright spots, including early career teachers. I'm hunting for bright spots so we can capture them and study them and get under the skin of their teaching, so we can learn from these and build on their success."

WAT has its own film crew, so coaches who see excellent practice during summits can commission the crew to film it for use at school level and trust level. The team then studies and analyses these clips, and uses them for trust-wide professional learning, whether on a whole-school basis or as part of individual coaching cycles.



FEEDBACK

By the time all the individual school summits are completed, members of the education directorate have spent well over 100 hours studying classroom teaching across the family of schools. At this point, the team comes together to synthesise findings on a trust-wide level.

The team looks at “glows and grows”: areas of strength and areas where there is still room for growth. What trends have been identified across the family? Data from 15 days spent in schools is brought together: what is being effectively implemented across the family? What is not working as well? What should be WAT’s next steps to address these areas? What capacity and resources does it therefore need?

“There are leading and lagging factors in any wide-scale organisational change,” says Ms Lanckham. “In some of our schools where the strategies are deeply embedded, we have seen the highest attainment in the history of those schools. Others have improved student progress by, on average, half a grade across all subjects and all students.

“We are taking an evidence-led approach and seeing students and teachers thrive in deeply engaging classrooms.”

SECURING RESPONSIVE LEADERSHIP

The thread that links WAT's set plays and quality-assurance and improvement approaches is responsive leadership. "The critical component of WAT's approach to school improvement is what comes next, and how we ensure that insights, practice and examples of excellence all translate into action," says Kat Howard, executive school-improvement lead.

"Our school and system leaders have a collective role in demonstrating what we mean by responsive leadership and ensuring that all school-improvement initiatives are deeply rooted in the best available evidence related to learning and the experience of the child, our specific school contexts and, of course, what our teachers and leaders see through their interactions with children every day.

"Responsive leadership is intentional and does not just happen automatically. To ensure that we take a collegiate approach to such practice, we take deliberate care to equip schools with a series of tools and exemplify how to mobilise these tools in line with our values."

The summit model, with agendas co-constructed between school and system



leaders, ensures that time is spent in key areas, where insight will turn into action. The summits that are undertaken in every school across the family enable the education directorate to consider glows and grows both vertically – the needs of each specific school – and horizontally across the family. This helps WAT to explore what is being effectively implemented across the family. What is less impactful? What should be the trust’s – and school’s – next steps to address these areas? What capacity and resources does it therefore need?

Essentially, the summits allow the education directorate to take a detailed look at one of the WAT set plays and to engage in a high-level conversation about its implementation, in individual schools and across the family. WAT is then able to make objective decisions and responsive plans, based on the evidence gathered.

“The summits enable us to accelerate school improvement activities that are already headteachers’ priorities,” says Ms Howard.

“If there’s really good work going on, then we can share it efficiently across the family. Therefore responsive leadership features significantly in our school-improvement activities.”

In the summits, colleagues from other schools from across the family work alongside the education directorate to undertake lesson-study

activities or discuss key areas of the curriculum. The trust adopts a peer model for specific activities such as SEND tours, which enables colleagues to learn from other contexts.

School leaders frequently collaborate and visit other schools to share effective practice across settings, or simply to see an entirely different context in session and consider how certain initiatives might be beneficial in their schools. For example, the trust’s recently founded free school, Windsor Olympus Academy, introduced a no-phones policy during its school day. Since then, other school leaders have adopted the approach, learning from the process of implementation.

Much of this approach to leadership relies upon the executive team knowing the schools deeply, and discussing them often as a team, but also enabling headteachers and senior leaders to do the same.

“This enables us to match talent swiftly, and signpost potential capacity giving from other schools where practice is excellent,” says Ms Lanckham. “We facilitate professional-learning community sessions for senior leaders to access high-quality professional development and share effective practice. We lead developmental input within our touchpoints with headteachers as a collective leadership team. And we develop our subject leaders through input in subject-network sessions.

“These are all opportunities for school and system leaders to discuss current successes, common challenges and, most importantly, to pose the questions: ‘What’s next? How do I support teachers and leaders in school to turn these insights into action and benefit the students and community that we serve?’”



“Responsive leadership is intentional and does not just happen automatically. To ensure that we take a collegiate approach to such practice, we take deliberate care to equip schools with a series of tools and exemplify how to mobilise these tools in line with our values.”

Kat Howard, executive school-improvement lead, Windsor Academy Trust

Key points

- **Windsor Academy Trust's approach to school improvement:** Establishing clear purposes, strategies and goals ensures that Windsor Academy Trust is aligned on what it aims to achieve and how to get there.
- **Empower horizontal improvement:** WAT's school-improvement summits accelerate improvement priorities and foster trust-wide collaboration by sharing exemplary practices and guiding strategic decisions through comprehensive, data-informed insights.
- **Secure responsive leadership:** Leadership at WAT is collaborative, evidence-led and grounded in strategic clarity. Leaders engage with staff and pupils to diagnose needs, co-construct solutions and align efforts across the family to address key improvement priorities effectively.

Resources

- [WAT student engagement: lesson-visit tool](#)
- [Set play for improving attendance](#)
- [Student engagement set play](#)
- [WAT curriculum](#)
- [WAT developing teacher and learner effectiveness](#)

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