

# Coherent professional development for a coherent curriculum

Responding to the Curriculum and Assessment Review

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 Steplab



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# Coherent PD for a coherent curriculum: responding to the Curriculum and Assessment Review

The proposed curriculum principles in the Curriculum and Assessment Review reinforce the aim for a coherent and ambitious vision of education that seeks to secure entitlement, knowledge, and professional autonomy. These principles underline an ambition for a curriculum that allows both children and teachers to thrive. Yet, as with all curriculum design, the challenge is not only in the articulation of principles, but in their enactment. The test is in how they are lived in classrooms, translated through teachers' expertise, and ultimately experienced by students.

## Curriculum as entitlement and experience

The review rightly positions the National Curriculum as an entitlement that offers all young people access to the knowledge and skills that will enable them to flourish. This recognition of curriculum as a public good is essential. However, entitlement cannot be understood solely as access to a shared body of content. It must also encompass access to the processes and pedagogies through which all students are inducted into the intellectual habits of the subjects we teach.

To know of history, art, or science is not the same as to think with them. This entitlement encourages schools to extend beyond content coverage to encompass the intellectual experiences that allow students to engage with, question, and reimagine the world. The knowledge-rich approach, when realised authentically, enables this; not as a static transmission of facts, but as an invitation to all students into the 'epistemic access' that Bernstein and Muller describe, where knowledge becomes a means to think beyond oneself.<sup>1</sup>

## A curriculum for all: representation and inclusion

The report's emphasis on ensuring all young people 'see themselves' in the curriculum is both necessary and overdue. This is not a matter of token inclusion or additive diversity; rather, it is imperative for a full and accurate understanding of the world. If knowledge is to be a shared inheritance, then it must reflect the full range of human experience that has contributed to its making.

Representation within the curriculum does not dilute disciplinary rigour, it deepens it. The aim here is to broaden the canon to reveal the multiple perspectives through which knowledge has evolved. This is not about displacing core content but enriching it. Students' sense of belonging arises when they encounter both the familiar and



<sup>1</sup> Bernstein, B (2000). *Pedagogy, symbolic control, and identity*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. Muller, J., (2014) 'Every picture tells a story: Epistemological access and knowledge', *Education as Change*, 18:2, 255-269.

the unfamiliar, and when they see themselves and the wider world reflected with integrity and respect.

## Knowledge-rich and the symbiosis of knowledge and skill

The Review commits to a knowledge-rich curriculum, characterised by careful sequencing, conceptual depth, and equity of access. Yet, there is a necessary caution in ensuring that 'knowledge-rich' does not become 'knowledge-dense'. The distinction lies in intentional design: knowledge should not overwhelm, but rather provoke curiosity, coherence, and understanding.

Skills and knowledge are not oppositional but symbiotic. Analysis, critique, synthesis are not developed in a vacuum but are manifestations of knowledge in practice. A truly knowledge-rich curriculum honours this reciprocity, designed for the interplay between knowing and doing. It is here that the teacher's expertise is most essential: the curriculum is the script, but the teacher is the interpreter, shaping meaning in the act of teaching.

## Depth, mastery, and curriculum time

The principle of mastery, reflected by a deep understanding rather than procedural repetition, aligns closely with a curriculum that values depth. The report's attention to curriculum time is particularly significant and reiterates how the curriculum should allow "sufficient space to secure, deepen and extend [students'] foundational knowledge and skills, building on prior learning". Without this deliberate space to secure and deepen understanding, students risk surface learning: knowledge gained but not internalised.

Achieving curriculum depth is found in the coherence of how prior knowledge is deliberately revisited, recontextualised, and extended. This cumulative process is what allows learners to see the patterns within and across subjects. To achieve this, curriculum design must consciously resist the pressure to overfill; the richness of learning lies not in its volume but in its connections.

## Coherence: vertical, horizontal and intentional

The call for both vertical and horizontal coherence within the curriculum marks an important evolution. Vertical coherence secures the disciplinary threads that allow concepts to mature over time; horizontal coherence ensures that learning is interconnected across subjects, phases, and experiences. This requires an intentional and intelligent approach to curriculum sequencing.

Sequencing of curriculum is therefore more than the order of its component parts - it is about the relationship between them, the connections, the embellishments, the deeper understanding that the sequence allows our students to make. It is more than simply: this, follows this, follows this - it is narrative, it tells the story of our subject, it is a conversation between its parts.

However, curriculum design can sometimes be reduced to "fragments of knowledge [that] float around without being placed in a coherent structure" or in some cases, formed of disjointed units of work merely connected by the command words of exam papers with no real sense of cohesion.<sup>2</sup> We begin to move towards a better model when we start to see how one episode of teaching requires prior knowledge to not only reinforce memory but to access new learning.

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<sup>2</sup> Myatt, M (2018). 'Building Curriculum', *Impact: Journal of the Chartered College of Teaching*

## Specificity and professional autonomy

Whilst careful sequencing can provide specificity of curricular structure and progression, this cannot devolve into minute-by-minute specificity that dismisses the intellect and expertise of professional teachers. The report's recognition that greater specificity must not come at the expense of autonomy is critical. Specificity provides clarity; autonomy provides satisfaction. Teachers are not merely deliverers of content but curriculum makers, interpreting, sequencing, and enacting knowledge for their particular students, in their particular contexts.

Curriculum design and teacher development are inseparable pursuits. Over-prescription risks undermining the professional satisfaction that comes from making pedagogical choices informed by deep disciplinary understanding. True professional autonomy is not an absence of structure, but the freedom to make expert decisions within it. It is this expertise that sustains teacher motivation and retention.<sup>3</sup>

## Teachers as curriculum custodians

Finally, the principle of involving teachers in the drafting and design of curriculum is fundamental. Curriculum written for teachers without being written with them risks being inert. Teachers' professional expertise, built in the interplay between subject-specific understanding and classroom experience, must be central to this process.

To sustain a curriculum that is aspirational, coherent, and inclusive, we must also sustain the people who teach it. This requires a system that values the curriculum not as a product, but as a process: a dialogue between intent and classroom reality. To achieve this, professional dialogue and development needs to be at the heart of how the curriculum is enacted. Professional development, too then, must mirror the very sequencing and coherence we expect of the curriculum itself: deliberate, sustained, and rooted in subject-specific expertise.

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<sup>3</sup> Worth, J and Van den Brande, J (2020) *Teacher autonomy: how does it relate to job satisfaction and retention?* NFER.

# Realising curriculum principles through professional development

## Revisiting our curriculum intentions

The Review's proposed curriculum principles mark an important point of reflection for school and trust leaders. Their emphasis on entitlement, coherence, depth, and knowledge-rich teaching echoes much of what the sector has been striving towards in recent years. However, a curriculum is not realised by documentation alone; it lives through the professional expertise of teachers who interpret, enact, and refine it in the classroom.

The question for us, then, is not simply what we will teach, but how we will cultivate and sustain the expertise necessary to provide teachers with the capacity to:

- Teach the curriculum as a journey: seeing the curriculum as a coherent whole rather than a set of isolated lessons, making purposeful connections between prior learning, current content and future ideas; telling the disciplinary story so knowledge unfolds as a meaningful narrative rather than coverage, and facilitating an ongoing conversation between concepts, topics, and experiences.
- Bring the curriculum to life: shaping meaning through clear explanations, carefully chosen examples, and purposeful questioning; provoking curiosity and intellectual engagement, and translating abstract ideas into accessible representations.
- Ensure deep curriculum engagement: making responsive pedagogical decisions in the moment, balancing depth and pace in line with curriculum intent; revisiting and recontextualising knowledge to deepen understanding over time; integrating knowledge and skill through thoughtfully designed tasks, and exercising professional judgement within the curricular structure.

So how can school leaders evolve their professional development culture and systems to ensure curriculum principles are not only understood, but meaningfully enacted for all students?

## Professional development as curriculum in action

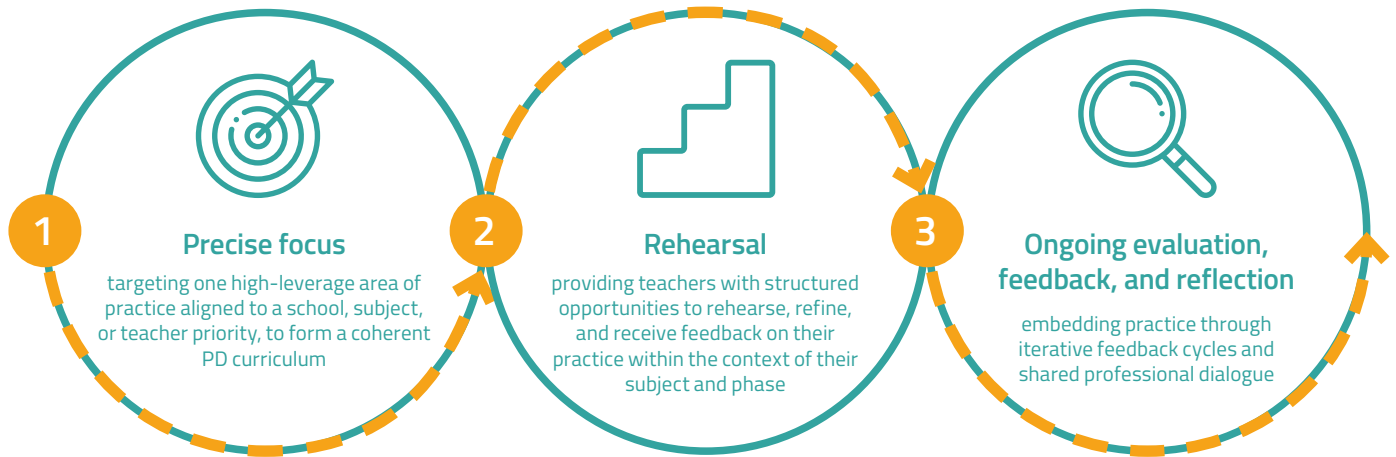
Just as we apply principles of sequencing, coherence and depth to student learning, the same must apply to the professional learning of teachers.

We can conceptualise teacher learning as a curriculum in itself: purposeful, sequenced, and grounded in evidence.



Multiple research papers have identified three core features of effective professional learning:<sup>4</sup>

- Precise focus: targeting one high-leverage area of practice aligned to a school, subject, or teacher priority, to form a coherent PD curriculum
- Rehearsal: providing teachers with structured opportunities to rehearse, refine, and receive feedback on their practice within the context of their subject and phase
- Ongoing evaluation, feedback, and reflection: embedding practice through iterative feedback cycles and shared professional dialogue



When applied thoughtfully, this model acts as the mechanism through which curriculum principles of knowledge depth, coherence, inclusivity, and professional autonomy, can be realised at scale.

<sup>4</sup> Sims, S, Fletcher-Wood, H, O'Mara-Eves, A, Cottingham, S, et al (2022). *Effective teacher professional development: new theory and a meta-analytic test?* CEPEO Working Paper No. 22-02. Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities, UCL. Mccrea, P (2023). *Developing expert teaching: A practical guide to designing effective professional development, for others and ourselves.*

# 1. Coherent PD that mirrors curriculum design

A coherent professional development programme entails far more than a collection of training sessions and should be treated as a carefully sequenced curriculum. Like any good curriculum, it should be rooted in intention and purpose: specifically focused on priorities for school improvement.

Professional development disconnected from a school's priorities risks becoming 'noisy' and ineffective, detached from teachers' needs.<sup>5</sup> Whether focused on improving oracy, supporting pupils with SEND, or increasing participation ratio, PD must be designed to solve the most pressing problems as a targeted response to what leaders know about their school.

Steplab's model provides a practical way to achieve this coherence by helping school and trust leaders to:

- Identify developmental priorities rooted in curriculum intent (for example, improving modelling in science, refining questioning in English)
- Design PD progression sequences that revisits and deepens key concepts - just as the curriculum does for students
- Complete review cycles to evaluate and iterate PD in response to patterns to ensure sustained impact.

But coherence isn't just about alignment to priorities, sequencing of the PD curriculum is also crucial. Just as pupils learn best when knowledge builds cumulatively, teachers benefit from the same. Fragmented PD with one week on modelling, the next on retrieval, results in superficial understanding and prevents new practices from being securely embedded. A better approach maps teacher learning over time. If through lesson drop-ins leaders identify that securing student attention is a key priority, a sequence of PD that starts by focusing on how to proactively attain students' attention, moving to how to deliberately direct attention and later to reducing distractions and maintaining attention, will be far more effective than a sequence that moves from one focus to another each week.

This sequencing also supports habit formation. A well-sequenced PD programme revisits key ideas, allowing teachers to refine and embed them. It also provides time for rehearsal, practice, and feedback, all of which are key ingredients for sustained improvement.<sup>6</sup>

In this way, professional development becomes the professional analogue of curriculum design: iterative, intentional and anchored in the disciplinary needs of each subject.

This incremental approach builds professional confidence as teachers are not judged on mastery overnight but supported in continual refinement. Over time, this creates a professional culture aligned with the Ofsted expectation of 'sustained and coherent programmes rooted in the needs and priorities of the school'.<sup>7</sup>

5 Kennedy, M (2016). 'How Does Professional Development Improve Teaching?' *Review of Educational Research*, 86(4), 945-980.

6 Sims (2021)

7 Ofsted (2025), Education inspection framework



## Unity Schools Partnership

*Unity Schools Partnership is a family of 40 schools in the east of England, spanning Suffolk, Norfolk, Essex, Cambridgeshire and Romford, with nine secondary schools, five special schools and 26 primary schools. A research school and two Teaching School Hubs are at the heart of the organisation, and it supports more than 900 schools across the country through its curriculum partnership, CUSP. Many of its schools serve communities that have experienced disadvantage in multiple forms, including coastal deprivation, high mobility, economic disadvantage and previously under-served educational landscapes.*

High-quality professional development is the keystone for educational success. Without this, the curriculum remains, at best, two-dimensional. At Unity Schools Partnership, we've thought carefully about how to ensure the PD curriculum is coherent and leads to meaningful and sustained habit change.

Drawing on the Education Endowment Foundation's Implementation guidance and Sims' meta-analysis of effective professional development, we've built a model for PD that prioritises quality over quantity and puts leaders and teachers at the heart of its delivery.<sup>8</sup>

At Unity, The Code is the pedagogical framework that sets out the eight core components of what makes great teaching. These eight components are not exhaustive and have many branches that derive from each chapter. Aligning schools around these components was – relatively speaking – the easy part. The Code seeks to distil high-quality evidence about what works in the classroom into a programme of professional learning that turns evidence into action and theory into habits.


Our mantra for The Code is 'central messaging, locally interpreted and delivered'. Each school has its own unique characteristics and we aim to honour these. Classrooms are also dynamic environments – every group of students is different. It is the skill of the teacher and the art of teaching to respond to these.

Our approach is designed to acknowledge this, while preserving the very best of what evidence tells us works in the classroom.

The initiative started with the creation of a shared understanding – a common mental model – of the evidence-based principles of learning. This foundational step established a language for discussing the learning process. Following this, for each of the eight core chapters, our leaders developed a comprehensive four-hour professional development package. These materials are grounded in the agreed mental models and illustrate the specific practices aimed to be embedded in all schools. PD sessions focus on equipping leaders with the











*Lauren Meadows,  
Curriculum Director, Unity  
Schools Partnership and  
CUSP*



### The Code

Our ambition is that every pupil in every class receives excellent teaching so that they can thrive. The Unity Code describes the core components of great teaching that we hope to see in all lessons. Expert teachers will deploy these flexibly to meet the needs of every learner in their classes.

	<b>Retrieval practice:</b> prior knowledge is activated through well-structured retrieval practice routines.
	<b>Explanation and exposition:</b> core concepts for the lesson are explained concisely and precisely.
	<b>Explicit vocabulary instruction:</b> key threshold vocabulary is instructed deeply; other important language is clarified.
	<b>Quality modelling and scaffolding:</b> high quality modelling and scaffolding ensures that every pupil can be successful.
	<b>Prosodic reading:</b> reading routines ensure that every pupil is reading, every lesson, every day.
	<b>Thinking hard:</b> generative task design provides opportunities for all pupils to think hard in lessons.
	<b>Checking for understanding:</b> opportunities to check pupils' understanding and resolve misconceptions are planned for.
	<b>Precision questioning:</b> questions are carefully designed to challenge thinking and ensure that all pupils can be successful.

<sup>8</sup> Education Endowment Foundation (2024). *A school's guide to implementation*.

knowledge of why these practices are effective and how to implement them in their specific contexts. Our leaders first master the content and techniques of each chapter themselves, and then, taking their individual school context into account, devise and execute their own implementation and delivery plan.

The first three one-hour sessions offer a deep-dive into every aspect of the mental model and provide teachers with opportunities to cogitate what this means in the context of their subject and rehearse delivery to the point of fluency. For each chapter so far, more than 240 senior leaders from across our schools have trained to become champions and experts of The Code. Each chapter builds from learning in the previous chapters with deliberate revisiting tasks and exemplification of how the mental models work together.

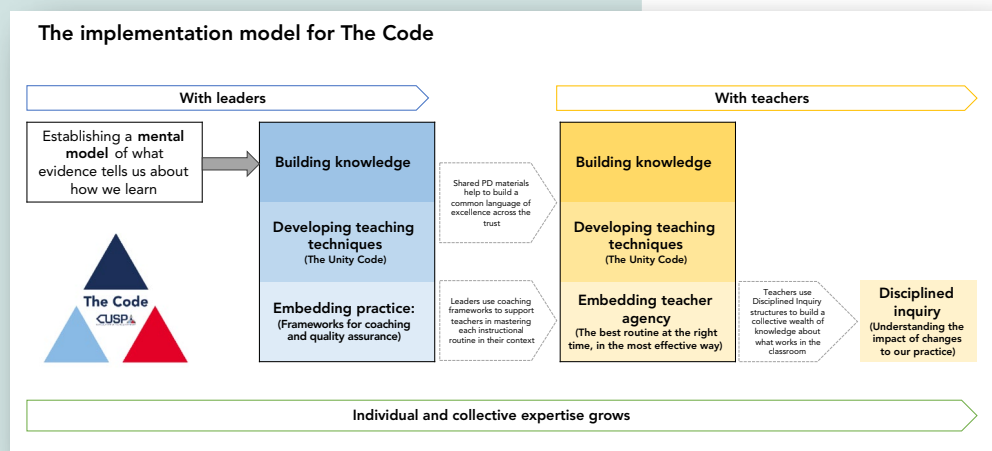
The fourth hour of each session focuses on evaluation, quality assurance and coaching, recognising that delivering PD is only the beginning of the journey. Our leaders have translated the coaching framework and observation prompts onto Steplab as a PD curriculum, allowing leaders to seamlessly move between delivering the chapter to their whole staff and deploying drop-in and coaching support.

This strategy has been prioritised in improvement planning. All schools have committed to a three year journey to implement all eight chapters, ringfencing at least three hours of PD time for each chapter per term to focus on one specific aspect of practice. By deliberately creating this space for implementation, PD moves away from 'we've covered it' to 'we live it every lesson, every day'.

Following delivery of each chapter, our leaders move into cycles of review and evaluation, regular revisiting, and coaching. Only once a chapter is fully embedded do we introduce the next. The Steplab platform has enabled us to systematise the delivery of this PD model to ensure high-quality follow up and follow through of all of our PD.

Unity's key ingredients for PD success:

- PD is learning and habit change – apply the same principles of curriculum design and pedagogy as you would in the classroom.
- A shared mental model and common language must be the prerequisite for PD.
- Be brave enough to do a few things really well - and not get distracted.
- If something is important, you must give it time.



## 2. Subject specificity and the practice of enactment

The Curriculum Review rightly highlights that professional autonomy and subject specificity must coexist. Teachers are not deliverers of curriculum, they are curriculum makers, whose subject understanding and interpretive decisions bring depth to its enactment.

Steplab's approach to subject-specific coaching reinforces this principle. Rather than generic training, effective PD situates practice within the precise context of the subject, lesson, teacher and students. Whether during coaching or through group PD, teachers require both high quality models and the time to apply and rehearse techniques, rooted in the curriculum to be delivered. By situating rehearsal within the context of an upcoming lesson, teachers can focus on how techniques can be used to make their curriculum enactment more effective, so that modelling in geography becomes rehearsing how to model map interpretation with precision of disciplinary language. Rehearsing the use of worked examples becomes a maths teacher practising how to scaffold procedural fluency before abstraction, or improving modelling in English becomes a teacher rehearsing live-writing of analytical paragraphs. In a primary context, this becomes a Year 2 teacher rehearsing how to model sentence construction using precise phonics and vocabulary, or a Year 4 teacher practising how to model the use of bar models to make multiplicative relationships explicit.

This approach can be taken further in PD sessions led by subject or phase leaders. In these sessions, subject leaders may focus on their own priorities for curriculum delivery or focus on a whole school pedagogical priority to explore in greater depth. In the example of a whole school priority to improve modelling strategies, a subject leader for maths may identify a key aspect of their curriculum, such as multi-step word problems, for which they use the PD session to rehearse and give feedback on modelling step-by-step, explicitly verbalising their thought process to help teachers understand how to unpack and solve complex tasks with students.

In English, the subject leader may choose a lesson focused on crafting an analytical paragraph for a specific text. This becomes an opportunity to develop the team's subject knowledge of the text itself as well as modelling how to analyse and write about the text with students. The session may start with how to intellectually prepare for the lesson followed by the mechanics of delivery such as modelling live-writing. This would be followed by teacher rehearsal either applied to the same task or to a different question, text or part of text to further develop subject knowledge and expertise.

In a primary setting, this might be an English or phonics lead using a PD session to rehearse how teachers model blending and



segmenting with precision. Or if a school's priority area is to improve KS2 writing, a key stage leader may lead a PD session demonstrating how to teach sentence construction, modelling how teachers can deliberately build in opportunities for pupils to orally rehearse sentences before writing, using talk to shape vocabulary choices, sentence structure and meaning. Teachers would then apply this thinking to an upcoming lesson or unit, adapting teaching sequences and task design, alongside rehearsing explanations. Using this session for both intellectual preparation and rehearsal for delivery.

This approach therefore not only supports lesson delivery but also models good habits for intellectual planning. In addition, by rehearsing techniques grounded in an upcoming lesson through this subject-specific lens, teachers can practise their application contextualised for their classroom, leading to a higher likelihood of adoption and a greater sense of motivation as teachers instantly see how the PD session will make a difference in their classroom.<sup>9</sup>

Through rehearsal and feedback, teachers internalise not only the what of their curriculum, but the how: how knowledge is explained, questioned, connected and made memorable. This is the artistry of teaching powerful knowledge.

### Case Study - Windsor Academy Trust

*Windsor Academy Trust is a family of 15 schools across the West Midlands, comprising seven primary and eight secondary academies. Schools range in size from Tenterfields Primary Academy, with just over 200 pupils on roll, to Windsor High School and Sixth Form, serving around 1800 students. Many schools serve communities experiencing significant socio-economic challenges, with a higher than average proportion of students eligible for pupil premium and free school meals compared with national benchmarks. In 2023, 72% of pupils achieved the expected standard in reading, writing and maths at Key Stage 2 and our aggregate Progress 8 measure reflected positive outcomes across our secondary schools. Several schools have joined following challenging inspection outcomes, with sustained school improvement and strong collaboration leading to improved Ofsted judgements.*

At Windsor Academy Trust, we use Shulman's 1987 paper, *Knowledge and teaching: Foundations of the new reform* to define the knowledge teachers need and to create a shared language for all key stakeholders. Shulman outlines that teachers need:

- Content knowledge: the subject matter, the rationale and sequence of this as part of a curriculum framework and the fidelities and evolutions of their subject matter over time.
- General pedagogical knowledge: the more generic aspects of teaching that 'transcend' subject matter and the interplay between components of these. For example, we know that exemplification is crucial ahead of independent practice or that retrieval should encourage a high success rate to be able to then present new knowledge.
- Pedagogical content knowledge: decisions around how to 'package' the curriculum in a way that strikes harmony for both pedagogical and subject-specific excellence.



*Katherine Howard,  
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<sup>9</sup> Sunal D W, Hodges J, Sunal C S, Whitaker K W, et al (2001). 'Teaching science in higher education: faculty professional development and barriers to change'. *Sch Sci Math* 101, 246-257.

We use this understanding to co-construct two key frameworks to support our teachers in their development of this knowledge.

The first, subject development time: we ensure dedicated time in schools for teachers to consider what they are about to teach, how to teach it, and what they need to know as subject experts to bring it to life. This shapes the nature of subject development time and how it works in practice. In some subjects, teachers may be led through a segment of a lesson by a colleague as an immersive exercise, where they are 'taught' the lesson and can consider how to leverage this in their own planning. Alternatively,

it may be that a subject team accesses subject knowledge input from an academic to support their development ahead of teaching specific content. We empower our subject leaders at school level as facilitators of PD in their own right, who know the strengths and opportunities to develop their subject teams accordingly. We are now in the process of revising our approach to lesson preparation to ensure subject and phase leaders are empowered to drive preparation at school level.

Our second framework is based on curriculum enactment principles, outlining explicit general pedagogical principles and how these can be embellished by the subject expert in the 'packaging' process of curriculum enactment. These consist of:

- Prior, current and future knowledge
- Reading classrooms
- Plan for error
- Sequencing
- Assessment

These principles build on the general pedagogical foundations that support learning over time, but

with the consideration that subject nuance holds a central role in how the curriculum is enacted to a high standard for students.

Curriculum enactment principles		
Principle	Consists of	Looks like
1. Prior, current and future knowledge	Relevant retrieval Prior and current knowledge Essential knowledge	Teacher preparation (materials and actions) reveals that teachers have a clear learning aim: the 'smart start' links prior and current learning through the principles of effective retrieval; materials and actions have considered key knowledge and vocabulary that students will know or need to know to access new content. The teacher may use the key concepts or big ideas to make current learning relevant to students.
2. Reading classrooms	High quality reading classrooms Selecting high quality texts Explicit teaching of vocabulary	Where appropriate, teachers use high quality texts, model reading effectively themselves or with selected students and design delivery around purposeful reading and managing cognitive load of students. Text selection is made collectively by the team and enables teachers to exemplify core vocabulary in use. Teachers explicitly teach key vocabulary that enables students to make links to a task.
3. Plan for error	Misconceptions A faded modelling approach Using examples and non examples	Teacher preparation evidence (materials and actions) plans responses to anticipated errors or misconceptions to high-priority questions/tasks. This could include a modelled exemplar, or explicit reference in anticipation of or in response to common misconceptions.
4. Sequencing	A sequence for learning and fully guided instruction Preparing students for independent practice	The teaching sequence enables learning: there is task-to-task cohesion where one stage in the sequence prepares students for the next in either relevance to build knowledge or to apply knowledge previously taught. No task assumes the prior knowledge or mental model of students to complete independent practice. For example, a scaffold might be created and modelled in use by the teacher to support during independent work.
5. Assessment	Formative assessment to check understanding	Teacher uses formative assessment (cold calling, show me, targeted questioning) to inform next steps in teaching. Active observation is used in a responsive way to ensure that learning is not fragile eg a reteach or show call to further exemplify learning.

This means that our drop-in and coaching data on the Steplab platform is plentiful but also interpreted in a nuanced way through the different professional lenses that staff bring to continual quality improvement. Our senior leaders provide specific spotlight and feedback regarding general pedagogical practices in the classroom, whilst our subject specialists are able to provide subject specific feedback that acts to embellish general pedagogical feedback. For instance, where a 'generalist' may highlight strong teacher instruction, a subject specialist may highlight that the teacher anticipates misconceptions in their instruction, leveraging prior knowledge in their explanation of the task.

These principles provide a universal framework through which our leaders can attend to generic and specific strengths and areas of development for teachers. For example, middle leaders use Subject Development Time with their teams to share strong practice and teachers may lead aspects of these sessions to exemplify, or senior leaders may draw on the strong practitioners seen to exemplify excellence in whole-school PD. The trust-wide subject team supports and empowers middle leaders by ensuring these sessions include rich, subject-specific input and collaboration for subject teams that act to drive continual improvement.

Our senior leadership teams then have a range of data to inform strategy, and to further support our middle leaders to drive their team's collective improvement.



### 3. Professional learning and curriculum evaluation as part of a continual cycle

Low teacher retention and the erosion of professional expertise creates a significant risk of knowledge loss within the sector. A robust PD curriculum can play a part in addressing these issues, but only when PD is informed by meaningful curriculum-related evaluative activities.

When teachers feel their work is professionally valued and experience curriculum design and enactment as intellectually stimulating, it becomes a satisfying and fulfilling pursuit. Even better, when teachers can see the connection between the evaluation of practice in the classroom and how this informs their PD experience, PD is given value and meaning.

High quality PD informed by evaluative findings can give teachers structured opportunities to improve their craft, creating opportunities to experience visible progress, and providing a sense of belonging within an organisation that values teacher learning as much as student learning. Leaders should therefore:

- Consider how curriculum is evaluated through regular, meaningful activities with teachers and leaders such as curriculum conversations in line management, learning activities like book looks or side by side visits to see the curriculum in action in the classroom.
- Protect time for weekly coaching or rehearsal sessions for teachers to engage in subject-specific practice ahead of enactment.
- Align PD with appraisal and progression that recognise professional growth, not outcomes.
- Use data from drop-ins and coaching to inform PD, feeding back into school priorities, ensuring balance between global whole-school trends and subject specific priorities to form a sophisticated approach to school improvement.

These insights allow leaders to tailor the PD curriculum and subsequent group PD sessions or coaching foci more precisely, identifying and embedding techniques that directly impact curriculum delivery and student learning.

Utilising this data more granularly to evaluate the effectiveness of PD on priority groups, such as pupils identified as disadvantaged or those with SEND, can further ensure PD is designed to have the most impact in the most vulnerable areas. Taking a more targeted approach to evaluation allows leaders to identify how well targeted interventions and adaptations taught during PD are being applied in classrooms and whether these actions are effective in reducing barriers to learning. If data suggests limited progress for these groups, PD content and delivery can be refined to better equip teachers to meet all students' needs.

Leaders in schools and trusts should consider how subject leaders are professionally developed to assure



the quality of curriculum, and how to use that data to inform the PD needs of their team. This ensures that PD is subject specific, nuanced to match the needs of the teachers accessing it and therefore leads to sustained improvement.

In this model, professional development becomes the retention strategy. When PD is coherent, deliberate, and anchored in curriculum knowledge, both children and teachers thrive.

### Case study: Outwood Grange Academies Trust

*Outwood Grange Academies Trust operates across the North of England, with 41 schools, encompassing primary, junior, secondary, and post 16 education. The trust serves over 30,000 students with a central mission of "Students First: Raising Standards and Transforming Lives". OGAT functions as a collaborative family where schools maintain individual identities shaped by their specific communities. Professional growth is fostered through the Outwood Institute of Education and regional networks.*

At Outwood, we underpin our Teaching and Learning model with Rosenshine's principles, translated into our Five Pillar teaching model. This comprises of:

1. Clarity of Learning Intentions
2. Recap and Recall
3. New Information
4. Practice
5. Feedback

A central tenet of our approach is creating a sense of belonging. We achieve this by designing a curriculum that allows students to encounter both the familiar and the unfamiliar, seeing themselves and the wider world reflected in their learning. However, moving these ideals from paper to practice has required us to take a robust, research-informed approach to PD. Based on research by Sims and Peps Mccrea our professional model is designed to include:

- Precise focus: Targeting high-leverage, granular practice areas aligned with school or subject priorities using the Five Pillars of Learning.
- Rehearsal: Providing structured opportunities for our teachers to refine their practice and receive feedback within their specific subject context. Conducted biweekly as a morning session for teachers and teaching assistants in all secondaries.
- Ongoing evaluation: Embedding practice through iterative feedback cycles and professional dialogue led by senior and middle leaders in weekly department Learning and Performance directed time, half termly community leadership meetings, and paired learning walks.

At Outwood, we use Steplab as the vehicle for our PD model. Our trust has worked closely with the Steplab team to deliver PD Leadership Intensives and Instructional Coaching sessions, to upskill leaders and coaches. We've also codified our 'Outwood Five Pillars' and 'Fundamental Foundations' within a digital playbook to guide daily practice. This work is complemented by Steplab's Implementation Roadmap course which has helped our leaders identify what matters most for their school and provides a step-by-step map of their contextualised implementation journey. Ultimately, this has helped



*Lauren Knowles, Lead Vice Principal, Outwood Grange Academies Trust*

our schools remove barriers during each stage of Explore, Prepare, Deliver and Sustain to allow them to lead high quality PD for all their staff.

We recognise that for PD to be effective, it must act as a mirror of curriculum design. Our approach maps teacher learning over time to support habit formation. The transition to classroom reality is supported by an iterative implementation plan. This includes regular meetings between implementation partners, such as executive principals and subject trust strategic leads, to evaluate progress and refine the PD curriculum at the local level. Through these meetings, we support our school leaders to make data driven decisions on whole school learning goals and on their specific PD focus. This includes training on Steplab's Simple Model of Teaching to identify the highest leverage learning problem to solve. The model is linked to our Five Pillar teaching and learning strategy so all staff relate common language to the Steplab method for diagnosing a learning goal.

A vital part of evaluation is supported by joint learning walks with leaders at all levels focused on drop-in feedback. We ask our schools to carefully select one learning problem and goal with a small number of steps they will focus on over a number of weeks through group PD and drop-ins. Following data collection our trust leaders hold half termly community keeping in touch meetings where schools share their PD focus and approach with peers, sharing best practice and practical ways to uphold high standards within communities. For example, 14 out of 28 secondaries identified 'gathering and giving feedback' as their learning problem and their goal 'to circulate to check understanding'. This led to PD sessions which shared videos of best practice to accelerate improvement, ensuring that schools are focusing on achieving success on the first step 'priming before circulating' and for the right amount of time.

In addition, leaders at all levels review lesson drop-ins via Steplab's school insights page so they are empowered to quality assure PD. This sustained journey is far more effective than shifting focus weekly. The school insights page provides clear impact data that trust leaders share each week with schools via the Steplab bulletin function. We use bulletins to help schools identify drop-in and shoutout trends with an aim to both build momentum for their PD model and improve its quality. To accompany the data, there are shoutouts and school spotlights for best practice and also suggested next steps. Exemplary feedback is also shared to model the most effective feedback approaches.

Through our culture of drop-ins, team teaching, and learning walks, we gather the information necessary to diagnose needs. The priority in year one of implementation is developing a consistent feedback loop, supported by training on how to QA coaching and drop-ins. This ensures professional learning remains precise and high-leverage. Using tools like bulletins to celebrate bright spots and sharing progress through community-specific messages, maintains momentum and ensures teaching principles are consistently employed by teachers and experienced by every student.

Through implementing this model across our schools, we have increased the momentum of teacher development and strengthened the quality of feedback provided to staff. The initiative has driven a shift towards a powerful teacher development culture.

The impact of implementation can be summarised into three areas:

1. Engagement and evaluation through core metrics. We are now able to

easily identify schools with high engagement, growth trends and adoption gaps.

2. Improvement in feedback quality. Working with Steplab has allowed us to introduce a standardised, high-quality approach for feedback designed to drive fast and effective improvement.
3. Shift towards a coaching culture. Beyond simple observations, this model has facilitated an effective teacher development culture, where we upskill coaches, focus on targeted pedagogical goals and embed inclusive practice with all teaching and support staff.

Our central mission is to put students first by raising standards to transform lives. Through our PD approach, we're already seeing the positive impact across our schools.



## Closing reflection

If we are to realise a curriculum that enables all young people to thrive - to see themselves in the world, and to “think the unthinkable and not yet thought” - we must value the professionalism of those who teach it.<sup>10</sup>

Curriculum design and professional development are not parallel tasks; they are one and the same. As the Curriculum Review reminds us, specificity, coherence and inclusivity are the hallmarks of a great curriculum. As exemplified through these case studies, it is through sustained, deliberate professional learning that these ideals move from principle to practice, from policy to classroom, and from aspiration to reality.

*With thanks to*



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<sup>10</sup> Bernstein (2000).



# School Improvement Hub

CST and ImpactEd Group are working together to collate examples of school improvement practices used by trusts, freely shared to help schools across the country. If your trust has work that aligns with our conceptual framework for trust-led improvement, please visit the website for details of how to work with us to develop and share a case study, and help all our schools to keep getting better.

[schoolimprovementhub.org](https://schoolimprovementhub.org)



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