work collaborative

Nets and Anchors

Case studies

School-Based Community Leadership

Tamara Zaple Rolfs FCCT et al.



Companion to the vision paper

Supported by

toddle

work collaborative

Case-study collection

Inside the case studies

Nine companion accounts from the paper. Use the collection page numbers below, or the bookmarks, to go straight to a case.

St Chad's CofE Nursery and Infant School, Derby	3
Esteem Multi-Academy Trust	8
Respect Collaboration Trust and the EMCCA Careers Hub	14
Maritime Academy Trust	19
Tees Valley Education	24
Windsor Academy Trust	31
Strothoff International School, Germany	36
The Reach Foundation	42
Exceed Learning Partnership: Edlington	44

Illustrative photography is AI-generated and does not depict the named settings or participants.

NETS AND ANCHORS / CASE STUDY

St Chad's CofE Nursery and Infant School, Derby

Recognised for its early years community work, St Chad's chooses partnerships strategically and values collaboration with other local schools.



Illustrative image (AI-generated), not this setting.

St Chad's CofE Nursery and Infant School, Derby

At a glance

School group

Derby Diocesan Academy Trust (DDAT), a trust of church and community schools in Derby City and Derbyshire

Place

Normanton, Derby

Phase and size

Nursery and infants, around 170 children, more than 20 languages

Key partners

St James Neurohub, Derby City Council New Communities Achievement Team and attendance team, Derby locality heads group

Contributor

Kat Leach, Co-Headteacher

Anchored in place

Understanding the school context. St Chad's serves a diverse, transient community in Normanton, Derby, where more than 20 languages are spoken. For many families, nursery is their first experience of a formal institution, and some parents had little schooling themselves, or had a difficult relationship with school. That makes the early years particularly important: the relationships built with families at the start set the tone for everything that follows. Co-headteacher Kat Leach and her team bring deep early years expertise. Their practice is child-centred and relational, "person before professional", and the environment follows Elizabeth Jarman's Communication Friendly Spaces, so parents feel calm from the gate and children can settle and learn.

St Chad's CofE Nursery and Infant School, Derby

Working in partnership. The key decision was strategic: who to partner with, and what to do in-house. At first the school signposted families to local services and even went with them to appointments. Families still held back, and leaders found that the time it took to broker each connection was not sustainable. So leaders and governors chose to work closely with a few trusted partners who deliver inside the school or nearby, and to build the rest themselves. There is now a parent workshop every day, in community languages. The St James Neurohub, a local autism support service, delivers SEND training for parents, adapted with the local authority's New Communities Achievement Team for families who are unlikely to join an online webinar in English.

The net: building capacity together

DDAT organises its schools in local hubs. The Derby City Hub brings together several church and community schools (all part of DDAT) in and around Normanton, meeting each term. The Trust's Derby City Hub is led by a locality-based Hub Director, who is an established, respected executive headteacher whose city-level contacts "open doors", for example bringing the local authority attendance team to a hub meeting. The Trust's safeguarding lead and the school's SENCO also link Trust and local authority networks, so support does not become fractured. The same heads also meet with a strong and well-established locality group of headteachers that includes both maintained and trust schools. They work on shared issues such as attendance and translating local authority procedures to their context. That is a strong example of schools collaborating in place across governance boundaries.

What is in place

A daily parent workshop in community languages; on-site SEND training for parents from the local St James Neurohub. There is a termly Trust hub meeting and a strong cross-trust and local authority locality heads group.

St Chad's CofE Nursery and Infant School, Derby

The difference it is making

Children join nursery with very low starting points and make significant progress by the end of Year 2. There have been no suspensions or exclusions, and visitors describe a calm school where children are ready to learn. Parents come into school every day. St Chad's won a National Attachment Research Community Award (ARC Alex Timpson Awards) after a nomination from Derby City's Virtual School Headteacher, and Kat now wants to show that relational practice works well beyond the early years.

Challenges and lessons learned

Family work is not funded, and Kat describes a weekly "tightrope" between this and teaching and learning. As family support work is not separately funded, delivering effective pastoral support alongside teaching and learning remains a careful balancing act. Brokering every connection with services took more time than a small school could give and this led to school leaders making decisions about where to direct families to, what to broker and what to develop in-house.

How they made it possible

First step: signposting families and going with them to appointments, which showed what families actually needed.

Capacity: leaders and local governors were strategic about whom to partner with, whom to bring on site, what to build in-house and which organisations to signpost families to. The school staffs this through the pastoral team, funded through the normal school budget.

The school group: the Derby City Hub and its leader's city-level relationships open doors to local authority teams. The Headteacher's involvement in locality networking is key to its success.

work collaborative

St Chad's CofE Nursery and Infant School, Derby

What we wish we'd known at the start

Broker less, invite in more: a few partners working inside the school reach families in a way that signposting doesn't.

In your setting

School context: How well do we know families before their children start with us, and what is their first experience of our school?

Working in partnership: Which few partners could we invite into our building, and what could we deliver more easily ourselves?

Building capacity together: Do our schools meet as a locality with neighbouring schools, including those outside our school group, and who holds the city-level relationships?

"When we build relationships with families from the very early stages, and do it well, the impact as the child and the family get older is huge."

Kat Leach

Full paper and supporting sources

workcollaborative.com/nets-and-anchors/

NETS AND ANCHORS / CASE STUDY

Esteem Multi-Academy Trust

Post-16 pathways and supported internships for young people in specialist schools and AP



Illustrative image (AI-generated), not this setting.

Esteem Multi-Academy Trust

At a glance

School group

Esteem Multi-Academy Trust: 14 specialist schools and alternative provision academies

Place

Derbyshire, Derby City, Staffordshire, Worcestershire

Phase

Secondary and post-16, specialist and alternative provision

Key partners

Royal Derby Hospital, University of Derby, Transition 2 (local authority), FE colleges, EMCCA Careers Hub

Contributor

Sabrina Hobbs, Director of Education (previously Headteacher at St Martins School, part of Shaw Education Trust)

Use destination data to test whether young people are truly prepared for adult life, and build pathways with employers so support doesn't stop at the school gate.

This case study draws on Esteem Multi-Academy Trust, which is in the early stages of its strategy, and on examples from St Martins School in Derby, where the case study contributor Sabrina Hobbs previously worked. This case study is connected through the EMCCA Careers Hub with the Respect case study in the paper. All Trusts serve young people with additional needs, including SEND.

Esteem Multi-Academy Trust

Anchored in place

Understanding the school context. Young people with SEND often receive significant investment at school, but too often support stops at school. In Derby, specialist post-16 places have shrunk, and some colleges and employers still form a judgement based on the type of school a young person has attended. Esteem's 14 schools are very different, so exam results can't be compared across them. What every school can track is where its young people go after leaving, and whether they stay there, indicating a successful outcome. That destination data gives the Trust its clearest picture of success and impact, or where there is more that needs to be done, where young people are dropping out of college or becoming NEET.

Working in partnership. In her previous role at St Martins School in Derby, Sabrina managed and developed a Project SEARCH internship at Royal Derby Hospital and later extended it to include the University of Derby. Two school staff, trained as job coaches, are based on site full-time alongside volunteer mentors in each department, and that is a large part of why it works. The local authority's Transition 2 service then supports young people once in work, because keeping a job can be as hard as finding one. This is a highly scaffolded approach to help young people succeed as they move into the workforce. In her current role at Esteem MAT, Sabrina is also connected to other specialist leaders in the region, including Respect and other schools through the EMCCA Careers Hub (see the Respect case study that follows).

The net: building capacity together

Esteem has made destinations a Trust-level priority and is highly proactive in its approach. When destination data shows young people dropping out of college or becoming NEET, heads take that to the college or other supporting organisations, including the local authority, and design something better together, with the board's active backing. Destination data is not a measure the accountability system prioritises, but Esteem sees it as the truest test of whether its schools have successfully prepared young people for adult life, and chooses to invest in this work because of it. Its alternative provision heads are now exploring the concept of supported internships for young people without an education, health and care plan (EHCP) as this is a gap in the system.

Esteem Multi-Academy Trust

Sabrina's advice to other schools and Trusts starting out is to empower leaders to innovate and work in partnership with their LAs, supporting organisations, and larger employers.

What is in place

Project SEARCH internships continue at St Martins School in partnership with Royal Derby Hospital and the University of Derby, with two full-time job coaches; support for young people once in work through Transition 2. At Esteem MAT, Trust- and school-level destination data are used across all 14 schools to maximise opportunities for its pupils and the communities they serve.

The difference it is making

At St Martins School, eight or nine in every ten interns moved into paid work each year, and the rest into apprenticeships. Esteem's partnerships have widened the destinations young people can choose from. This results in low NEET figures across its various types of schools. As this strategy evolves, Esteem hopes to be able to report on the difference innovation and vocational pathway development will have on even more successful outcomes for more of our most vulnerable young people.

Challenges and lessons learned

The system invests heavily in young people with SEND in special schools but lacks a clear route into adult life, so adult services often only step in at a point of crisis. Supported internships are mostly limited to young people with an EHCP, which leaves many in alternative provision without that pathway. Keeping a job can be as hard as finding one, which is why support after the internship matters.

Esteem Multi-Academy Trust

How they are making it possible

First step: using destination data to see where young people were going, and where pathways weren't working.

Roles and time: two school staff trained as job coaches, based full-time on the internship sites, alongside volunteer mentors in each department. Heads lead the conversations with colleges and the local authority, with the board's backing.

Funding: Esteem's alternative provision heads are working with local authorities to access funding for supported internships for young people without an education, health and care plan (EHCP).

Partners: Royal Derby Hospital and the University of Derby host internships via St Martins School; the local authority's Transition 2 service supports young people once in work; and the East Midlands Combined County Authority (EMCCA) Careers Hub connects St Martins, Esteem MAT, and other specialist providers with careers leaders and employers across the region.

Starting with what you have: look at where your young people go after they leave you, and whether it lasts. Then talk to one local employer or public body about hosting supported work experience.

What we wish we'd known at the start

Plan for what you intend to happen after the placement from the start: maintaining a job is just as difficult as finding one.

work collaborative

Esteem Multi-Academy Trust

In your setting

School context: Where do our young people go after they leave us? Is this a positive outcome?

Working in partnership: Which local employers, LAs and public bodies could support, fund or host supported internships, and who supports young people once they are in work? Is this a sustainable model?

Building capacity together: Does our board back leaders to act on destination data, even though accountability measures don't prioritise it?

"We have a civic duty to make a difference. If we don't do it, who else will?"

Sabrina Hobbs, Esteem

Full paper and supporting sources

workcollaborative.com/nets-and-anchors/

NETS AND ANCHORS / CASE STUDY

Respect Collaboration Trust and the EMCCA Careers Hub

Careers as a trust-wide priority, supported by a regional careers hub



Illustrative image (AI-generated), not this setting.

work collaborative

Respect Collaboration Trust and the EMCCA Careers Hub

At a glance

School group

Respect Collaboration Trust: three schools for young people with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs

Place

Derby, with the EMCCA Careers Hub covering Derby, Derbyshire, Nottingham and Nottinghamshire

Phase

Secondary, specialist (SEMH)

Key partners

EMCCA Careers Hub, employers including Hovis

Contributors

Pete Benyon, Respect; Charlotte Bushell, EMCCA Careers Hub (East Midlands Combined County Authority)

Make careers everyone's business across the trust, and use a regional careers hub to reach the reviews, networks and employers that no single trust could reach alone.

Anchored in place

Understanding the school context. Respect's three schools serve young people with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs. Post-16 pathways for the young people the schools serve are often limited, by stigma and by funding cuts, and some colleges and employers still form a view from a school's name. The Trust's aim is "equity of experience" with ambitious goals broken down into steps young people can see.

work collaborative

Respect Collaboration Trust and the EMCCA Careers Hub

Working in partnership. The East Midlands Combined County Authority (EMCCA) Careers Hub, through adviser Charlotte Bushell, runs termly communities of practice for careers leaders in secondary, special and alternative provision schools, who are often isolated in their role. Teacher Encounters take staff into workplaces such as Amazon to see careers learning first-hand. EMCCA facilitated Respect's Internal Leadership Review, a structured review of careers provision against the Gatsby Benchmarks, which brought the Trust's three schools together to set priorities. It also connected Respect with employers such as Hovis, which can bring a virtual reality lorry simulator into school. Charlotte encourages schools to lead with what a partnership offers the employer. Respect is also connected with Esteem, another Derby trust working on post-16 pathways for young people with SEND (see the Esteem case study) and the cross-trust collaboration offers value in shared learning.

The net: building capacity together

Respect made careers a Trust-level priority. It created a Trust Lead for careers and post-16, a deputy with careers responsibility on every site, and a family support worker alongside them. An all-staff day, "Careers is everyone's business", made careers a golden thread through the curriculum, giving students a reason for their learning. The same thinking runs through the Trust's "Inclusion by Design" approach, in which each school team writes its own measurable action plan, so solutions fit each school's context.

What is in place

A Trust careers lead, site deputies and a family support worker; an Internal Leadership Review with the Careers Hub; termly cross-trust communities of practice; new employer links, including Hovis.

The difference it is making

Careers is now shared across all staff rather than held by one person, and the Internal Leadership Review gave the three schools shared priorities. Whilst acknowledging there is always work to do, there has been a significant positive three-year trend on NEET figures across the three schools.

Respect Collaboration Trust and the EMCCA Careers Hub

Challenges and lessons learned

Parents are the biggest influence on young people's choices, yet many are unaware of post-16 pathways, and some fear losing benefits. Charlotte raised the value of building open and honest relationships with parents. The financial implications for families of young people gaining a work placement can be detrimental. An awareness of this is important when considering barriers to success.

Releasing teachers for employer visits needs cover, which headteachers often find hard to fund. Charlotte also notes that a low NEET figure doesn't show whether each destination is the right one for that young person.

Some workplaces are reluctant to offer placements, but thinking about what the employer gains from the partnership can help build a longer-term relationship, with genuine value in both directions.

How they made it possible

First step: an Internal Leadership Review with the Careers Hub, which brought the three schools together to agree priorities.

Roles and time: a Trust Lead for careers and post-16, a deputy with careers responsibility on every site, and a family support worker as coordinator; an all-staff day to make careers everyone's business.

Funding: the Trust has created dedicated careers roles at Trust and site level; the Careers Hub adds a network, review process and employer links the Trust would otherwise have needed to build itself.

Partners: the EMCCA Careers Hub, employers, and other schools such as Esteem as a fellow Derby trust working with vulnerable young people on post-16 pathways.

work collaborative

Respect Collaboration Trust and the EMCCA Careers Hub

Starting with what you have: connect with your local Careers Hub and join its community of practice for careers leaders; use the Careers & Enterprise Company's Internal Leadership Review to look at your provision; and hold parent events in trusted community spaces, such as community centres and places of worship, rather than only in school.

What we wish we'd known at the start

Bring parents in early: they are the biggest influence on young people's choices.

Respect Schools - Respect Collaboration Trust

In your setting

School context: Do we know whether each young person's destination is the right one for them, not just whether they are in education, employment or training?

Working in partnership: Who connects our careers leaders with others doing the same job, and when we approach employers, do we think about what they gain so that the partnership brings value both ways?

Building capacity together: Who is responsible for careers at school group level and in each school, and do all staff see it as their business?

"Careers is everyone's business."

Respect Collaboration Trust

NETS AND ANCHORS / CASE STUDY

Maritime Academy Trust

Build trust with families from the very start, and create a dedicated, non-teaching role so the work doesn't fall on teachers' shoulders.



Illustrative image (AI-generated), not this setting.

work collaborative

Maritime Academy Trust

At a glance

School group

Maritime Academy Trust, with the Maritime Children's Foundation (the Trust's charity)

Place

Kent and south-east London

Phase

Primary, including early years

Key partners

Reach Foundation, families, local community organisations

Contributor

Susan Matheson, Chief Operating Officer

Case-study focus

Home visits and Community Ambassadors

Anchored in place

Understanding the school context. Maritime's ambition is that every child gets a great start in life. They think big with their Big Hairy Audacious Goals, to which community engagement is integral. Leaders knew that when trust between home and school is low, even well-designed support fails to take root. Inspired by Reach Foundation's cradle-to-career work, the Trust decided to understand families by meeting them on their own ground. Universal home visits, piloted at Bligh Primary School in Strood and two other schools in 2022, now run in every Maritime school: a teacher and a second adult visit every family before term begins. For most schools in the Trust this takes place for every child each year, with one school that focuses on Early Years and new pupils only.

Maritime Academy Trust

Working in partnership. Maritime accessed support and training from The Reach Foundation, which shaped its starting point: home visits first, then capacity to connect with local assets. The Trust set up the Maritime Children's Foundation so it could apply for grants that no single school could. The Trust's Community Ambassadors run coffee mornings and build links with local organisations, and Maritime values the ripple effect. At times it felt like it was hard to build but they realised building trust takes time and one parent at a coffee morning can bring others.

The net: building capacity together

Teachers were the obvious people to connect with communities as they know the children well, but they are also the people with the role and skill to teach. So Maritime created a Community Ambassador in each school: a non-teaching role of around 15 hours a week, focused on connecting with families and the local community. This protects teacher workload whilst providing capacity to link with the community and include teachers in a way that is appropriate to their role. Teachers own the relationship with their class's families; ambassadors widen the circle, and both share an understanding of why this matters. Ambassadors are managed centrally by the Trust's Head of Community Engagement, which gives them a professional community across eleven schools.

The vision for this work runs through the whole organisation, from trustees and the CEO through to the families the schools serve.

What is in place

Around 4,000 home visits every autumn across all year groups; a Community Ambassador in every school; a Trust charity able to apply for grants; parent-infant groups through the Strong Foundations programme that started in one school and now takes place across nearly all Maritime schools.

The difference it is making

At Bligh, relationships with parents are more open, parents' evenings are more productive, and children arrive on day one more settled, supporting attendance and readiness to learn. An unexpected benefit is recruitment: candidates are drawn to a school that knows its community so well.

Maritime Academy Trust

The ambassador model works very well in nearly all the schools. An early years programme runs in most schools, and a SEND programme is due to follow.

Challenges and lessons learned

Home visits. The first year was the hardest. Implementing the home visit programme meant delaying the start of term, and some staff found the visits emotionally demanding. The visits remain demanding at times, seeing children grow up in conditions that continue to shock our staff.

Community Ambassadors. The headteacher's backing was essential. Where heads understood why the work mattered and could cascade that "why" through their school, to staff and families, it created real leverage and the work had far greater impact. There was also an understanding that deep, sustainable results would come over years, not terms.

How they made it possible

First step: piloting home visits in three schools before rolling them out across the Trust.

Capacity: a 15-hour Community Ambassador role in each school, managed centrally by a Head of Community Engagement, and funded through the charity with seed funding and Reach support.

Partners: the Reach Foundation shaped the approach; the charity opened up grants no single school could access.

What we wish we'd known at the start

Be patient: the impact builds over years; even one parent at a coffee morning can start a ripple.

work collaborative

Maritime Academy Trust

In your setting

School context: Whose threshold does our first conversation with a family happen on?

Working in partnership: What could a school group, charity or partner make possible that no single school could?

Building capacity together: Who holds the relationship with families, and does cover keep pulling them away?

Learning from others and applying to our context: Who can help us shape our approach? How can we make it work for us?

Thinking big for long-term impact: How can you use the freedoms of being in a school group to do ambitious, longer-term work?

"When trust is low, even well-designed academic support can fail to take root."

Bligh Primary School

Full paper and supporting sources

workcollaborative.com/nets-and-anchors/

NETS AND ANCHORS / CASE STUDY

Tees Valley Education

A trust's place-based strategy for understanding and tackling inequalities



Illustrative image (AI-generated), not this setting.

work collaborative

Tees Valley Education

At a glance

School group

Tees Valley Education (TVEd): primary, secondary and SEND-specific contexts

Place

Middlesbrough and Redcar and Cleveland

Phase

Primary, secondary and SEND-specific contexts

Key partners

A partnership network of over 280 organisations across education, health, industry and the third sector

Contributor

Sean Harris, Director of PLACE

Understand the problem before acting, and work through what already exists locally rather than building something new.

Anchored in place

Understanding the school context. Almost 70% of children in the Trust's schools qualify for free school meals. However, TVEd does not use this as an overarching proxy. Rather, they recognise that poverty and inequality rates are not neatly captured in FSM statistics. TVEd believes deeply in high-quality teaching, but not that schools can teach children out of poverty alone. Free school meal data is a signal, not a diagnosis. Staff listen deeply to children and families before acting. TVEd believes that a commitment to deep social justice requires deep social listening and seeing our roles in education as civic and social architects.

Tees Valley Education

To provide one component part of this in action, TVEd has provided the following as one example of inequality impacting the lives of many children and families. Listening uncovered sleep inequalities as a hidden barrier to learning, and this challenges the narrative that families lack aspiration. What emerged through conversation was that local opportunity was often invisible to children. By sleep inequality, TVEd refers to multiple barriers such as bed poverty, inadequate sleeping resources, and structural barriers to sleep impacting families and children (e.g. unstable housing, cold temperatures and being unable to afford rising fuel costs).

Working in partnership. TVEd explored for some years the idea of establishing a charitable foundation or blueprint that would help coordinate local place-based responses to problems such as sleep inequality. However, after careful social listening and scoping with local families and other organisations it became apparent that this would duplicate existing provision and potentially add to issues for local charitable organisations already doing good work.

As a result, TVEd spent considerable time exploring what a partnership methodology could look like for local communities across the Tees Valley. This led to the establishment of the award-winning methodology of PLACE (People, Learning and Community Engagement) as a response to understanding and tackling place-based inequalities across the Tees Valley.

As Sean Harris says, we "gang up on the problem, not on each other". In the case of tackling sleep inequalities, TVEd partnered with Zarach, which provides beds, and The Sleep Charity, which trains Sleep Champions, alongside other partners to plan and implement this work.

Another aspect of the PLACE approach is Classroom to Careers, in which children at an early age have meaningful encounters with hyperlocal industries across the Tees Valley. This has involved educators and industry leaders across local communities working together through the methodology of PLACE to both design and deliver curriculum, encounters and meaningful interactions with children and industry from a very early age.

Through PLACE, TVEd is adamant that schools and academies should not see their role as ‘beating hearts’ in communities, but rather as vital organs in ecosystems designed to support conditions for all children to flourish, especially those facing poverty-related barriers to learning.

Tees Valley Education

The net: building capacity together

TVEd created PLACE (People, Learning and Community Engagement), led by a Director of PLACE, and treats poverty work as core school improvement rather than something separate. The priorities of PLACE focus specifically on persistent problems of inequality that they know impact conditions for learning and access to learning. Staff across the five schools take part in poverty-informed professional development and research. In addition, this is offered to schools and other settings around the UK. TVEd has worked with over 8,500 educators and leaders to help develop poverty-informed and place-led change in their own contexts.

What is in place

PLACE has received acclaim from a number of investors, policymakers and professional spheres of influence in and beyond education. However, TVEd is clear that whilst it plays a strategic and leading role in convening, PLACE as a methodology is delivered across multiple partners and networks all working together to ensure conditions for children's learning work well.

To give examples of some of the impact of this work:

Over 400 beds delivered to families facing bed poverty and sleep inequality in just 18 months through a place-based partnership and the work of Zarach

Over 200 sleep champions trained to help diagnose and respond to sleep inequalities; facilitated through the expertise and work of The Sleep Charity

Over 1,000 children have engaged with local industries for meaningful encounters with over 98% of them saying it has helped them understand more about the opportunities and roles available to them in the Tees Valley

Over £2 million of additional investment provided to local communities and projects to support families and children facing significant levels of inequality

The publication of an award-winning book Tackling Poverty & Disadvantage in Schools which has received acclaim from across the education sector

Published research and insights with partners such as the Child of the North, the Centre for Young Lives and the Centre for Social Justice

Tees Valley Education

Over 8,500 educators and leaders served across the UK to develop poverty-informed and place-informed work in their own contexts

Challenges and lessons learned

As part of their broader system change work, TVEd is clear that PLACE also exists as a methodology to shift mental models in and beyond education that sometimes compound inequalities. For example, the misconception that low-income families somehow need fixing or lack aspiration. Evidence illustrates this is not the case, but as Katrina Morley OBE (CEO of TVEd) says, "if a child cannot see it, then it is hard to be it". This is why approaches such as Classroom to Careers help to create visible opportunities for children and families.

How they made it possible

First step: listening to families and children, and asking local partners before building anything. It is imperative that we see our role as convening with others and understanding the context that we serve. We need to shift away from narratives that place us as the spearhead or solo leader in ecosystems.

Roles and time: a senior Director of PLACE role, with poverty-informed practice treated as core school improvement rather than an add-on. It is important to establish principles such as PLACE as a methodology rather than as a model. As we often say to settings we work with, do not simply adopt our model, adapt it but adopt the principles and intentionality that sit behind it.

Funding is important, but money alone cannot solve inequalities. Instead, develop a clear theory of change and collaboration (ToCC). We then use these to identify potential resource flows and funding opportunities. This avoids chasing money or funding; this can also help to shift the narrative from intervention to ecosystem. If you have to attract funding, then consider doing this alongside partners around common problems rather than all the funding going to one silo organisation.

work collaborative

Tees Valley Education

Partners: local charities and employers deliver; the Trust connects, secures funding and shares the learning. It is important to develop ecosystem maps and asset mapping tools to support with this. This helps both to direct and discern our work and priorities, and who we need to work with.

Starting with what you have: a family survey in the school newsletter led to a community magazine co-produced with families, which includes ideas such as budget cooking and low-cost days out. You do not need to simply run focus groups about poverty; our marketing and messaging focus groups have facilitated broader discussions about local need in such a way that families are able to maintain dignity without talking directly about poverty or inequality. However, these opportunities also matter.

Before creating anything new, map what already exists locally.

What we wish we'd known at the start

Ask local partners first: our first idea, a new charity, would have duplicated what already existed.

In your setting

School context: What problem are we actually trying to solve, and whose knowledge is missing? Phrases like educational disadvantage and child poverty are arguably too broad in their scope. So, consider the domains of the problem you may need to prioritise and which directly impact learning conditions and access in your setting

Working in partnership: What already exists locally, and what should the school group contribute or leave to others? Educational inequality cannot be tackled by education alone; so we need to be careful about proposing that quality-first teaching or the efficacy of a teacher is the most important solution. Evidence tells us this matters, but it takes a whole-school culture and ecosystem to impact inequalities.

Building capacity together: Do we treat poverty and disadvantage as core school improvement, with senior capacity behind it?

> *"Do not copy the projects. Copy the discipline and intentionality."*
>
> **Sean Harris, Tees Valley Education**

Full paper and supporting sources

workcollaborative.com/nets-and-anchors/

NETS AND ANCHORS / CASE STUDY

Windsor Academy Trust

Partnership with the NHS: civic engagement as trust strategy



Illustrative image (AI-generated), not this setting.

work collaborative

Windsor Academy Trust

At a glance

School group

Windsor Academy Trust: 15 schools (7 primary, 8 secondary), around 10,000 children

Place

Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall, Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent

Phase

Primary and secondary

Key partners

Ten NHS bodies including Walsall Healthcare NHS Trust and Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent ICB, Public Health Walsall, Confederation of School Trusts, and NHS Confederation

Contributor

Claire Gething, Director of Communications, Community and HR

Put civic engagement into the Trust strategy, so building partnerships becomes part of the job, not another thing to do.

Anchored in place

Understanding the school context. Where there are educational inequalities, there are health inequalities too. Windsor Academy Trust's (WAT) schools span five local authority areas, several on the edge of former Education or Priority Education Investment Areas. WAT schools begin by listening, without an agenda, for example asking every pupil from Key Stage 2 upwards where they spend their time outside school. Through taking the time to map what was already in place, the Trust found that much health support already existed locally, but schools simply did not know about it.

work collaborative

Windsor Academy Trust

Working in partnership. A trustee who worked in health introduced CEO Dawn Haywood to the chief executive of a group of NHS trusts, and they began meeting termly. Claire describes the first year as "following the breadcrumbs": finding people with passion and goodwill. The breakthrough came from learning the NHS's own strategy and language, so both sides could see a shared purpose. Windsor then brought 10 NHS trusts and seven school trusts together, in partnership with the Confederation of School Trusts and NHS Confederation, to write the Co-creating Healthy Futures framework.

The net: building capacity together

Civic engagement is one of the Trust's five strategic pillars, which gives leaders both a mandate and capacity. Every school has a Civic Leader, and each school's civic engagement plan must include a health priority. Community hubs are created where there is both need and capacity, so each school's offer fits its place. Local Community Committees bring parents and health and civic partners into each school's local governance.

What is in place

Regular meetings with NHS leaders; the Co-creating Healthy Futures framework, now working with 10 NHS bodies; a Civic Leader and a health priority in every school; community hubs where there is need and capacity; £300,000 over three years committed by a local Integrated Care Board.

The difference it is making

The framework has been presented at the House of Commons and national conferences, and is helping others start similar work. In schools, an early years health hub at Goldsmith Primary brings health services onto a school site, and 30 students at Windsor Olympus Academy are trained as Asthma Ambassadors. A Locality Improvement Framework in Newcastle-under-Lyme is promoting health literacy and addressing health inequalities to improve attendance in schools.

Windsor Academy Trust

Challenges and lessons learned

National policies and structures for this collaboration don't yet exist; building capacity is essential, and the work needs someone employed to connect people.

How they made it possible

First step: a trustee's introduction led to termly CEO-level meetings, and the first year was spent finding the people with passion and goodwill.

Roles and time: civic engagement is one of five strategic pillars. Every school has a Civic Leader, who sits on the school's Local Community Committee, with a line of sight through the committee chair to a link trustee. A central director role helps schools and health communicate across sectors. The first 12 months were spent mainly finding the right people and what already existed, and the framework took a further nine months.

Funding: a community fund, rather than a separate charity, helps pay for community hubs on school sites and other civic activities. A local Integrated Care Board has committed £300,000 over three years.

Partners: NHS bodies and the CST co-wrote the framework, and an ICB is now co-funding some of this work through a Locality Improvement Framework.

Starting with what you have: ask pupils where they spend their time outside school, and find out what health support already exists locally, as much of it may already be there. The Co-creating Healthy Futures framework includes a guide to NHS roles, such as Place-Based Partnership Leads, to help you find the right people.

work collaborative

Windsor Academy Trust

What we wish we'd known at the start

Learn your partners' strategy and language first: shared purpose came once we could talk the NHS's language.

In your setting

School context: Do we know where our pupils spend their time, and what support already exists around them?

Working in partnership: Do we know our local NHS priorities, and do we speak their language?

Building capacity together: Does our strategy give leaders a mandate and capacity for civic work, or is it one more thing?

> *"Do one thing - and do it really well. Prove it works - then scale it."*
>
> **Claire Gething**

Full paper and supporting sources

workcollaborative.com/nets-and-anchors/

NETS AND ANCHORS / CASE STUDY

Strothoff International School, Germany

A local curriculum with a global framework (International Baccalaureate) for applied "service" taking place within the community.



Illustrative image (AI-generated), not this setting.

work collaborative

Strothoff International School, Germany

At a glance

School group

Phorms Network of bilingual schools across Germany; Strothoff is one of two IB schools in the network

Place

Dreieich, near Frankfurt, Germany

Phase

Secondary (Grades 6 to 12), IB continuum school

Key partners

Local care and retirement homes, community groups, alumni, the IB

Contributor

Julia Campbell-Ratcliffe, Secondary School Principal

The learning is in the doing: a local curriculum combined with a global framework, and applied through service and active learning in the community.

Anchored in place

Understanding the school context.

Strothoff is a small IB World School with students from many cultural backgrounds. Like any school with a national curriculum, it must cover what the state requires while preparing young people for an interconnected world. Some schools in Germany run the state curriculum and the IB side by side, which Julia says can give students close to 60-hour working weeks. Strothoff starts instead from the state curriculum as the foundation, and from the perspectives its students bring with them.

Service learning is deeply rooted in the school's guiding statements, mission and vision. This makes it a strategic priority, supported by allocations of time, resources and staff.

work collaborative

Strothoff International School, Germany

Working in partnership. Two things link learning to the community. The first is service. Service learning is a required part of the IB, linked to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, so learning moves from school to local community to global community. The second is active learning in the community. For example, after a unit on poetry from around the world, students write their own poems and organise a recital, catering included, at a local care home. Learning in the community is not about narrowing horizons to local jobs, but "taking the learning outside the school building and applying it in real world contexts". The skills students build this way, such as planning, collaborating and communicating, go with them wherever they choose to live and work.

The net: building capacity together

Strothoff uses the IB as a framework that is filled with the content and the competences of the state curriculum, rather than stacking the two curriculums, an approach Julia calls "synergetic". The IB framework lifts local content to the level of concepts: in geography, students explore "settlement" by comparing Frankfurt with London and Singapore. Teachers become facilitators who model inquiry, "a paradigm shift in terms of the role of the teacher". The wider IB network now encourages schools to combine local curricula with its framework, and Julia's work as an IB Educator Network (IBEN) programme leader, evaluator and curriculum developer brings learning from other schools back into Strothoff.

The Phorms network encourages the school to have its own focus areas. Service learning is one of Strothoff's.

What is in place

A combined state and IB curriculum; required service learning linked to the UN Sustainable Development Goals; community projects such as the care home recital and an alumni network that returns to support students.

work collaborative

Strothoff International School, Germany

The difference it is making

Students are more engaged and prouder of their work because they can see it contributing to something. Alumni say service projects strengthened university applications and taught them collaboration and project management. Many return to give careers talks and help students connect to other networks and professional opportunities.

Challenges and lessons learned

Some teachers underestimate what 13- and 14-year-olds can do, yet given real ownership, students can do far more than adults expect. Protecting time for service learning is a constant pressure.

How they made it possible

First step: the planning stage. Julia speaks of how the school considered how they could use the IB framework and the IB approaches to teaching and learning and combine it with using the state curriculum as a solid base. Simply stated, the state curriculum is what is being taught and the IB framework is how the students learn and are being taught.

Roles and time: teachers developing as facilitators of inquiry, supported by the IB network and Julia's IBEN role. Service learning coordinators work alongside teachers, and the school's CARE programme (Creativity, Agency, Responsibility and Empathy) gives middle years students up to four 45-minute lessons a week. Protecting that time is a constant effort.

Funding: the work is built into the curriculum and timetable rather than run as a separately funded project.

Building partnerships: for example, local care homes and community groups host projects; alumni return to support students.

work collaborative

Strothoff International School, Germany

Starting with what you have: end one existing unit with students doing something real for the local community. Link service projects to your school group's values and partnerships, for example health partners or mental health priorities.

What we wish we'd known at the start

Trust students sooner: given real ownership, they can do far more than adults expect. Involve students more from the start in how they want to use the learning to serve the community, drawing more on their connections and experiences.



Illustrative image (AI-generated), not this setting.

work collaborative

Strothoff International School, Germany

In your setting

School context: Where could a unit end with students doing something real for their local community?

Working in partnership: What do our school group's values and partnerships make possible as service and applied learning opportunities?

Building capacity together: Does our curriculum connect local content to bigger concepts and global goals, as well as the students' own experiences and connections?

"The local curriculum is an important foundation. Developing the learning into meaningful service opportunities helps students to go further and really makes them recognise their purpose."

Julia Campbell-Ratcliffe

Full paper and supporting sources

workcollaborative.com/nets-and-anchors/

NETS AND ANCHORS / CASE STUDY

The Reach Foundation

A partner behind many of these stories



Illustrative image (AI-generated), not this setting.

Contributor: James Townsend, Executive Director, The Reach Foundation

The Reach Foundation

A partner behind many of these stories

The Reach Foundation is not a school group, but it has worked with a number of contributors to this paper, including Maritime. Its cradle-to-career approach supports children from before birth into adulthood. Its vision is for babies, children, young people and families "to enjoy a life of choice and opportunity". As Reach puts it, "great schools are necessary but not sufficient."

What Reach does

Leads by example in Feltham. In west London, Reach Academy and the Reach Children's Hub work together to give local families joined-up support from birth to adulthood.

Supports other places to do the same. Reach works with schools and trusts to develop their own cradle-to-career approach, at the neighbourhood level where families live their lives. That means understanding a place deeply and building a coherent journey for every child from the early years to their first job.

Builds the children's workforce. It incubated the Centre for the Children's Workforce, which will offer a foundation degree to anyone working with children, in schools, youth work, family support and beyond.

Shares thinking and tools. Its paper with the Confederation of School Trusts, The Partnership Dividend (2026), sets out how trusts, as anchor institutions, can lead in place. Reach also offers two free tools: a data mapping tool for each local authority and a Cradle to Career Journey Tool.

Full paper and supporting sources

workcollaborative.com/nets-and-anchors/

NETS AND ANCHORS / CASE STUDY

Exceed Learning Partnership: Edlington

Collaborating in place by convening a neighbourhood delivery board



Illustrative image (AI-generated), not this setting.

Exceed Learning Partnership: Edlington

At a glance

School group

Exceed Learning Partnership (ten schools, around 5,300 pupils)

Place

Edlington, Doncaster, starting with the Royal Estate

Phase

Primary focus (Edlington Victoria Academy), in a mixed-phase Trust

Key partners

Doncaster Council, Edlington Town Council, South Yorkshire Police, St Leger Homes, local schools and community organisations

Contributors

Beryce Nixon OBE, CEO

A school cannot close the gap alone, so the Trust helped convene a whole neighbourhood around children's futures.

Anchored in place

Understanding the school context. Edlington is a village with active community groups and green spaces such as Pit Wood. After COVID-19, conditions on the Royal Estate worsened sharply, with empty homes, absent landlords and organised crime. Around four in five parents fall in the most deprived tenth nationally for education and skills, so many children start school behind. The turning point came when pupils described feeling unsafe and unable to sleep near home.

Exceed Learning Partnership: Edlington

Working in partnership. Beryce took the children's concerns to the Chief Executive of Doncaster Council, who brought senior leaders together, and the council funded Exceed to act as the local anchor. In January 2023 the Edlington Delivery Board, first chaired by Beryce and meeting in school, brought together the Trust, local schools, the council, police, housing and community groups around a local delivery plan: safer communities, housing and environment, children and families, and community wellbeing. A weekly tasking group tackles immediate issues, and the police use the Home Office “Clear, Hold, Build” approach to disrupt organised crime. The school is part of “village” life too, with pupils singing at a local care home and supporting the food bank.

The net: building capacity together

The Trust's leadership has placed the school at the heart of a wider neighbourhood programme. Schools in Edlington, in and beyond the Trust, work together on a cradle-to-career Children and Family Zone and joint peer reviews, and pupils across the Trust share a student council. Edlington Victoria now supports more than 40 schools as a regional Attendance and Behaviour Hub.

What is in place

The Delivery Board, local delivery plan and weekly tasking group; a free breakfast club, family support, a uniform and hygiene bank, and 50 "excellent experiences" for every child; a forest school and floodlit pitch shared with the community.

The difference it is making

In 2024, from a low starting point on entry, Key Stage 2 outcomes were 17% above Doncaster and 14% above national. Attendance in 2024 to 25 was 96.1%, 1.3% above national, with no permanent exclusions. The February 2025 inspection signalled the school was likely to be outstanding. Police and pupils say the estate is much quieter and empty homes are being secured and repaired.

Exceed Learning Partnership: Edlington

Challenges and lessons learned

Fragmented ownership and legal limits slow change in housing, and disrupting crime revealed a gap in youth provision. Regeneration moves more slowly than school improvement and relies on bids and grants.

How they made it possible

First step: listening to pupils and using the school's own data to decide what to tackle first.

Roles and time: Beryce chaired the Delivery Board, with a consultant coordinating partners. This is led as a collective partnership. The chair and vice-chair are elected annually, and neighbourhood managers provide administrative support.

Funding: around £40,000 of initial council funding. Since then, all organisations have supported the collective priorities and resourced key projects or initiatives. There are no external pots of money.

Partners: senior council, police, housing and community leaders share one local delivery plan.

Starting with what you have: build on the police, housing and community networks already in place.

What we wish we'd known at the start

Get decision-makers in the room from the start, begin with one clearly defined place, and expect regeneration to take longer than school improvement. Small, visible wins keep everyone believing change is possible.

Exceed Learning Partnership: Edlington

In your setting

School context: What does our own data, including what pupils tell us, say about life outside school?

Working in partnership: Is there a local table where schools sit with councils, police, housing and residents, and if not, could we help convene one?

Building capacity together: How does our school group support a school to lead beyond its gates, and share what it learns?

"When you invest in a child's environment, safety and wellbeing, you transform their education and future prospects."

Beryce Nixon OBE, Exceed Learning Partnership

Full paper and supporting sources

workcollaborative.com/nets-and-anchors/



Keep exploring

Full paper and supporting sources

workcollaborative.com/nets-and-anchors/

workcollaborative.com/nets-and-anchors/reading/

About this collection

Zaple Rolfs, T., Campbell-Ratcliffe, J., Crittenden, J., Gibbs, S., Gill, N., & Tinkler, A. (2026). Nets and anchors: School-based community leadership. Work Collaborative.

Edited by Shane Leaning. Published by Work Collaborative. Supported by Toddle.

Illustrative photographs are AI-generated and do not depict the named schools or participants.

Full paper and supporting sources: workcollaborative.com/nets-and-anchors/

work collaborative

Nets and Anchors

Case studies

workcollaborative.com/nets-and-anchors/

Supported by

toddle