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.

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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.

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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.

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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

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