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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Nets and Anchors

School-Based Community Leadership. A Work Collaborative Vision Paper. Lead author: Tamara Zaple Rolfs



Illustrative image (AI-generated).

Why this matters

The world is changing, and in many places the fabric of community life is wearing thin. The more our lives move online, the more we're recognising the value of face-to-face connection. Schools are one of the few places where whole communities still meet face to face. That gives them a real opportunity to make a difference not just to academic outcomes, but to the whole child, to communities and to society more broadly. Education provides an opportunity for human flourishing, both individually and collectively.

Some people may ask: why is this the responsibility of schools? Apart from our civic duty, this is also about dealing with the issues schools are facing every day: attendance, inclusion, mental health, parental complaints, staff retention, the NEET crisis. This is not extra to school improvement. This is part of it. No one organisation can meet the challenges we are facing alone. If we want equity, inclusion and high expectations for all our young people, then this is the work we need to do.

Grasping the opportunity

Taking this opportunity asks schools to shift how they work. One of the biggest shifts is in seeking to understand context from an asset-based perspective, prioritising collaboration and sharing power in place.

The schools white paper, Every Child Achieving and Thriving (2026), asks schools to move from "withdrawn to engaging". This paper responds by asking one central question: how can groups of schools meet the distinct needs of the individual communities they serve?

A complex, fragmented landscape

The paper doesn't shy away from naming the complex and fragmented landscape we are working in.

It names five overlapping spheres of influence that shape how school leaders connect within and beyond their schools: the wider education system (including policy and accountability); locality services; community partners and neighbourhoods; curriculum and employment pathways; and the school group.

Responsibility for children is fragmented, and organisational and governance boundaries don't line up. Health and local government are moving towards neighbourhood working, but school group governance doesn't follow those footprints. One neighbourhood may contain schools from several trusts and the local authority. Accountability measures focus mainly on academic outcomes and can reward competition over collaboration. Wider change across the system would help, but leaders still have choice and agency within the system as it is, and many are already doing remarkable work.

Drawing on practice

The paper draws on case studies from school groups in the UK and abroad, along with examples of contextual governance. Each one is shared openly, including what has been hard, and together they show what is possible now. From these examples, the paper draws out what it takes to be both anchored in place and part of a strong net.

Anchored in place

Each school is rooted in its community.

Know the place and people you serve. Listen to children, families, staff and partners before acting, and start from the community's strengths.

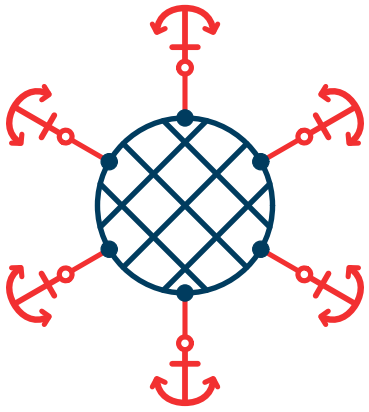
Collaborate in place. Work with families and partners as equals, including health, social care, early help and the voluntary sector, and share power with the people closest to the problems.

The net

The net's strength comes from shared purpose and shared capacity.

Govern for context. Start with the shape of your net. Build a clear line of sight from the trust board and executive team through to the people working on the ground, so that local voice shapes decisions.

Build capacity. Pool resources, and make time for staff and leaders to listen, collaborate and learn together. The whole group grows stronger that way.



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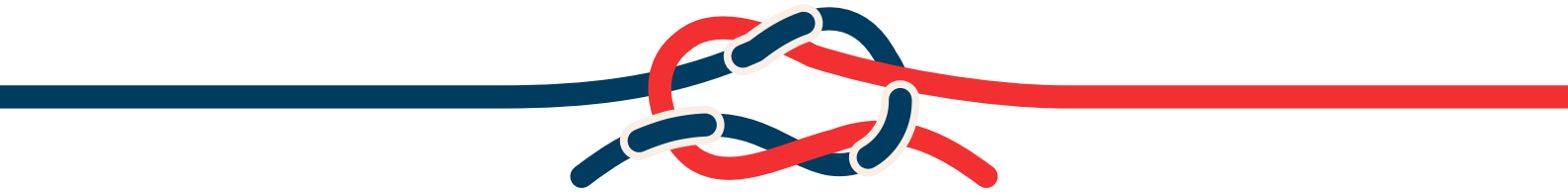
Tending the knots

The knots, meaning the relationships that hold the net together, need constant attention. This is relational practice: naming tensions openly and working through them together.



A leadership mindset

Work with, not do to.

Measure what matters.

Choose collaboration over competition.

An invitation

We end with an invitation. What relationships and assets already exist in your community that you haven't yet noticed? Spend time finding out, with children, families, staff and partners. Then navigate the way forward together. Start there, learn as you go, and share what you find.

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