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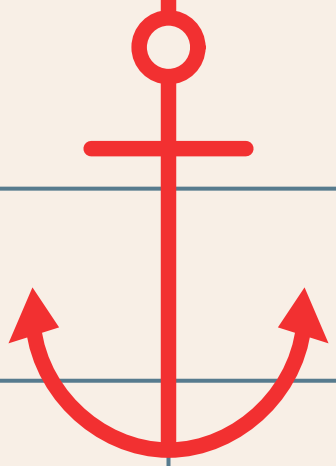
Nets and *Anchors*

School-Based Community Leadership

Tamara Zaple Rolfs FCCT et al.



VISION PAPER

How can groups of schools meet the distinct needs of the individual communities they serve?



FROM TODDLE

Foreword

School groups face an important challenge: how can schools stay rooted in their communities while drawing on the strength of a wider network? Every school serves a particular community. The school's pupils, families, and local priorities shape not only how it teaches and supports learning, but also the decisions made across the wider group. At the same time, being part of a school group gives access to expertise and resources that individual schools would otherwise have to develop alone. Drawing on existing research and trust leaders' experiences, Nets and Anchors offers practical guidance on how to bring these priorities together.

This challenge is closely connected to Toddle's work. Toddle is an AI-powered teaching and learning platform that brings curriculum planning, assessment, reporting, and family communication together. For school groups, this means greater visibility for leaders across schools, more opportunities for teachers to collaborate and share strong practice and resources, and a single platform for communicating with families. Connected workflows can also reduce administrative work while allowing each school to respond to its local context.

Toddle is pleased to support work that helps school groups use their collective strength to better serve their students and communities.

Misbah Jafary
Co-founder & COO, Toddle



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work collaborative

The antidote to outsourced decision-making is *organisational confidence.*

Work Collaborative brings together a community committed to inside-out change in education. As a research and advocacy group, we empower schools to lead change for themselves as a community. We believe that the antidote to the outsourcing of decision-making is organisational confidence. This is our North Star.

Open-source research, frameworks and tools for schools leading change from within.

Work Collaborative is the non-profit arm of Education Leaders.

workcollaborative.com/nets-and-anchors/

The vision

This paper outlines a vision of school groups where every school is anchored in its community, and the school group acts as a strong net, connected within itself and beyond itself, so that every young person can flourish and reach their potential.

The paper sets out why school-based community leadership matters, using the metaphor of nets and anchors throughout, and is accompanied by a one-page resource to support leaders doing this work in their own setting.

School leadership is complex, demanding and deeply rewarding work, and creating the conditions for this work to have impact is a real challenge. We believe healthy schools are built by people connecting and collaborating with others, inside their organisation and beyond the school gates. This paper is for leaders who want to resist quick fixes and one-size-fits-all approaches. It is for leaders who want to understand their communities deeply, see the strengths and possibilities in them, and build the human capacity, together, to do this work for every young person they serve.



Drawing on the experience of leaders already working this way, including trusts that have used their academy freedoms to do so, this paper offers ways to navigate the complexity, the pressures and the possibilities of this work.

Some words in this paper carry many meanings. Here is how we use them.

School group

any group of schools working together, in the UK or internationally. We use "Trust" when speaking about the English system specifically. The ideas in this paper apply through an international lens too, and one of our case studies is from outside the UK.

School-based community leadership

a way of seeing and working. It sees each school as connected to its community, and education as more than schooling: a contribution to human flourishing.

Community

the community around the child. That means their family, the neighbourhood they live in, the services they are connected to, and the relationships, histories, assets and aspirations that surround a school.

Neighbourhood

the small, very local area where children and families live day to day, within walking distance of home, school, the GP, local shops and places to play. Health and local government increasingly organise services at this level.

Place

the setting in which children and families live their lives. It has no single definition, and spans the neighbourhood around a school, the wider local area and beyond.

Locality

the local area, such as a town, city or council area, where many services are organised and where schools, school groups and partners work together.

1. Why this matters now

Society has changed. More of life now happens online, and many places where people once came together, such as clubs, youth groups and community spaces, have thinned out or disappeared. Gordon Brown describes how “the erosion of civic life has led to an epidemic of loneliness, a loss of community spirit and a growing sense that there is nowhere to turn in times of need” (The Future Starts With Us)1. Children feel this too: one in 20 young people has no friends at all (IPPR, The Loneliest Generation)2. Young people are the canaries in the mine. Rising mental health needs and falling attendance are warning us that something in the world around them has changed.

Schools are one of the few places left where every child connects with others, in person, each day, yet children spend only around 9% of their waking lives in a classroom (Children’s University)[3]. So teachers cannot do the work of connection, and therefore learning, alone.

This is not extra to school improvement; it is part of it. Understanding families and working well with local partners informs attendance, early identification of need, transitions and readiness to learn, the very things schools are already working hard to improve. Connecting with community and place matters:



Because connection and belonging are the foundations.

Children learn best when they feel safe, seen and part of their school, and when that belonging extends into their community.

Because no one organisation can do this alone.

SEND, mental health, attendance and inequity cross every boundary, and health, social care, housing and the voluntary sector see the same families. Inclusive schools need inclusive communities.

Because learning happens in the community too.

Applying learning with neighbours, local organisations and employers builds the skills, creativity and resilience for work and life.

Because caring for our place teaches us to care for our planet.

Children who look after and take pride in their local environment build a lasting sense of responsibility for the natural world.

Because meeting people unlike ourselves builds understanding.

Regular, meaningful contact with people from different backgrounds reduces prejudice and widens the circle of people we trust.[4,5]

"Social capital - defined as the networks and quality of relationships within and beyond a school community - holds transformative potential for closing gaps in educational outcomes and enhancing diversity and inclusion"

Dr Nicole Ponsford, 2025[5]

We cannot deny the world is changing. So this prompts us to ask the question: what do young people need now? And what must we hold on to and cherish as human beings, not least each other? We are custodians of our communities and our planet, with a responsibility to think long term, for the children in our schools today as well as for the generations who follow. Increasingly leaders are describing the purpose of education as human flourishing6. Maybe on the surface this sounds soft and without academic rigour. It couldn't be further from the truth. It embodies the 'and' mindset that runs through this paper; strong academic outcomes with human connection at its heart.

Each school group must decide: what do we value, and therefore what do we measure and what do we do? When school groups answer this together, each school can become an anchor in its community, where children reach their potential and the community around them flourishes too. Many of the case studies show this.

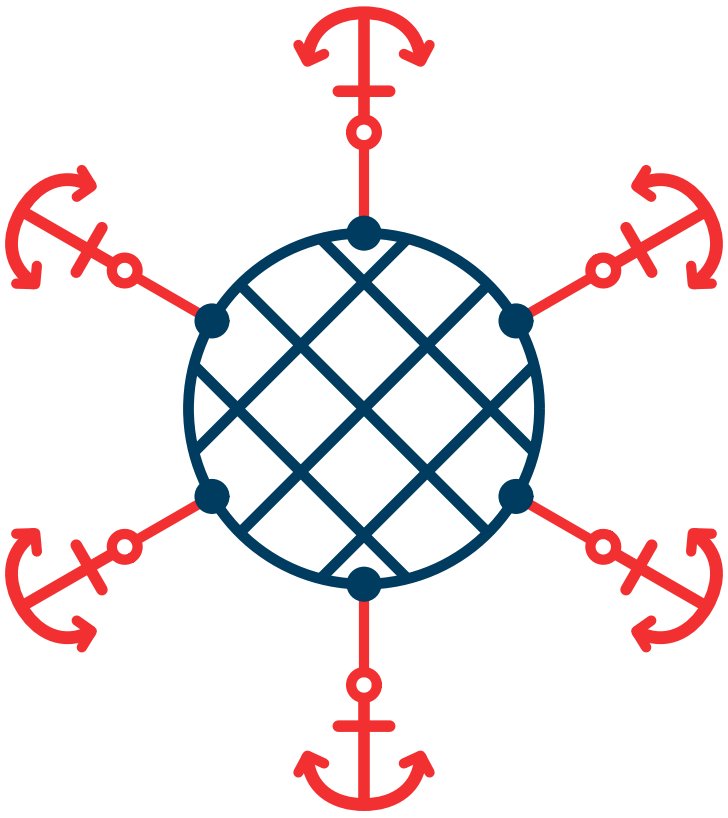
"Some people may ask why is this our responsibility? And my answer to that is, we have a civic duty to make a difference."

Director of Education

2. Nets and Anchors

This paper asks one central question: how can groups of schools meet the distinct needs of the individual communities they serve?

To help answer it, the paper uses the metaphor of a net and its anchors. It offers school and trust leaders a simple, shared language for something that can be hard to talk about: how a school group can be strong and coherent while each school keeps its own identity and stays rooted in its own community. The metaphor makes the point that leaders do not have to choose. We can have both, a strong net and anchors that hold, and the work is at its best when we do. Leaders can use this language when grappling with the tensions this work brings, and to look honestly at where their attention is best directed.



Anchored in place

each school rooted in its community

The net

the school group

Knots

where strands meet and are tied

Each school has its own community.

The language of the net

The metaphor stays true to how real nets are made: knotted by hand, and mended together by fishing communities. Four terms offer a shared language for the relationship between schools, their school group and their communities.

Term	Definition	What it offers
Anchor	Holds the net in place against the current, anchored to what matters.	Each school, rooted in its community and connected within its place: families, local services, assets and other schools.
Net	Strands tied together, giving strength, connection and collective agency.	The school group: schools and central teams tied together coherently, through governance that understands context and the power of shared capacity-building and collective learning.
Knots	Where strands meet and are tied. A net's strength is in its knots.	Where the school group and each school meet, and where schools are connected to their communities. The knots are where relationships bind people together.
Menders	The people who keep the net strong as well as connect it to the local anchors.	Everyone: connecting through strong relationships, within and beyond.

The tension in the knots

There are competing pressures at the heart of this work, and at times these pull against each other. Understandably, leaders tend to respond to their proximal pressures: their perspective is often shaped by where they sit, whether nearer the top of the school group or nearer the ground. Across the board, leaders are working hard to meet the needs of all young people. Our view is that when the tension is named, it can be addressed for positive good.



This work of connecting well rarely appears in a plan or on a risk register, and its impact takes time to show in performance tables. Yet it may be some of the most valuable work in any school group.

There are three knots worth paying particular attention to

Headteachers and school group or trust leaders.	Between them, the balance of support, challenge and freedom for each school is worked out.
Trustees and local governors.	Their connection shapes whether a school group's vision and strategy listen and respond to stakeholders from each school it serves (see contextual governance).
Local partners, the school and the school group.	This is where anchors connect with the net. When these connections are joined up, support and opportunity flow more freely to young people.

Some questions to hold

Where are our strongest knots, and where are they slipping?

Are we explicit about the tensions we are all managing, and do we discuss them openly?

At the intersection: questions for headteachers

Headteachers sit where many of these tensions meet. Navigating them well is a skill, and one that strengthens the whole net. These questions can help.

What do I know about my community that my school group doesn't yet see?

Where does a group-wide approach fit my school, and where doesn't it, and how do I say so constructively?

What pressures is my school group carrying that I may not see?

Am I clear where the net is tight and where it is loose?

Who in my community already holds trust, and how am I connected to them?

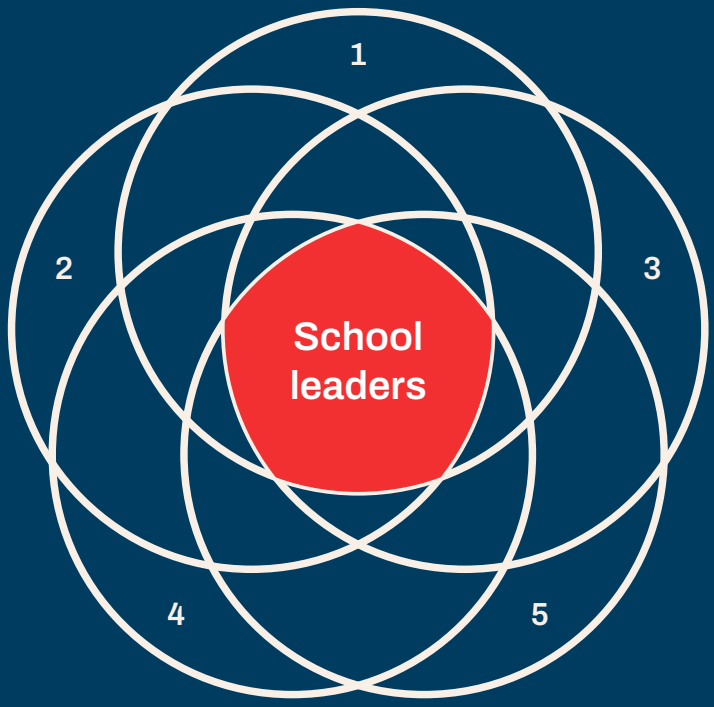
"I am part of a trust family, but I absolutely need to understand the service offer that is available at city level, and if I don't, support can become very fractured."

Headteacher

3. The context: complex, fragmented and full of possibility

Any account of this work needs an honest picture of the ground leaders are standing on. It is complicated, and it is moving. It is also ground on which many leaders are already doing remarkable work.

We have named five spheres of influence that shape how school leaders connect within and beyond their schools. Every leader sits within these overlapping spheres, and they look different for every school. Naming them helps leaders step back and see where they are already active, and where they want to act more deliberately.



1 The wider education system

National and regional policy, regulation, accreditation and inspection

2 The school group

Where formal authority, professional development and most decisions sit

3 Locality services

Local authorities, health, social care, SEND, housing, policing and the voluntary sector that connects them

4 Curriculum into career

The context in which young people apply their learning and prepare for the world of work

5 Communities and neighbourhoods

Families, civic life and the voluntary sector. Where soft power lives

A fragmented system

Responsibility for children is fragmented, both within and beyond the education sector, and the dots don't naturally join. The schools white paper itself acknowledges that "duties and responsibilities are dispersed between different services"7. Local government, health, social care and schools are each organised differently, with their own structures, priorities and accountabilities. This can leave families, and the professionals working with them, navigating a maze.

Since 2010, the growth of academy trusts in England has brought gains in academic outcomes for many schools[8]. It has also added new layers to who is responsible for what, with decisions often made further from the locality.

Boundaries that don't line up

Other public services are organising themselves around neighbourhoods. Local government's Pride in Place programme and the NHS's plans for neighbourhood health both focus on the places where families live their lives. So where is education in this? Schools see every child, every day, so they have a vital place at the neighbourhood table.

Yet school group governance doesn't naturally follow neighbourhood boundaries. One neighbourhood may contain schools from several groups, and one school group may stretch across several neighbourhoods and local authorities.

Chaddesden West, Derby. A Pride in Place area with one nursery school, four primary schools and two secondary schools, spread across six trusts and the local authority.

Collaborating across boundaries that don't align takes patience. It needs people in the same space, to understand where each other's work begins and ends and to grapple with the issues together. It requires a deep commitment, and asks us to slow down and listen before jumping to action.

Because this work takes time, it also takes capacity. Each school group's net has its own shape, so each will need to consider its existing structures, partners in each place and how to build the trust and capacity to work with them well.

4. Contextual governance: starting with the shape of your net

No two trusts cast the same net, and few work in a single locality. The size and shape of a trust's net determine who its partners are: which councils, which health footprints, which SEND systems, which communities. The more boundaries a net crosses, the more relationships there are to build, and the more capacity and strategic thought the work needs. **As trusts grow, one question becomes more important, not less: how does each school continue to understand and meet the distinct needs of its own community?**

Four trusts show how different those shapes can be



Embark Federation

Embark Federation: one county, 29 schools across Derbyshire.

Embark's vision is "outstanding schools at the heart of our communities": every school keeps its own identity while benefiting from the strength of the group, so that "no school works in isolation". Governance is designed as a "governance family". Trustee Advocates work alongside schools to understand local priorities. Local Governing Team Forums bring governors together to share practice and shape trust strategy, so local voices reach the board. The same thinking runs through professional networks and development programmes for heads, staff and governors, building distributed leadership across the trust.[9]

"Our governance structure is designed to ensure that leadership is something done with schools, not to schools... Trustee Advocates work alongside schools to build strong relationships, understand local priorities and provide both support and constructive challenge... This collaborative model creates a genuine partnership where ideas flow in both directions, local voices influence Trust strategy and governance continually evolves through shared learning and collective ownership."

Matt Crawford, CEO, Embark Federation

Odyssey Collaborative Trust

One city, seven primary schools.

Every Odyssey school is in Derby City, which the trust sees "not as a limitation but as one of our greatest strengths". Its vision (Our Children Thrive, Our Colleagues Thrive and Our Community Thrives) is held by trustees who "share a commitment to improving lives across Derby". Each year the CEO publishes a Community Report, open to families and partners, as a form of accountability to the city.[10]

Read the annual Community Report online

"Our schools do not stand apart from the communities they serve. They are woven into the life of Derby, working alongside families, organisations and neighbourhoods to create opportunities for children and strengthen the communities around them. We believe that school improvement and community improvement are one and the same. The success of our schools and the success of Derby are inseparable. When our communities flourish, our schools flourish too, creating the conditions for children, colleagues and the city itself to thrive together."

Ian Dewes, CEO, Odyssey Collaborative Trust

PolyMAT

PolyMAT: one local authority, three secondary schools close together in Greenwich.

PolyMAT began with the question: how can we build capacity? With limited internal funding options, the trust looked outwards for what CEO Tim Plumb calls "latent capacity": reciprocal relationships with people and services it can call on when needed, offering help in return. That meant investing time in relationships, especially with the local authority, and the board saw the value too. Trustees and executives worked through the "why" together. Becoming outward-looking has been a cohesive, gradual and strategic process that "hasn't felt a jump". This year, outward-looking targets are in performance management for the executive team and heads, so the work rests on the trust's structures, not one person's relationships.[11]

"Ever since we developed the growth strategy for the trust, we started to have real conversations about the why, and then linking that to the how."

Tim Plumb, CEO, PolyMAT

Oasis

Oasis: national, 57 academies, with school and community side by side.

Oasis began in 1985 as a community charity, starting with a hostel for young people facing homelessness, and opened its first academies in 2007. Its schools grew out of community work, rather than the other way round. Oasis Community Learning (OCL) is responsible for 57 academies and is one part of the wider Oasis Charitable Trust, alongside community, housing, youth and church work. Its starting point is that "great schools are only sustainable within happy and healthy communities", so "school improvement and community development go hand in hand". Each academy is "just one part" of a local Oasis Hub, alongside services such as youth work, food provision, family support and adult learning. In most trusts, community work is one strand of strategy; at Oasis, school and community are given equal weight, each with its own leadership and governance. Local groups (voluntary bodies with no statutory role) respond to the assets and needs of each neighbourhood, keep priorities community-led, and feed community context back to the OCL board.[12]

"The Oasis Hub model starts with the belief that lasting change happens when schools, youth and community services, families and local partners see themselves as part of one community. The power of the model is not any single service, but the relationships and opportunities we can build around a young person over time."

Kat Agar, Youth and Community Lead, Oasis

Governance that connects

Each of these four trusts has a clear trust-level vision for community, governance shaped to carry it, and a CEO and board of trustees who drive it forward because they believe it is the right thing to do. For some, such as Oasis, this was there from the start. For others, such as PolyMAT, it has grown step by step: starting with the why and building through a cohesive, strategic process. The net's shape differs; the line of sight from board to each school community, and back again, is deliberate in each.

That line of sight works in both directions. Local voice reaches the board when there is a clear route for it: at Embark, Local Governing Team Forums feed directly into trust strategy; at Oasis, local groups feed community context to the trust board, and each trustee is linked to a region with a direct line to its Regional Director; at Odyssey, the annual Community Report opens the trust's work to the people it serves.

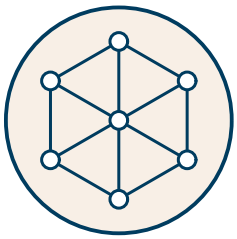


Why this matters for boards

This is becoming part of how trusts are held to account. The schools white paper looks set to put community collaboration into the new Trust Standards, encourages public benefit reporting, and proposes local governance structures that include all schools, with parental forums. It is also clear that collaboration is "a means of achieving higher standards, stronger professional practice, and better outcomes for children"[7].

Further insights on trust governance can be found in the case study section.

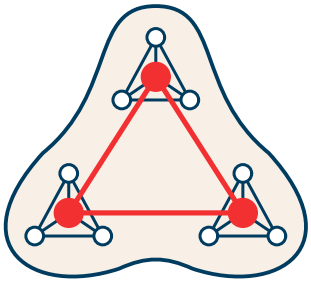
Here are three examples of the net shapes. Very few Trusts have a uniform shape.



One place

Standard net

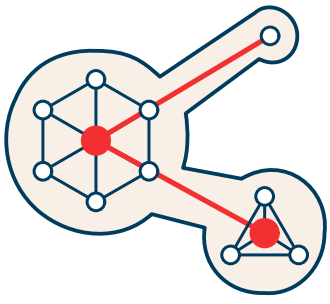
One locality



Hub model

Clustered net

Local hubs, multiple localities



Mixed model

Asymmetrical net

Uneven hubs, multiple localities



Starter questions for trustees and executive teams

Trust context: the cast of the net

What is the shape of our net and what does this mean for us? How many neighbourhoods, local authorities and health footprints does our net cover? How does our governance structure match that shape?

Vision and priorities

Is our vision for community explicit, and do trustees own it?

School context

How well do trustees and the executive team know, see and understand the context and distinctiveness of each school and its community?

Line of sight

How does the board hear from each community, and how does local voice shape strategy from community through to executive team and trust board?

Measuring what matters

How do we effectively use data for decision-making and evaluate the impact of our place-based and partnership work as part of self-evaluation?

Resources and energy

What time, roles, professional development and funding do we give this vital work, and how do we report on it?

5. Case studies

Introduction to the case studies

The case studies in the companion collection come from leaders who have chosen to share their work openly, including what has been hard. Each school group has its own net and each school its own community, so what worked in one place will look different in another. They are offered as learning: what these leaders noticed, the choices they made, how they made the work possible, and what they would tell someone wanting to do similar work.

How each case is set out

1	The idea in one line: the heart of the case
2	Anchored in place: understanding the school context, and working in partnership
3	The net: building capacity together: how the school group made the work possible
4	What is in place, and the difference it is making
5	Challenges and lessons learned
6	In your setting: questions to prompt you to consider your own context

The summaries below and on the following pages show where each case is strongest, so you can start with the ones most relevant to you.

Exceed (Doncaster, Yorkshire)

Anchored: understanding the school context

Local data and community engagement

Anchored: working in partnership

A Trust-convened neighbourhood delivery board

The net: building capacity together

A Trust student council, joint peer reviews and a Children and Family Zone

Where each case study is strongest



DDAT
Derby Diocesan Academy Trust

St Chad's (DDAT, Derby)

Anchored: understanding the school context

Earning the trust of families from the early years

Anchored: working in partnership

Choosing a few partners, and bringing the rest in-house

The net: building capacity together

A local Trust hub that also meets with other local schools

esteem emat
Multi-Academy Trust
Stronger Together...

St Martins School

Esteem / St Martins (Derby, the Midlands)

Anchored: understanding the school context

Destination data: where young people with SEND go after school

Anchored: working in partnership

St Martins: Sabrina Hobbs's earlier internship work

The net: building capacity together

Esteem heads and board acting on destination data

Respect Collaboration Trust

CLAIRE WARD
MAYOR OF THE EAST MIDLANDS
EAST MIDLANDS COMBINED COUNTY AUTHORITY

Respect and EMCCA (Derby, the East Midlands)

Anchored: understanding the school context

Isolated careers leaders, and families' fears about post-16 options

Anchored: working in partnership

A cross-trust community of practice, Teacher Encounters and employers

The net: building capacity together

A Trust careers lead, a careers deputy on every site, and "careers is everyone's business"

Maritime Academy Trust

Maritime (Kent and south-east London)

Anchored: understanding the school context

Home visits before term starts

Anchored: working in partnership

Reach Foundation and a Trust charity

The net: building capacity together

A non-teaching Community Ambassador in every school, managed centrally

Where each case study is strongest

Tees Valley Education (Teesside, the North East)

Anchored: understanding the school context

Listening to stakeholders, assessment, not assumption

Anchored: working in partnership

Working through local charities and employers, not duplicating them

The net: building capacity together

A Director of PLACE treating poverty as school improvement

The Reach Foundation

Anchored: understanding the school context

Before birth into adulthood: a cradle-to-career approach

Anchored: working in partnership

Supporting schools and trusts' cradle-to-career work

The net: building capacity together

Children's workforce, shared thinking and practical tools

Windsor (West Midlands and Staffordshire)

Anchored: understanding the school context

Pupil voice: asking pupils where they spend their time

Anchored: working in partnership

NHS trusts and a shared framework

The net: building capacity together

Civic Leaders and civic engagement in the Trust strategy

Strothoff (Germany)

Anchored: understanding the school context

A state curriculum as the foundation

Anchored: working in partnership

Service and applied learning in the local community

The net: building capacity together

The future-focused IB and the Phorms Network as a shared framework

6. What the case studies tell us

Across these nine accounts, some common threads emerge.

Listening comes first.

Each school group started by understanding its community: local and destination data, pupil surveys, conversations with stakeholders and deep listening to families.

Family engagement and pupil voice.

Relationships, relationships, relationships. Trust with families is built face to face and over time, through home visits, coffee mornings and early years groups. Pupils are listened to as well as taught. When young people and families are part of the process then the impact is likely to be more sustainable.

Collaboration across the locality matters.

The strongest work connects schools within and beyond the school group, and shares responsibility for every child in the area. This doesn't mean starting from scratch. Often old or existing networks can be tapped into.

Working with, not doing to.

These leaders share power with families and partners, choose carefully what to do in-house, and build on what already exists rather than duplicating it.

Dedicated capacity makes it possible.

Community roles, charity arms and civic leaders: this work needs people with the time to do it.

"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."

Sean Harris, Director of PLACE, Tees Valley Education Trust

Working against the current

The case studies are also honest about what this work is up against.

Measuring what matters.

Many of these school groups measure more than accountability requires, such as destinations, belonging and family relationships, alongside the measures they are judged on. That is where some of the strongest evidence lies, but it means carrying two sets of measures.

Fragile funding.

Much of this work depends on school budgets, grants and short-term funding, which makes it hard to sustain and hard for others to replicate.

Time and space go first.

When pressure rises, time for listening, relationships and partnership is often the first thing to be lost.

Determined individuals.

Much is achieved through leaders driven to challenge the inequities they see in front of them. That makes the work powerful, but vulnerable if those leaders move on.

These leaders are choosing a different route. In a high-accountability environment that often pulls against collaboration and inclusion, they hold the care of children and of the staff they lead, a huge responsibility. Their work shows what is possible despite the system. The current steers us down the fastest route, not always the right one, but it does not decide where we go. There is a choice. The next section looks at those pressures, and the choices leaders can make within them.

7. Systemic pressures and accountability

It would be dishonest to write about the environment leaders are working in without acknowledging the pressure they are often under. This paper is not about changing the system directly, though we support all those working to do so. Our focus here is on how leaders can navigate the system as it is, and be part of the change through the work they do.

Much of the accountability system focuses on individual schools and on academic outcomes. Ofsted continues to come under criticism for its impact on the workforce and for the inequity of the framework it uses to measure success[13].

Fear of failure in a high-stakes system can draw us towards competition over collaboration. Jonny Uttley (2026)[14] traces this back to the 1988 Education Reform Act and a system built on competition between schools. As he puts it, “schools are judged individually but children experience services collectively”. Even when we believe in working together, the system can make the work in this paper feel risky, because its value is not always recognised and it takes time to have impact.

Personal success shapes us too. Many of us have grown up, been schooled and built our careers in systems, and through leadership programmes, that reward individual and organisational achievement. So our instincts can lean towards ourselves, or our own school, rather than towards shared responsibility. That is a human response, and it is how we have been shaped. It is worth resisting, because as humans we also have an incredible capacity to work together. Human connection, for adults and young people alike, is at the heart of this work.

Reading this from outside England: the pressures may come from accreditation, inspection, owners or parent markets rather than Ofsted, but the pull between group-wide coherence and local distinctiveness is the same for any school group.

There is something here that matters as much as anything else in this paper. Most people come into education to make a difference to young lives, yet many teachers and school leaders are leaving the profession. Should we be asking whether bringing together people, purpose and place could make working in education more worthwhile and more joyful and give people more reason to stay?

Greany et al. (2026)[15] show a link between sustainable school leadership and leading with school context in mind. They found that making a difference is what sustains school leaders, and that a gap between their moral purpose and what the role demands of them is a key source of frustration, one that may drive some from the profession. In practice, that gap can be very specific to place. One primary head described how a standard trust letter about attendance, acceptable elsewhere, risked undoing the trusting relationships she had built in her community over years.

Working with the pressures

If these are the pressures, part of the answer lies in how we hold them. Leaders will continue to hold them for some time, and naming them is a way of working with them more intentionally. We believe they are not either/or choices but both/and ones, and that holding them with an “and” mindset is what unlocks the capacity for positive change. Leading in this way asks for a shift in how we work.

The paradoxical pressures	Holding it with an “and” mindset
Coherence and local distinctiveness	A shared strategy across the school group, and the freedom for each school to respond to its own community: being both net and anchor.
Short-term accountability and long-term impact	Meeting short-term goals and responding to immediate pressures, and investing in a long-term vision and partnerships that reap rewards over years.
Individual accountability and collective responsibility	Being accountable for results as an individual or at school level, and sharing responsibility across the school group and local community.
Recognising need and building on assets	Being honest about what a community needs, and starting from what it already has: its people, relationships, places and strengths, so that need is seen alongside the assets that can meet it.
Authority and soft influence	The formal authority a school or school group holds, and the influence, earned over time, that builds trust and makes co-creation and meaningful partnership possible.
Holding complexity and maintaining clear focus	Keeping the whole, connected picture in view, and prioritising what to act on first.
Stability and agility	Giving people clarity and steadiness when the ground is shifting, and being ready to respond quickly when it does. Good communication holds the two together.

The attendance letter is one example of the first paradox in the table, between coherence and local distinctiveness. The difficulty comes when a one-size-fits-all approach is implemented as if place were not important. Shared frameworks, ways of working and replicable templates are still of real value. They often ease workload, provide clarity that enables creativity and, when co-created, can unlock the collective agency so many practitioners crave. Professional dialogue across hierarchical boundaries is what helps leaders navigate this space.

Full of possibility

The ground is shifting towards place-based ways of working, and towards seeing success as a collective endeavour. The 2026 Schools White Paper, *Every Child Achieving and Thriving*, asks schools to move "from withdrawn to engaging" and looks set to place community collaboration within the new Trust Standards[7]. For leaders who have been doing this work against the current, the current is beginning to turn. For all of us, it opens the door to working differently.

This is demanding ground, and it is full of possibility. The choice of how to stand on it is ours. We do not have to wait for the system to change to act well within it. For executive and board-level leaders in school groups, there are real freedoms, and they give us choices about how we serve the children in front of us by connecting with the communities around them.

Many of the building blocks are already in place: schools trusted by their communities, relationships built over years, local assets and partners ready to work together, and a policy direction that increasingly values place. Investing the time, effort and leadership capabilities to connect, so that we can navigate the landscape together, is where the greatest opportunities lie.

The rest of this paper looks at the kind of leadership this calls for.

8. A different kind of leadership

The case studies show leaders doing this work in very different places, with different shapes of net, navigating a range of pressures and tensions. The idea of strong school leadership has historically focused on a delivery style, fit for simpler times: more top-down and linear. The world is changing and the challenges facing us are complex, which require a different type of leadership. One where leadership is more collaborative, agile and focused on what the humans in the system need. And how the humans in the system need to work together.

Leaders doing this work well, wherever they are, share a way of leading. It is relational, it looks outward as well as inward, and it holds the pressures of the system alongside the needs of the community. These are the qualities that stand out.



“It is not enough to discover assets. We must connect them with one another in new ways, that multiply their contribution, power, equity, and influence.”

Cormac Russell (July 2026)[16]



Know your context and people well.	Listen to children, families, staff and partners before acting. Use the right amount and the right kind of data, numbers and lived experience together, to understand each school and its community.
Start from what is already there.	Focus on the assets. Every community has people, relationships, places and organisations to build on. Find them and connect them before creating something new.
Commit to collaboration over competition.	Work with families and partners as equals. Collaborate with neighbouring schools, inside and beyond your school group, and share responsibility for every child in the area.
Name the paradoxical pressures and hold them together.	Be open about the pressures you are under and the pressures others feel, from the top of the school group to the school gate. Talk about them honestly, and look for the "and" together.
Invest in the knots.	The relationships between school group and school leaders, trustees and local governors, and schools and their partners are where this work succeeds or slips. Give relationship building time and attention.

Measure what matters and think long term.	Set wider measures of success alongside academic outcomes. Build this work into plans, self-evaluation, budgets and the risk register so it holds when short-term pressures rise.
Build capacity on purpose.	Relational and collaborative skills can be learned. Make time for staff and leaders to learn together, within and beyond the school group, and support those who connect with the community.
Know yourself.	Be aware of your own worldview, where it comes from and where it may cloud your vision. Stay curious about the perspectives of others.
Learn by doing.	Learn with others, be curious, be honest about what is working and not and don't be afraid to adapt.
Keep sight of what is possible.	Ask what is within your control, with the capacity you have, and choose one thing to start with.

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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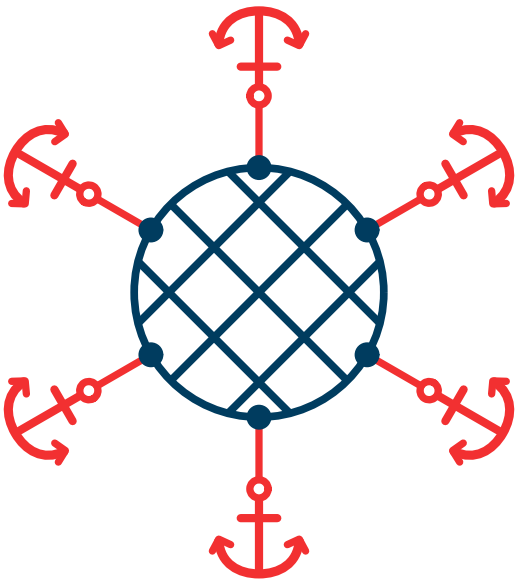
Keep exploring

Further reading and supporting sources

Explore the reading behind the paper and the resources shared by the working group online.



Reading. Examples. Practical resources.

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

Numbered references remain on the preceding page. Supporting files will be added as approved public copies become available.

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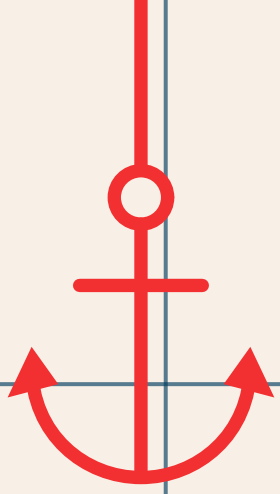

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