



**Confederation**  
of School Trusts

# A Bridge to the Future

**Address to CST 2021 Annual Conference**

Leora Cruddas, Chief Executive



## A Bridge to the Future – April 2021

Good morning colleagues and welcome to this, CST's first annual conference. Can I thank the excellent choir from Dixons Music Primary and the drummers from Dixons Academies Trust. I wanted to start the conference with a reminder of the power of making music together, the drum beat that speeds up the heart, the heartbeat of what we do and why we do it.

I would also like to pay tribute today to Folajimi Olubunmi-Adewole – the twenty-year-old young man who selflessly jumped into the Thames on Saturday to save a woman who had fallen from London Bridge. A former pupil at the Harris Academy in Peckham, his bravery and altruism cost him his life in trying to save the life of another. We honour him today. Our love and thoughts are with his family.

Thank you for the many kind messages you've sent us through this challenging year. We've appreciated these immensely. It has been our privilege to support and represent you. We have been humbled by the support you have given us and each other. Through this crisis we have seen that we are indeed a family of trusts.

I also want to thank our brilliant partners who have been such a strong source of support through the pandemic, in particular, Stone King and Browne Jacobson who have given so generously of their time and expertise in providing legal advice notes for us.

Today, I'd like to stand back and reflect on the journey we've made together over the past 30 months since we founded the Confederation of School Trusts – your sector body. Today we have just shy of half of the sector in membership.

It has been an extraordinary journey spanning an extraordinary time in our country's social, political and economic history.

I want to reflect particularly on the last 12 months of the global pandemic. On 16th March last year, I wrote my first Covid-19 email briefing to CST members. In that first message at the start of the pandemic, I thanked you for your leadership in uncertain and very worrying times.

It has been a tragic time in our global history. So many of us have suffered the unbearable loss of loved ones – family members, relatives, friends and colleagues.

But this has also been a story of heroism and service and great courage. Our public services have been magnificent. Our NHS has been on the front line of the pandemic and it is right that the nation has applauded them. And so have our other public services – the police, carers, and of course those working in education. All of you.

Today I am proud to launch new research which was carried out by the University of Nottingham, in partnership with CST. The research explored system leadership in disruptive times and the robustness of policy making in School Trusts. 15 trusts in the Midlands participated in the research.

I quote from the research:





*“Over the twelve-month period of unanticipated disruptions and discontinuities, these Trusts had gone beyond ‘coping’ or merely ‘surviving’. Their CEOs, regardless of the size and geographical distribution of their schools, had demonstrated a strong sense of efficacy, agency and robust resilience, a profound sense of care, and agile, adaptive, values-led leadership which had permeated their schools, minimising disengagement of most of their pupils from learning, connecting closely with their parental communities and external agencies.”*

This is a remarkable achievement.

However hard this is (and it has been very difficult for so much of the time), you have never stopped, not once, to put yourselves first. At every moment, you have done your civic duty.

Despite times when there has been a lack of clarity or when there has been contradictory information, and the rapid changes in policy, school and trust leaders and their boards have been determined to make sense of it.

You have done this because you believe in the power of education to improve lives – and indeed to change the world.

So quite simply, thank you. You are a national treasure.

Now to our story, to a reflection about the journey that we began together 30 months ago.

## A new narrative for School Trusts

In September 2019, before the last election CST published our [White Paper](#) setting out the future shape of the education system in England. It appears to be fashionable now to talk about the future of education. We have been doing so since our inception. We argued for the power in a group of schools working together in a single governance structure with clear accountability arrangements.

This is part of our [new narrative](#) for School Trusts – a narrative for a new decade. We said School Trusts create the conditions for deep collaboration among teachers and leaders to improve the quality of education. We said School Trusts are a new civic structure created with the sole purpose of advancing education for public benefit.

At the legal and ethical heart of what we do lies something grand and aspirational – our core charitable purpose to advance education for the public benefit – to make children and young people’s lives better. To change lives.

This is *why* we exist.

And this has never been more important. How will we bring together a divided country, blighted by the global pandemic? How will we ensure that our children are not left behind? How will we chart the path for future generations? It is education that will shape the next generation.



I know there are times when it all feels too much. When the relentless negative narratives feel so oppressive that we want to give up. When the pressures of the accountability system feel so punitive that it takes its toll on the body and mind. When we are battered and hammered in all directions.

Those of you who know me, know that I am first and foremost an English teacher, so I want to share a poem with you – **The Way It is**, by William Stafford.

*There's a thread you follow. It goes among*

*things that change. But it doesn't change.*

*People wonder about what you are pursuing.*

*You have to explain about the thread.*

*But it is hard for others to see.*

*While you hold it you can't get lost.*

*Tragedies happen; people get hurt*

*or die; and you suffer and get old.*

*Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.*

*You don't ever let go of the thread.*

So let's not *ever* let go of the thread.

But I'm not sure we've explained enough about the thread.

Colleagues, it is time we took control of the narrative – time we explained about the thread.

So let's say proudly that trusts are education charities that run schools to give children a better future.

Let's say, "Our trust is a group of schools working in collaboration as one entity to improve and maintain high educational standards across the group. Our trust has a single legal and moral purpose: to advance education for public benefit."

**To parents**, let's say "As a family of schools, we improve your child's education by sharing ideas and expertise with each other. Like any other state school, our schools are free to attend, we're inspected in the same way, and children take the same tests and exams."

**To teachers**, let's say "As a family of schools, we work closely together and share expertise, which creates great opportunities for children and teachers. We share good practice on the important things - curriculum, assessment and behaviour. We offer structured career pathways for teachers, supported by high-quality professional development so teachers and leaders learn together." We help teachers and leaders spend more of their time focussed on the one thing that counts the most – the education of children.





I believe this is an insurgent mission.

Trusts have waged war on endemic failure in certain schools and areas of the country – and they have done this with a relentless focus on putting children first.

The most successful school trusts have clarity of focus and purpose, both inside and outside the organisation. At its most powerful, the mission is found embedded in all parts of the organisation from systems and processes to staff development and decision-making. The mission comes first. It jumps out at you.

This is a powerful thing.

You are obsessed with the front-line – the quality of teachers, teaching and the curriculum. McKinsey was right – the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers. Nor can the quality of a school or group of schools.

You are driven by a passion about every detail of a child or young person's experience.

You do not play the blame game – you do not account for the lack of success by pointing to the disadvantage in the community or any other limiting factor. Although of course these factors do make a difference. The mental models you bring to the task of improving schools is about how you solve or overcome their persistent problems. You are not complacent – you are restless in your desire to improve the quality of education.

You are driven.

You have limitless horizons about what can be achieved by all children – but particularly the most disadvantaged.

Setting up organisations – specialist education charities – to run and improve schools to create a better future for children is not marketisation. Nor is it privatisation. And it is not fragmentation. It is sensible education policy.

There is now stronger evidence that groups of schools working together in a single governance structure are educationally and financially stronger. This is not an ideological argument for full academisation – notice I have not even used the term academisation – but an evidence-informed argument for the power of a group of schools working in deep and purposeful collaboration through what David Hargreaves all those years ago in the 2000s called structural integration.

School trusts create the conditions for deep collaborations among teachers and leaders to improve the quality of education.

### **The Trust in testing times**

You may have seen Professor Daniel Muijs and Karl Sampson's blog that was published by Ofsted in January entitled, [The trust in testing times: the role of multi-academy trusts during the pandemic](#). CST asked Ofsted to delve a bit deeper into the ways in which trusts are supporting their schools through the pandemic. Ofsted opened an additional evidence card during the Autumn interim visits. For the





school leaders Ofsted spoke to, the support of their trust was crucial. They told Ofsted about support with safeguarding, interpreting COVID-19 guidelines, developing remote learning and integrating this with the curriculum.

Daniel and Karl conclude: “One of the aims of bringing schools together in trusts is to provide them with levels of support and collective learning that would not be achievable for any school on its own. These findings show how important this can be to schools’ resilience in the most challenging of circumstances, and how being part of a greater whole builds that resilience.”

This is a significant piece of evidence which supports CST’s position that all schools should be in a strong and sustainable trust. As we look ahead to the future of policy reform in the next decade, there can be no doubt that we should now complete the reform journey.

## Redefining Trust Leadership

Last year, we published a paper mapping the [Systems of Meaning](#) within which School Trusts are located. We identified three leadership narratives:

1. The first is about **trust leadership**: how we talk about ourselves, what we do and why we do it. Recall that we said School Trusts create the conditions for deep collaborations among teachers and leaders to improve the quality of education. This is absolutely necessary, but not sufficient.
2. Our second leadership narrative is about **civic leadership**: how we work with others to advance education as a wider common good. Civic trusts create the conditions for purposeful collaboration between and among Trusts and other civic organisations. We will not solve the problems which will be the legacy of the global pandemic if we do not work with other civic actors.
3. Our third leadership narrative is about **system leadership**: not in the old definition of ‘working beyond the school gates’, but rather how we need to act *on*, rather than just acting *in* the system. System-building goes beyond collaboration and engages in deliberate system design.

All three leadership narratives are underpinned by ethics – [the Principles of Public Life](#).

Through the pandemic, we have seen these leadership narratives being enacted.

Building on this work, we made the case for [School Trusts as new form of Civic Structures](#). Prior to the global pandemic, we made the case that it is necessary to galvanise Trusts as good civic partners working with other civic actors to advance education as a public good in their locality.

We have seen extraordinary examples of trusts leading with other civic actors during the pandemic.

I believe we are redefining what it means to lead a trust through these three leadership narratives – trust leadership, civic leadership, system leadership.





In the post-pandemic period, CST will continue to work with you to support you to develop and enact this leadership in your own trust. We will support you to develop next generation leaders who have the deep expertise needed to lead their organisation, as well as leading with other civic actors and building local systems, purposefully and deliberately.

We will work with you to hone these post-pandemic leadership narratives and develop the next generation of leaders.

## A Bridge to the Future

The global pandemic has highlighted the role of public service and the value of education in society. Inevitably the spotlight on education and the challenges of Covid-19 have prompted widespread reflection on a range of education issues, including accountability, assessment, technology and pedagogy to name just a few.

These discussions are largely a positive response to the pandemic and grapple not only with the immediate fallout but also act as a catalyst for advocating broader changes over the long term. However, there can be limitations and oversights in the discourse that limit the credibility of policy proposals. In some cases, popular rhetoric gains traction over evidence-informed policy.

It is likely that the effects of Covid-19 will be felt for a long while yet. Beyond the educational impacts, there are also health, social and economic impacts which will affect the children and young people in our schools. If we are to address the negative legacies of Covid-19, we will need robust policies – those with the capacity to continue to cope with current and future perturbations.

This is why, in January this year, we published [A Bridge to the Future](#).

We cannot limp on with a lack of coherence and a refusal to take a close look at the education system. We must be ambitious in our goal to build a strong and sustainable system with all schools part of a group. So, CST is building an ambitious vision for the education system.

As we said in our White Paper, completing the reform journey is likely to take the next decade. This should not be done through the blunt instruments of compulsion and legislation, but rather by integrating what the system is doing now – in other words, building groups of schools.

Structures are important because they create robustness and are the vehicle for improving the quality of education. We should not make the mistake of believing that structures themselves will inevitably bring about improvements in the quality of education. We need to pay as much attention to the way that we develop robustness in curriculum, assessment and pedagogy.

There is an urgency to this. Existing inequalities in society have opened up further during the pandemic. We need robust policies that seek not to throw out everything that has gone before, but to elevate the best of our current system. There are some positives on which to build – not just in the structures of schooling in England - but also in the recent work on the Early Career Framework, curriculum and assessment.





CST is committed to the promotion and advancement of equity and social justice. To this end there are strong equity and social justice themes through our conference. One of our equalities themes is the importance of girls' safety and education, and the participation of women in public life.

As Ruth Bader Ginsberg wrote just before she died, "Our communities, nation, and the world will be increasingly improved as women achieve their rightful place in all fields of human endeavour." This is of course equally true for Black people and People of Colour.

Matthew Syed, writing in The Times in August last year talked powerfully about Martin Luther King whom Syed claims "sought to build bridges, not erect more barriers."

Our work on equalities (and indeed our conference) seeks to do that – to build bridges in the creation of a better and more equal society. We draw on the theory of 'bridging social capital' - a type of social capital that describes the connections that link people across old social cleavages which typically divide society (such as race, gender, class, or religion). It is these associations, norms of trust and generosity that create 'bridges' between communities, groups, and organisations.

I am looking forward to welcoming Ziauddin Yousafzai, Malala's father, peace, women's rights and education activist who will deliver our final keynote. I am also delighted that Dame Rachel de Souza is joining us. In addition to the Big Ask, she will speak on this theme ahead of the G7 summit in Cornwall in June this year.

The issue of safety, education and the right to participate in public life is a global issue. We are fortunate in the UK that education is a universal right and that many women hold positions in public life, but there is still more to be done even here in our liberal democracy. This is particularly the case in our social relations, the safety of girls and women and in better representation of women and Black people in public life, including in leadership, executive and governance roles in education.

It is through education that we will build these bridges to a fairer and more just society.

## The best system at getting better

Eighteen months ago I was on a public panel with Sir Kevan Collins, formerly the Chief executive of the Education Endowment Foundation, now the Government's Recovery Commissioner. He said, 'Leora can you tell me, do you think we are the best system at getting better?'

Fortunately, he did not wait for my answer. He said: 'I can tell you we are not.'

But this question intrigued me. How can we be the best education system at getting better?





## Knowledge building – improvement at scale

School improvement at scale across a group of schools has also been much discussed in recent years, but often the discussion, while helpful, remains at the generic level.

We have recently published a paper on [knowledge building – school improvement at scale](#). This paper offers a view of school improvement as *deliberate and intentional knowledge building*. We make four propositions:

1. The goal is for every teacher in every classroom to be as good as they can be in *what* they teach (the curriculum) and *how* they teach (pedagogy).
2. For this to happen, we need to mobilise for every teacher the best evidence from research.
3. There is no improvement for pupils without improvement in teaching, and no improvement in teaching without the best professional development for teachers.
4. Strong structures (in groups of schools) can facilitate better professional development and thus better teaching and improvement for pupils.

This is not to dismiss the procedural processes of building capacity, undertaking a forensic analysis of need, supporting and deploying leadership, providing access to effective practice and monitoring improvements in the quality of provision. Indeed, these things are essential. But without the intentional practice of knowledge building, improvement is not sustainable. It may not result in an enduring change in practice.

And knowledge building is also important in relation to governance. Too much that is written about governance is again, generic. At CST, we use a model of expertise to underpin our approach to helping boards to keep getting better.

We are less concerned with generic approaches to governance and more interested in building proficiency around the education-specific and highest-leverage work that boards do in governing their trust. We do draw on the governance literature outside education because it helps to shine a light on how to tackle some of the problems. We think some of these problems are created by bringing the 'mental models' of maintained school governance into trust governance. This is dangerous as the proposition of a governing a school trust is fundamentally different from governing a maintained school.

Today, I am announcing that we are launching a joint project with the Chartered Governance Institute to develop a sector-wide trust governance code. Drawing on the excellent practice of the charity governance code, and the well-established governance codes in other sectors, the development of our Code is a defining moment – a mark of our maturity that we are moving beyond regulatory compliance and determining what expert governance looks like in our sector.

So, returning to the question of how we can be the best education system at getting better?

We'll build our bridge to the future through deliberate and intentional knowledge-building – through the systematic use of evidence and research. And by setting the standard for ourselves.





## Holding trust with children

And why is all this important? Because in the words of the late great Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the United Nations in his forward to the State of the World's Children in the year 2000,

“There is no trust more sacred than the one the world holds with children. There is no duty more important than ensuring that their rights are respected, that their welfare is protected, that their lives are free from fear and want and that they grow up in peace.”

This statement has never been more important than in the context of a global pandemic.

CST's mission statement is drawn from this – holding trust with children.

This is our thread, the thread that we follow. This is the thing that goes among things that change. But **it** doesn't change.

While we hold it, we cannot get lost.

As we lead our schools and trusts, as we build our bridge to the future, let's put the sacred bond of the trust we hold with children at the centre of all that we do.

Thank you.