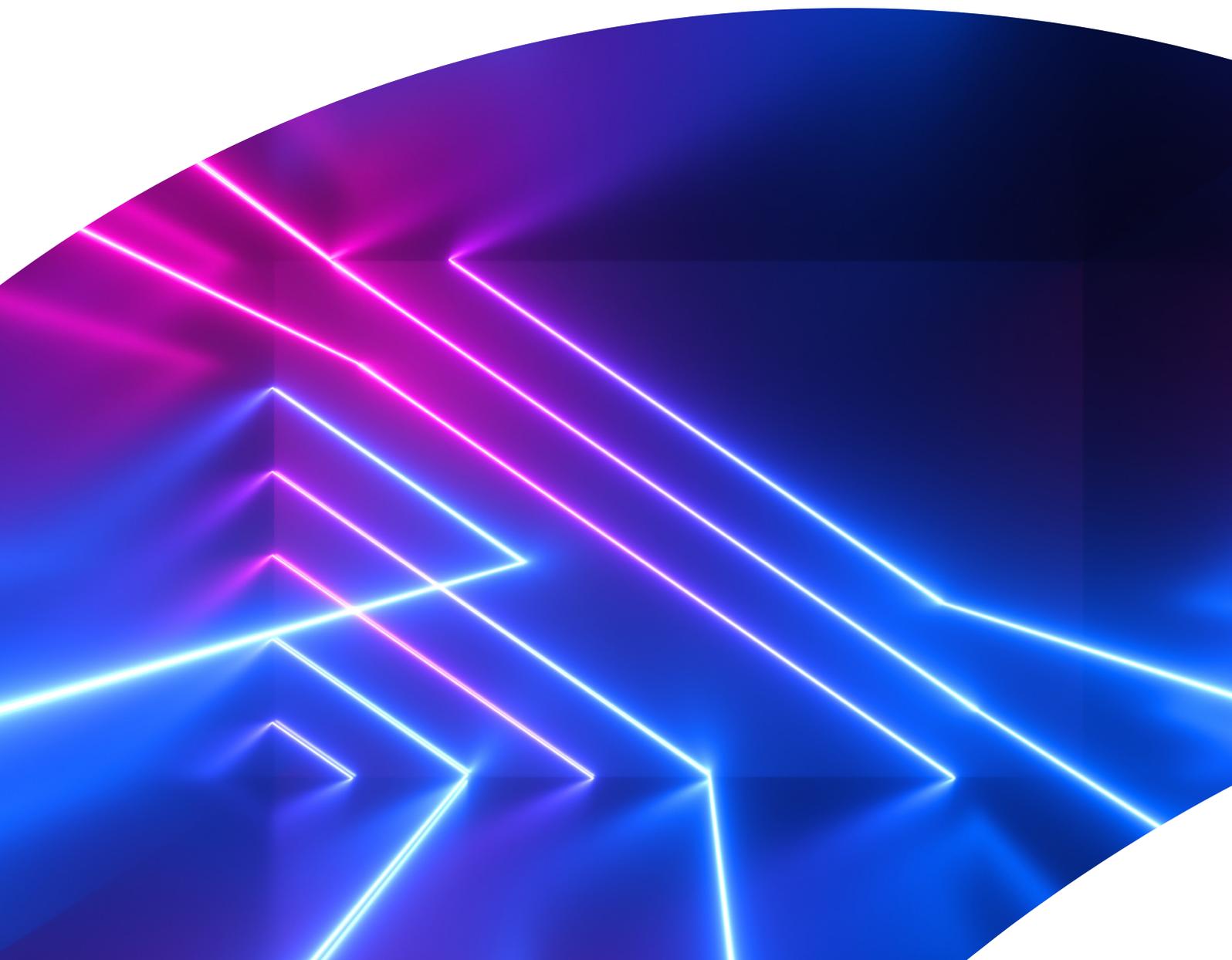




Confederation  
of School Trusts

# Professional Development in School Trusts – capacity, conditions and culture

A Bridge to the Future Paper



# About CST - The voice of School Trusts

CST is the national organisation and sector body for academy and multi-academy trusts - advocating for, connecting and supporting executive and governance leaders in School Trusts.

We are a charitable company, registered with the Charity Commission. Our charitable purpose, as set out in our Articles of Association, is "the advancement of education for public benefit."

We are governed by a Board of Trustees and are subject to the regulations of the Charity Commission and accountable to our members.

We are strictly apolitical. We work with the government of the day, political parties and politicians across the spectrum to advance education for public benefit.

CST's mission is to build an excellent education system in England, with every school part of a strong and sustainable group in which every child is a powerful learner and adults learn and develop together as teachers and leaders.

**Our vision is a system which holds trust on behalf of children.**

**Published February 2022  
By Jennifer Barker and  
Katy Patten**

Confederation of  
School Trusts (CST)  
Suite 10,  
Whiteley Mill Offices,  
39 Nottingham Road,  
Nottingham NG9 8AD

[cstuk.org.uk](https://www.cstuk.org.uk) 

Charitable Company Limited by Guarantee,  
Registered in England, Charity Number  
1107640, Company Number 05303883  
VAT Registration Number 270 0880 18



## Our values:

Selflessness	Openness
Integrity	Honesty
Objectivity	Leadership
Accountability	

# About the authors

Jen is the Senior Dean of Learning Design at Ambition Institute. Prior to working at Ambition Institute she led the design team at Teach First and before that spent nearly 10 years in teaching and senior leadership roles in schools in Manchester. She is currently studying for a Doctorate at the University of Manchester.

Katy is a Dean of Learning Design at Ambition Institute where she oversees design of teaching and leadership programmes including the reformed NPQs. Prior to this she led and designed the whole school Transforming Teaching programme for the Institute for Teaching and led the design of ITT and NPQ curricula at Ark Teacher Training. Before moving into teacher development, Katy was a history teacher and Deputy Director of Sixth Form in a London school.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Dixons Academies Trust, Ark Schools and Advantage Schools for their thoughtful contributions which exemplify the ideas in this paper. Thanks also to Harry Fletcher-Wood and Tom Rees for their contributions to drafting.



**Jennifer Barker**



**Katy Patten**

# Introduction

This paper emphasises the importance of teaching, evidence, and professional development in improving schools. It considers the ways in which school trusts can work to overcome some of the challenges associated with the design and implementation of high-quality professional development through leveraging their capacity (scale and expertise) alongside their ability to control the conditions and culture in which teachers work and professional development takes place. It builds on the previous CST publication '[Knowledge-building - School improvement at scale](#)'  which posits school improvement as a 'knowledge building activity' and makes the following 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.

A growing body of literature places educator professional development at the heart of efforts to improve the school system. This paper seeks to explore the role of professional development, what it is, why it is important and how we might be able to do it better. In doing so, it builds upon the idea that school improvement - in order to be lasting and sustainable - should be underpinned by [deliberate and intentional knowledge building](#)  Professional development of educators is core to these knowledge building efforts.

Evidence and experience are offering us increasing wisdom about how teachers can help pupils learn more effectively. For example, teachers are increasingly aware of the evidence around the benefits of retrieval practice, and the lack of evidence to support differentiation or grouping by learning style. However, the evidence is much less clear as to what schools should do to help their teachers improve and there is less available evidence as to how trusts can provide the most effective support. Nevertheless, there has been increasing research interest in effective professional development – and some of it provides us with valuable insights about what schools can do.

In this paper we want to examine what trusts, and trust leaders, can do to support teacher development which improves pupil learning. We address this issue by examining:

1. The importance of professional development
2. Effective professional development: what it isn't
3. Characteristics of effective professional development
4. Barriers to effective professional development
5. The role of the trust to overcome these barriers

We draw on the existing evidence, including research which has been conducted into effective professional development. We also use our experience working with trusts to refine their professional development programmes. Three case studies from trusts help us exemplify some of these ideas.



## 1. The importance of professional development

There are many important functions that a school trust holds and numerous things that trusts could prioritise to fulfil these functions. There is a strong case for teacher professional development to be a priority for trusts because there is clear evidence that it can make a substantial difference to pupils.

Pupils who benefit from more effective teaching not only learn more, they live happier and healthier lives (Jackson et al, 2014; Slater et al 2012; Chetty et al, 2013). The effect is strongest among pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds (Sutton Trust, 2011). In order to improve the quality of teaching, we could try to recruit better teachers into the profession, but this is a slow and uncertain route, in part because it's hard to identify a great teacher right at the start of their career (William, 2016, Chapter 2). A better, and indeed a more ethical approach, is to focus our efforts on helping existing teachers to improve.

This is hard. Teachers are busy, under pressure, and have evolved existing habits which often work well for them (Hobbiss et al, 2020). But professional development can make a difference. Last year, a meta-analysis reviewing the effects of professional development programmes

was published (Fletcher-Wood and Zuccollo, 2020). It found that, on average, participating in a professional development programme makes a similar difference to student learning as having a teacher with a decade's experience (as opposed to a new one). Professional development was a lot cheaper than other ways to improve pupil outcomes such as one-to-one tutoring. Importantly, professional development does not only help teachers get better, it seems to help them enjoy their job more. Participating in a professional development programme can significantly reduce the chances a teacher will leave the school and given it is estimated that every teacher resignation costs a school – on average – around £12,500 (in advertising, recruiting, training and so on) professional development could be a key route to improving teacher retention (Fletcher-Wood and Zuccollo, 2020).

It's clear that effective professional development makes a difference to pupils and to teachers. But when it comes to designing and implementing professional development within a trust structure, where do we start?



## 2. Effective professional development: what it isn't

In recent years, a 'consensus' had developed around what makes for effective professional development (e.g. Hill et al, 2013). Various researchers have argued for a combination of characteristics, which tends to include:

- Subject-specificity
- Collaboration
- A sustained duration
- Active learning
- External expertise
- Teacher buy-in

In an important review paper published in 2020, Sims and Fletcher-Wood challenge this view, highlighting that there are instances of professional development programmes which have adopted all these characteristics

but had not succeeded in improving teaching. They go on to explain why. First, the studies which researchers examined to derive these characteristics were small, dated, and not sufficiently robust to allow strong conclusions. Secondly, within the research cited, it is not always clear what specifically is causing the impact: knowing that, for example, many successful professional development programmes involve collaboration, does not tell us that collaboration causes their success. To do this we need to be able to connect evidence of impact with identifiable evidence of what specifically is causing it.



### 3. Characteristics of effective professional development

A small but growing body of research identifies a set of 'active ingredients' or 'mechanisms' as the causal component in professional development, i.e., it tells us exactly what (about the professional development experience) is actually having impact. A recent paper by the EEF (2021) examines the mechanisms involved in effective (defined as having impact upon pupil outcomes) professional development. The project identified 14 mechanisms which the authors define as 'empirically evidenced general principles about how people learn and change their practice' (EEF, 2021, p4).

The report groups these mechanisms into four categories and report that professional development programmes which incorporate at least one mechanism from each category are three times more likely to have an impact on pupil standardised test scores. The authors conclude that it is the mechanisms within programmes, rather than a form of professional development (like instructional coaching, lesson study or teacher communities), that makes the difference. For trusts and their teachers, designing or adopting programmes that have been constructed with these mechanisms in mind is important. The report's authors highlight some statistical uncertainty in their results and the report – as a meta-analysis of existing research – only identifies mechanisms

that are already present within the literature, it's not to say that there aren't others we don't yet know about. More work is now needed to exemplify the mechanisms in practice, to prevent the sorts of lethal mutations we know happen so often in education.

As well as growing our understanding of what mechanisms of professional development are effective, we also know that the conditions in which teachers work, and professional development takes place are also critical. When focusing on the 'what' and 'how' of professional development, there is a danger we might overlook the conditions within which it takes place, which research suggests are just as important (Kraft and Papay, 2014). The conditions in a school can lead to any CPD-related activity being viewed as developmental or threatening depending on how they are experienced. Professional development will be most effective in a school culture where the participating individual feels supported, valued and trusted, where the purpose of the professional development is clear and aligns with the individual's goals, and where the school (and leaders) have thought carefully about how to protect the time needed to engage in professional development.

## 4. Barriers to effective Professional Development

Whilst it is heartening to better understand what it is about professional development that makes it more likely to be effective, there is much to be done to tether this research to the reality of life in schools. Schools are complex environments, and those working in schools are often 'time poor'. At the same time, we know that significant capacity and influence over the conditions within which professional development is implemented are fundamental to its success. These sorts of tensions can make implementation of high-quality professional development for all teachers really challenging.

Individual schools, for instance might have a high degree of influence over the school environment – the conditions – but maybe limited resources and expertise to ensure what is being delivered meets the needs of all their staff. Conversely, an external CPD provider might provide high quality programme materials but has little influence over

how their suggested approaches might be implemented in settings where conditions are not optimal, for example, teachers have insufficient protected time to meet the demands of the programme.

Day and Taneva (2021) write that: 'School Trusts...and their leadership, occupy a unique position, by virtue of their ability to influence directly the consistency, quality, and robustness of their pupils' education over a range of schools in the Trust' (p41). With this potential to provide capacity and also the ability to control the conditions in which teachers work and professional development takes place, trusts are well placed to mitigate some of the common challenges associated with professional development.



## 5. What can trusts and trust leaders do to enable high quality professional development?

Each trust has its own operating model and relationships with its schools and there are many ways in which trusts can use these to catalyse teacher learning through professional development.

The following case studies provide some concrete examples of how trusts can optimise professional development for their teachers by:

- Adding and building **capacity** for teacher development, for example through provision of expertise and supportive central functions.
- Positively influencing the **conditions and culture** in which teachers work and professional development takes place, increasing the likelihood of coherence with school priorities and impact.

### Case Studies

#### Adding and building capacity

##### Encourage and support (facilitate) schools to develop coherent professional development programmes

Across the 39 Ark schools, regular network days bring disciplinary communities together. Subject leaders – both primary and secondary – meet frequently, to analyse pupil attainment, shape the network days and refine the shared curriculum frameworks and resources.

##### **Ark Schools**

Dixons Academies Trust run cross cutting teams across the trust, for things like safeguarding or curriculum, where everyone in similar positions in the trust comes together to share good practice, make decisions together about aspects of their work – curriculum for example - which is then shared back with the trust.

##### **Dixons Academies Trust**

##### Provide the expertise schools need to help improve teaching

Advantage Schools ensures coherence in curriculum planning by sharing knowledge and expertise across phases. It is important that teachers in every year group understand what they are building on and towards.

Advantage Schools benefits further by drawing from the pool of specialists in either the central team or another school in the trust. This supports school improvement, as staff pursue sustained development and training to enhance provision.

##### **Advantage Schools**

**Work to develop a shared understanding, language and mental model of effective teaching and use this to underpin all professional development that takes place across the trust**

Advantage Schools has a professional learning curriculum across the trust, which is the entitlement of all teachers. All new teaching staff are enrolled onto a centrally delivered induction programme, which includes a module on curriculum. Advantage also offer courses for middle and senior leaders, which builds on and enhances the core offer. This means schools can trust their staff have a shared knowledge base without re-delivering content year after year, and their own professional development plans can focus on school priorities and subject development.

***Advantage Schools***

Dixons Academies Trust over communicate everything. They do that through induction, through re-induction after each holiday, they have written 'what to dos', a narrative or video for what they expect everything to look like. These are either focussed on culture routines or instruction routines, they create a shared understanding and language around the meaning of excellence, what it looks like for them.

***Dixons Academies Trust***

**Offer central support to increase capacity of school leaders to focus on improving teaching**

As a start-up school we benefitted enormously from the trust because we were able to take so many of their ideas and now we are the ones supporting new and establishing schools within the trust. Much of this is focussed on professional development: we often have curriculum leaders who are new to the trust coming to visit us to speak to heads of department here to see how we are implementing the curriculum.

***Dixons Academies Trust***



## Influencing the conditions and culture

### Influence schools to ensure teachers have the time and support to build their expertise

[A] key step that Ark Schools has taken to build disciplinary communities is to work with principals to ensure that the crucial leadership support is there for disciplinary communities to flourish. One of the ways we have done this is by establishing expectations across all our secondary schools, that dedicated time is timetabled each week for teachers to collaborate with their colleagues and prepare for the lessons ahead. This is an important time for teachers to really immerse themselves in the subject matter of their lessons.

#### ***Ark Schools***

Dixons Academies Trust has a very open-door culture, every week everybody receives low-stakes feedback on their performance including a success and next step which is updated on a performance tracker. The tracker forms the basis of a coaching session based on an instructional coaching model.

#### ***Dixons Academies Trust***

### Provide the time teachers need to engage in professional development

Advantage Schools prioritises carving out time and encouraging teachers to access on subject-specific professional development, be this through sessions led by Heads of Department, collaborative work across our schools or engaging with subject associations and the wider subject community.

#### ***Advantage Schools***

### Provide the environment and support which schools and teachers need to experiment with their practice and keep getting better

A problem we face is that of never reaching perfection. Therefore, we accept that curriculum work is iterative: our school systems promote constant review and refinement. A further barrier we face is protecting teachers' time to prioritise curriculum work. To mitigate for this, we sustain dialogue between teachers and leaders and remain alert to creeping workload. For as long as we consider curriculum work to be a high-leverage activity, we make difficult decisions around things we are not going to do.

#### ***Advantage Schools***

Because of the culture we've created, we're able to find the time we need to support professional development. We run deliberate practice sessions two mornings a week and because of the culture in the school we're able to facilitate large, whole year group sessions with a very small number of staff so that the rest of the staff can take part in sessions.

#### ***Dixons Academies Trust***

A growing body of evidence tells us that effective professional development can support teacher improvement which in turn, impacts positively on both pupil outcomes and a range of other measures. Being a school trust in and of itself is no guarantee of providing more effective professional development, however this paper argues that two key levers, **capacity** (resources and expertise) and the ability to control the **conditions and culture** within schools, allow trusts the ability to overcome common barriers to effective teacher development. As the case studies illustrate, trusts and their leaders can play a valuable role in creating and improving the conditions for effective teaching across their schools.

Steve Rollett writes that 'school trusts are structures with the potential to build and mobilise knowledge pertaining to school improvement' (Rollett, 2021, p3). If school improvement relies upon improvements in the quality of teaching, then educator professional development is a serious priority for the system. This paper has highlighted some of the ways in which trusts can leverage their potential for improving professional development with the aim of raising pupil outcomes and tackling educational inequality.

# References

- Burgess, S., Davies, N.M., Slater, H. (2011) *Do Teachers Matter? Measuring the Variation in Teacher Effectiveness in England. Oxford Bulletin of Economics and Statistics October 2012* 74(5): 629-45
- Chetty R., Friedman J.N., Rockoff J.E. (2013) *Measuring the Impacts of Teachers II: Teacher Value-Added and Student Outcomes in Adulthood. NBER Working Paper* 19424.
- Day and Taneva (2021) *System leadership in disruptive times: robust policy making and enactment in School Trusts. University of Nottingham and Confederation of School Trusts. [https://cstuk.org.uk/assets/pdfs/QR\\_system\\_leadership\\_in\\_disruptive\\_times\\_report\\_2021.pdf](https://cstuk.org.uk/assets/pdfs/QR_system_leadership_in_disruptive_times_report_2021.pdf)* 
- Fletcher-Wood, H., and Zuccollo, J., (2020) *The effects of high quality professional development on teachers and students: A rapid review and meta-analysis. Wellcome Report, <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/effects-high-quality-professional-development>* 
- Hill, H., Beisiegel, M., & Jacob, R., (2013). *Professional development research: consensus, crossroads, and challenges. Educational Researcher*
- Hobbiss, M., Sims, S., & Allen, R. (2020). *Habit formation limits growth in teacher effectiveness: A review of converging evidence from neuroscience and social science. Review of Education. <https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1002/rev3.3226>* 
- Jackson, K., Rockoff, J., and Staiger, D. (2014) *Teacher Effects and Teacher-Related Policies. Annual Review of Economics 2014* 6:1, 801-825
- Rollett, Steven, (2021) *Communities of Improvement: School Trusts as fields of practice. Confederation of School Trusts.*
- Sims, S. & Fletcher-Wood, H. (2020) *Identifying the characteristics of effective teacher professional development: a critical review. School Effectiveness and School Improvement*
- The Education Endowment Foundation: Sims, S., Fletcher-Wood, H., O'Mara-Eves, A., Cottingham, S., Stansfield, C., Van Herwegen, J., Anders, J. (2021) *What are the characteristics of effective teacher professional development? A systematic review and meta-analysis*
- The Sutton Trust (2011) *Improving the impact of teachers on pupil achievement in the UK: interim findings. Sutton Trust <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk//30348>* 
- William, D., (2016) *Leadership for teacher learning: creating a culture where all teachers improve so that all students succeed. Learning Sciences International*