

# The three strands of leadership

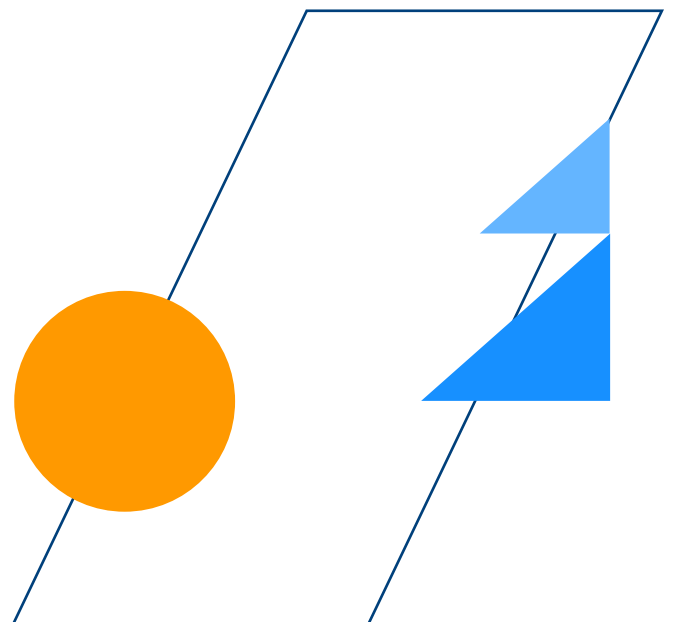
Building strong schools and trusts through education,  
business and governance leadership

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**Insight**

A research study by the  
National Governance Association



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The National Governance Association (NGA) is the national membership association for governors, trustees and governance professionals in England's state schools and trusts.

We empower those in school and trust governance with valuable resources, expert support and e-learning. Together, we're raising standards and shaping stronger governance to ensure every pupil can thrive today – and tomorrow.

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The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) is a leading professional body and trade union representing more than 25,000 members across the UK. Our members include trust leaders, headteachers, principals, vice-principals, deputy and assistant headteachers, and business leaders, of state-funded and independent schools and colleges. They are responsible for the education of more than four million young people in more than 90% of secondary schools and colleges, and in an increasing number of primary schools.

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The Institute of School Business Leadership (ISBL) is a nationally recognised professional body. ISBL is committed to the continuous improvement and professional development of all those involved in school business leadership.

We act to ensure the suitability, sufficiency and sustainability of the school business profession, and we advocate for its enhanced status.

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“This report reinforces why collaboration across governance, education, and business leadership is not only important but fundamental to a well-functioning system. Effective governance brings strategic clarity, ethical stewardship and accountability; building foundations that enable educational and operational leadership to thrive. When these elements work in genuine partnership, the system is stronger, more coherent, and better placed to deliver for pupils and communities. We urge boards, executive leaders, and school business professionals to engage with this work together, recognising governance as an equal partner and critical ally in shaping sustainable, high-quality provision.”

**Emma Balchin, Chief Executive, NGA**

“This report, grounded in Stephen Morales’s research on barriers to joined-up leadership, highlights why governance, education, and business must work in concert. Effective leadership aligns operational capacity, teaching quality, and strategic purpose; when these strands fracture, silos emerge, and educational outcomes suffer. We encourage school and trust leaders to reflect as teams, embed collaborative decision-making, and review leadership approaches to ensure distributed practice that strengthens success for all.”

**Bethan Cullen, Deputy CEO, ISBL**

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This report is the result of a valued partnership between three national organisations representing the core strands of leadership across the English education system: the National Governance Association (NGA), the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) and the Institute of School Business Leadership (ISBL).

We would like to express our sincere thanks to all those who contributed their expertise and insight to this report. In particular, we acknowledge the significant contributions of **Sam Henson**, Deputy Chief Executive, NGA; **Emma Harrison**, Business Leadership Specialist, ASCL; and **Bethan Cullen**, Deputy Chief Executive, ISBL, whose leadership, collaboration and commitment to sector-wide improvement have been instrumental in shaping this work. Their collective vision underpins the shared principles and recommendations set out in this report.

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# Introduction

"Leadership is pluralistic. It flourishes in diverse settings and in multiple forms. Leadership is not a zero-sum game... A community can have many leaders."

Ronald Heifetz, 'Leadership Without Easy Answers'

Navigating the English education system in 2025 is much harder than fifty, thirty or even ten years ago. Distinct school operating models have proliferated within a complex sector. The evolution of increasingly sophisticated organisational structures has transformed our understanding of traditional school leadership models.

This report has a simple premise. It looks beyond the confines of structural boundaries and sets out a holistic, sector-wide approach to leadership in the English education system – shared principles which can then be implemented and adapted according to structure, phase and wider context. It begins from the understanding that there are three recognised interdependent but distinct strands of leadership within the education sector:

- **Governance leadership** including strategic vision, oversight and accountability
- **Education leadership** including organisational management, pedagogy and school improvement
- **Business leadership** including operations, human resources, estates management, procurement, technology and finance

The national representatives of these three strands have come together to produce this report, demonstrating our recognition for the integral part each area plays in effective school delivery and improving outcomes.

This report aims to:

1. Examine the distinct roles and responsibilities of the three leadership strands
2. Highlight their critical interdependencies and the benefits of cohesive leadership
3. Analyse the common barriers and pitfalls that cause leadership fragmentation
4. Explore interventions to foster joined-up leadership

The idea of the three strands of leadership is not a new concept, but it rarely receives the same emphasis as the singular leadership of headteachers or CEOs. In April 2022, ISBL CEO Stephen Morales published research exploring the barriers to joined-up leadership in education. The findings revealed significant organisational challenges including headteachers and CEOs struggling to delegate responsibilities they have traditionally managed, while school and trust business professionals reported feeling marginalised from critical discussions where their expertise could provide substantial value. The research suggested that effective decision making requires collaboration from stakeholders across governance, pedagogy and business functions, with an essential emphasis on valuing professional diversity and alternative perspectives.

## A leadership definition

In schools and trusts, there are multiple layers of leadership – these go far beyond the top tier leadership strands explored in this report. This paper does not attempt to define leadership, nor to limit it, but it does seek to shift the narrative when looking at executive and strategic leadership in schools and trusts. Complex problems often require complex solutions, and this will require wide engagement. The narrative discussed here can therefore be seen as the interaction between the three distinct yet crucial strands of organisational leadership.

## Time for a narrative change?

These three strands have rarely been discussed in a joined-up fashion, instead being considered as separate functions. Heads had long been expected to act as a high-profile 'jack of all trades' prior to the investment in the professionalisation of school business leadership under Estelle Morris MP during the 2000s. A 'hero head' mentality had driven excessive pressure on lone individuals who were expected to facilitate a position as experts in HR, finance, strategic vision and even governance, on top of teaching and learning expertise.

While traditionally most heads, and since 2010, multi academy trust (MAT) CEOs, have come from a teaching background, there has been notable departure from this development pathway. Despite more people from different working backgrounds, areas of expertise and even sectors taking on the role of leading educational institutions, even today, little professional leadership development is focused on anything other than teaching and learning. The fundamental and crucial areas of wider operations and business, including finance and governance, are all too often missed off the leadership development curriculum. The unsustainable nature of this approach has been brought into sharp focus with the additional challenges of leading trusts and federations with multiple schools.

In a mixed and complex economy, any continuing reliance on headteachers as sole leaders creates unsustainable demands that neglect the complementary expertise needed in areas such as finance, HR, estates management and governance – expertise that most education-trained leaders simply do not possess. Not only is it often the case that the individual lacks the sufficient knowledge to provide expert business leadership, but it intensifies workload and wellbeing challenges and adds to the enormous pressure of being the sole point of accountability.

Without an extended focus on robust governance and business excellence, we risk creating a system that is both over-centralised and under-accountable, responsive to political whims but disconnected from community needs. Research by Education Support (2024) reveals that 73% of school leaders report experiencing symptoms of poor mental health due to workload pressures, with 67% citing responsibilities outside their pedagogical expertise as significant stressors. Add the benefits of multiple perspectives and meaningful oversight, and the case for a shared framework of leadership is clear.

## An evolving profile of educational leaders

The traditional assumption that educational leaders must emerge from teaching backgrounds is being fundamentally challenged by the realities of modern school and trust leadership. Increasingly, MATs are appointing CEOs who bring expertise from corporate, public sector or school business backgrounds. This shift represents more than a staffing trend; it validates the core premise of the three strands model and highlights why specialised educational expertise must be embedded at senior leadership level alongside, rather than subordinate to, executive authority.

Major academy trusts have recruited CEOs with backgrounds in management consulting, local government, healthcare administration and financial services. Others have promoted school business leaders – chief financial officers (CFOs) or chief operating officers (COOs) – into CEO roles. This demographic shift reflects the growing recognition that modern educational organisations require different leadership capabilities than individual schools. Managing budgets from £20million to even £100million, overseeing multiple sites, navigating complex stakeholder relationships, and ensuring compliance across numerous regulatory frameworks demands skills more commonly found in corporate or public sector leadership.

Importantly, these appointments do not replace educational expertise but rather acknowledge its specialisation in the academy trust system. Non-educationally trained CEOs consistently emphasise their dependence on strong educational leadership within their senior teams. They recognise that their business acumen enables the trust to function effectively, but educational outcomes are reliant on deep pedagogical knowledge and school improvement experience. This creates a natural partnership model where business-trained executives provide organisational leadership, while education specialists drive academic strategy: precisely the integration the three strands model advocates.

## Embracing a new paradigm

The three strands of leadership offer a new paradigm that demands leadership capabilities transcend traditional models. Pedagogical mastery must be complemented by operational maturity and the foundation of sound governance principles and practice. With such profound challenges around budgets and workforce, the right curriculum and skilled teachers are no longer sufficient to guarantee success. The operational management of a school or trust and its culture as an employer have never been more significant. The National Audit Office (2024) identifies that schools facing financial sustainability challenges show common characteristics, including “insufficient integration between curriculum planning and financial management, and a lack of professional business leadership at senior levels.”

This report therefore engages with the challenge of how to construct this integrated leadership model and ensure its success in achieving institutional excellence. How can the three strands combine to produce coherent educational leadership which is collaborative, accountable, shared and distributed? Leadership must be understood as spanning multiple leaders rather than vested in a single individual. Research shows that when leadership responsibilities are strategically distributed across educational, governance and business domains, organisational coherence and effectiveness increase significantly.

## The interconnected leadership ecosystem

The academy trust sector has led to innovation and diversity in education leadership models. Some trends are clear, such as the typical trust central teams focusing on multiple schools, but the diversity of approaches is also palpable. There are a vast array of different approaches and goals, and therefore, a range of leadership models within the sector in 2025.

Our view is that the leadership requirement for all school types can be summarised by three equally critical, yet not equally recognised, domains. These strands are indispensable, providing the mutually reinforcing leadership to drive schools and trusts towards sustainable success. Each strand, while implemented with significant nuances across the sector, come with a fairly consistent set of sector-wide characteristics:

**Governance leadership:** Sets the strategic direction while serving as the guardian of organisational purpose, providing robust accountability and offering critical external perspectives, support and challenge. Effective governance combines strategic thinking with confident evidence-based decision-making, applying oversight with clarity of purpose. Governance leadership ensures the organisation remains true to its core mission while adapting to evolving educational contexts and embedding stakeholder voices into decision-making processes.

**Educational leadership:** At its core, educational leadership encompasses both the direct leadership of teaching and learning and the broader school improvement agenda that drives mission effectiveness. The focus on driving educational standards and shaping the organisational model of teaching and learning is fundamentally shared across the strands, but this strand carries the weight of its implementation and necessary interventions. This strand translates shared strategic vision into operational teaching, learning and assessment reality, balancing immediate educational priorities with long-term institutional development.

**Business leadership:** Includes trust CFOs, COOs, HR directors, estates managers, IT leaders, procurement specialists and school business leaders who ensure operational excellence, regulatory compliance and strategic resource management in service of the institution's academic mission. This strand exhibits the greatest variability in role recognition and definition, qualification requirements and organisational influence across the sector, reflected in considerable differences in status, remuneration and decision-making authority within different organisational structures.

Isolated from one another, each strand operates with limitations – governance becomes disconnected from practical realities, education leaders proceed without operational stability and strategic buy-in, and business decisions occur devoid of pedagogical context. Only through purposeful integration can schools and trusts harmonise strategic vision with operational discipline and academic excellence.

# 1. Governance leadership

## Strategic vision, oversight and accountability

Governance should not be viewed as merely an oversight function, but as a specialised dimension of educational leadership – one that provides the strategic architecture within which all strands of leadership flourish. Organisations achieving sustainable improvement share a sophisticated understanding of governance as a leadership strand, with clear role differentiation alongside collaborative strategic alignment.

Effective governance connects educational institutions to their communities and serves as the primary form of internal accountability, safeguarding the institution's mission, values and sustainability beyond immediate pressures or short-term goals. NGA (2023) findings reveal that "effective governance provides strategic guardianship of the institution's mission beyond immediate operational demands. Boards with the greatest impact report high levels of interaction with both educational and business elements of executive leadership, creating triangulated perspectives that strengthen institutional decision-making." Governing boards can then pull required levers where problems are identified including, in extreme cases, directing or replacing the other two leadership strands.

Recent global challenges have further highlighted the value strong governance delivers as part of a cohesive theory of leadership. During times of crisis, governance provides the steady hand that keeps institutions focused on their core purpose while adapting to new circumstances. By bringing diverse professional expertise and external perspectives, governance complements the specialist knowledge of business and educational leaders with broader strategic insights.

## The board's leadership remit

At its highest function, an institution's governance operates as an independent but deeply integrated element, working symbiotically with the wider executive leadership team. The governance strand encompasses:

- strategic vision and culture
- stewarding resourced annual plans that align with the long-term roadmap
- holding executive leaders accountable for implementing approved plans and targets
- monitoring organisational risk by determining the approach to risk and opportunity
- understanding and balancing the interests of all parties
- approving engagement and communication strategies

Together, this comprehensive approach ensures accessibility and accountability to all stakeholders, creating the foundation upon which strategic educational leadership and business leadership can effectively operate.

Good governance requires a sophisticated understanding of how the other two leadership strands work in practice: having an awareness of the operational without interfering in the day to day.

## Bringing governance together with other leadership strands

For governance to fulfil its potential as a meaningful leadership strand, board composition must be considered. While many skills are valued, most boards agree that educational and business expertise are essential for making well-informed, sector-informed decisions. This is not to assume that the right composition guarantees success, but the richness of the challenge, support and understanding will be heightened. By bringing together governance expertise with educational and business skills, boards are better equipped to understand the interplay between oversight and leadership, and to steer schools and trusts towards sustainable excellence.

Striking the right balance of expertise while building a cohesive governing board culture with strong community ties is one of the primary challenges facing schools and trusts today.

## 2. Strategic educational leadership

### Advancing education and school improvement

Leadership in education is both demanding and indispensable; organisations rely on their leadership capability to establish the conditions for success. Research supports the idea that even in distributed leadership models, clear, identifiable leaders remain essential.

Regardless of school structure, pedagogical excellence and school improvement know-how supports the foundational mission and purpose of schools. Whether single school heads, CEOs, or directors of education, these leaders draw upon deep mastery of the curriculum and teaching practices, while applying leadership skills they have developed over time. Their professionalism and qualifications form the foundation of our school system.

There is no doubt that the commitment and ability of these individuals can be one of, if not the most impactful mechanisms for delivering life-changing pupil outcomes. Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2020) demonstrate that "School leadership accounts for up to 27% of variation in student outcomes when leadership influences are directly and indirectly traced, second only to classroom teaching among school-related factors."

Whereas governance oversees the strategic direction, education leaders bear responsibility for translating that long-term vision into actionable plans. As the institutional figure head, strategic educational leaders shape the internal culture, while being the accountable individual for the management of their organisation day-in, day-out. The implications for workload and wellbeing can be significant, especially in the current context where a focus on teaching and learning is often diverted by wider societal challenges. The Department for Education (DfE) School Leadership Workload Survey (2023) found that headteachers spend on average 61% of their time on administrative and operational tasks, leaving insufficient capacity for their core function of leading teaching and learning. That is why educational leaders rely on the assistance of business leaders to ensure proper and sufficient resourcing, and the support and scrutiny of governance.

## The educational leadership remit

There can be significant diversity in the remits of executive educational leaders depending on their organisation's scale and complexity, and the definition of their individual role. A head of an individual school would have far more operational involvement than the CEO of a large trust.

The spectrum therefore encompasses a staggering breadth of responsibilities.

Educational leaders are often perceived as driving the organisation's passion, expertise and strategies to maximise the life chances of its pupils. However, that endeavour can only succeed when substantiated by governance's navigational direction and business's operational power to marshal the required resources and capabilities. This interdependence also flows in the opposite direction, with education leaders giving operations teams and governance the critical context around academic priorities.

In many respects this is where the idea of Integrated Curriculum and Financial Planning (ICFP) came from – the recognition that pedagogical approaches cannot be alienated from resourcing. Decisions around budgets, staffing, technology infrastructure and estate development are most prudent when accompanied by a visceral understanding of the pedagogical implications. Likewise, governance is more effective when closely connected to classroom-level realities, enabling boards to shape strategy with a clear understanding of educational context.

Ultimately, the most successful schools and trusts do have excellent education leaders, but their success does not stem from operating in siloed brilliance, instead through their synchronisation with governance and business leadership. Transformational pupil impact results from working models where all three leadership strands operate as symbiotic multipliers.

## 3. Business leadership

### Delivering the resources to make vision a reality

While academic priorities define a school or trust's ultimate purpose, achieving those aspirations require a foundation of operational discipline, resource optimisation and adherence to rigorous governance standards. More than just budgeting and accounting, robust business leadership plays an instrumental role in responsibly deploying limited resources to maximise impact.

As the Institute of School Business Leadership (2023) acknowledges, "school business professionals are no longer simply 'back office' support staff but strategic leaders whose expertise in resource optimisation, compliance, and operational efficiency is essential to educational success." As trusts, in particular, gain increasing autonomy over decisions like staffing, procurement, technology and asset management, business professionals have ascended into mission-critical leadership roles. They are now central to ensuring regulatory compliance, sustainability and strategic alignment of operational spending in service of each institution's academic vision.

However, despite its importance, business leadership is still neglected in many schools and trusts. Common pitfalls include paying little attention to professional development, and insufficient appraisal. In an ISBL and Hays workforce survey, 59% of respondents said they had no dialogue with their employer on career development and progression. The exclusion of business leadership from key strategic conversations at board or senior leadership level is also a concern in some schools and trusts.

## **The business leadership remit**

The business leadership cohort encompasses a diverse range of specialisms crucial to institutional success. COOs orchestrate complex operational ecosystems spanning multiple schools and sites. HR directors shape organisational culture through recruitment strategies, professional development programmes and wellbeing initiatives that directly impact educational outcomes and staff retention. Estates managers create safe, inspiring learning environments through strategic asset management, ensure buildings comply with health and safety regulations, and optimise energy efficiency.

IT leaders enable digital transformation while safeguarding data, implementing cyber security measures, and ensuring technology enhances rather than hinders learning. Procurement specialists maximise value from every pound spent through strategic sourcing and contract management. Marketing and communications professionals build school reputation and community engagement. Finance directors ensure long-term sustainability through robust financial planning and risk management.

In smaller schools, these wide-ranging responsibilities may be held by one person operating as a school business leader or operations manager, whereas in large organisations they will usually be shared across a team of specialists, each bringing deep expertise in their domain. Business leaders within the sector are increasingly multidimensional experts, although the trust model has allowed this function to expand to specialists within a wider business team. This operational excellence spans workforce development, premises optimisation, technology integration, and stakeholder engagement – far beyond traditional financial management.

## **The role of ICFP - the three strands collaborating**

The focus on a school or trust's operational efficiency and sustainability has never been more important. ICFP exemplifies how the three strands work together effectively. The DfE has, over several years, strengthened its emphasis on the links between ICFP, effective resource management and efficient operational management.

ICFP operates across three interconnected strands: people (staffing, professional development, and workforce planning), estate (premises, facilities, and capital infrastructure), and curriculum (educational delivery and learning resources). These strands are not isolated siloes but interconnected elements that must be planned and managed holistically. For example, decisions about estate improvements must consider their impact on both teaching capacity and staffing requirements, while curriculum innovations may drive both professional development needs and technology infrastructure demands.

Business leaders use ICFP to prepare and present key metrics across all three strands as evidence for strategic recommendations. This partnership mindset demonstrates collaborative leadership in action. For capital projects, educational leaders guide specifications based on curriculum requirements, estates teams provide technical expertise on premises optimisation and compliance requirements, while governing boards set financing parameters. In staffing decisions, HR professionals work with educational leaders on competency requirements while considering how workforce deployment affects both estate utilisation and resource allocation across subjects and year groups.

## **Operational excellence**

Effective business leadership in schools and trusts determines how fully the "operational engine room" is functioning. The presence of impactful business leadership translates strategic ambition and academic aspiration into executable, sustainable realities. The sector has sometimes been shy in celebrating business excellence in the system, perhaps in part because neither schools nor trusts are businesses, although few would disagree that they are increasingly required to perform as such.

Operational excellence has been defined as "the cultural transformation and technical enablement of an organisation that allows it to perform optimally and achieve its strategic objectives". This vision puts continuous improvement and high-quality service at the forefront of the approach to running schools and trusts and is reliant on the business leadership strand being both fit for purpose and innovative in its approach. Getting this right allows schools to focus on education, but practice remains decidedly mixed in the sector.

The three strands model of leadership provides a significant opportunity to raise the prominence of business leadership within education and recognise the enormous value that skilled business leaders across all operational domains can provide.

# **4. Joined-up leadership**

## **Constructing the new leadership model**

The interdependencies of governance, educational and business leadership are evident. Each strand's potential is amplified by a vision of symbiotic leadership which joins these three strands into one unifying force. The need for joined-up strands of leadership becoming the status quo is validated by vast swathes of research indicating a gradual shift from a simpler view centred on an individual leader. Governance provides the guiding mind with the ability to articulate vision and values. Educational leaders forge the academic strategies to uphold that vision. Business leaders enable those strategies by optimising the usage of scarce resources across all operational domains.

The reality is we have some way to go before the sector fully embraces this new vision of leadership at an organisational level. We also must acknowledge there are other debates to be had on how we define leadership, and what that leadership is centred upon. There is a risk that too narrow a focus on organisational leadership means we become insular and inward looking. This demonstrates a distinct leadership dilemma for organisations that bring schools together, across multiple sites and communities under one leadership structure.

Ultimately, fragmentation between the pivotal strands of governance, educational and business leadership remains a recurring theme across the sector – affecting both maintained schools and academy trusts. When these leadership strands are disconnected, the pitfalls range from the calamitous breakdown of strategic misalignment to the insidious costs of working at cross-purposes. Every expenditure decision, technological investment, estates development and staffing plan achieves maximum impact only when filtered through integrated leadership.

## **An approach to joined-up leadership**

Effective integration of the three leadership strands requires deliberate attention to communication, culture and shared accountability. This begins with:

### **Establishing unified vision and values**

- Creating an institutional vision, mission, and values centred on pupil-centric priorities
- Using unifying language and titles that signal integrated leadership
- Ensuring all strands understand and champion the same strategic objectives

### **Building transparent communication**

- Establishing feedback loops that connect every strand
- Creating regular cross-strand meetings with structured agendas
- Developing open information flow between governance, educational, and business leaders
- Using unified institutional language that values all leadership contributions equally

### **Implementing shared accountability**

- Developing consistent performance metrics spanning all three domains
- Ensuring fair and ethical compensation for all executive leadership strands based on organisational impact
- Creating integrated strategic planning processes that synthesise proposals from each leadership area
- Building joint accountability for institutional outcomes

### **Developing talent strategies**

- Cultivating professionals who understand the roles and value of each leadership strand
- Providing training in stakeholder engagement, collaboration, and systems thinking
- Creating intentional succession pipelines from all three domains
- Offering professional development opportunities across leadership boundaries

## Practical implementation steps

Organisations can assess and develop their integrated approach through these key steps:

1. **Start the conversation** – Have the individuals on your board, education and business leadership teams met to discuss how leadership works in your organisation?
2. **Establish foundation** – Create an integrated leadership structure with clear roles while fostering a holistic identity that values all strands
3. **Create formal mechanisms** – Develop structured processes for cross-strand collaboration in strategic planning and decision-making
4. **Build mutual understanding** – Provide training that helps each strand appreciate the expertise and constraints of the others
5. **Enhance organisational understanding** – Demonstrate unity through clear communications and integrated ways of working
6. **Align performance frameworks** – Ensure success metrics reflect the interdependent nature of the three leadership strands
7. **Foster collaborative culture** – Use language, recognition systems and communication practices that reinforce shared leadership

Joined-up leadership requires commitment from across the organisation to the principle that sustainable excellence emerges from the integration of governance accountability, educational expertise, and business acumen. This approach moves beyond traditional hierarchies to create leadership ecosystems where each strand amplifies the effectiveness of the others in service of pupil outcomes.

## Looking ahead

The education system in England remains in a state of flux with the anticipation of a government white paper, new Ofsted framework and the implementation of curriculum review. The need for rational, cohesive leadership models across governance, educational and business functions has never been clearer. However, long-standing norms pose significant barriers to change, and widespread adoption is far from guaranteed.

To overcome these barriers, central direction is needed rather than simply relying on individual organisations. Whether schools remain maintained, join trusts, or develop new partnership models with local authorities, the three strands principle remains relevant. The white paper should recognise that effective leadership integration can occur within various structural arrangements. More robust and clear leadership pathways that reflect the changing face of the sector need to evolve if this new model of leadership is to be fully implemented. Examples include pathways that actively certify and reward interdisciplinary expertise, with prospective governors/trustees and multi-disciplined executive leaders all benefiting from a greater understanding and appreciation of the roles of the other leadership strands.

At a national level, bold policy steps may help propel schools and trusts towards embracing integrated approaches. While revising statutory guidance and codes to promote interdisciplinary leadership recognition and practice remain an option, the organic winning of hearts and minds through an honest look at the evidence would be far more appropriate. Developing joined-up leadership standards, akin to existing headteacher standards, or improving how we approach leadership through the NPQ framework, could shift mindsets.

It is important to recognise that there will be the need to overcome ideological resistance in some quarters of the sector, especially from those used to a particular style of leadership. The message must be that the three strands is a liberating vision of leadership; it broadens accountability and frees leaders to focus on the areas where they can add the most value, helping to tackle issues with workload and wellbeing.

## Conclusion

The transition towards interdisciplinary, joined-up leadership models that combine strategic educational leadership, business and operational leadership, and governance leadership represents a pivotal inflection point for England's schools and academy trusts. Greater recognition of cohesive leadership has the power to unlock new levels of organisational optimisation.

This joined-up approach transcends structural boundaries, offering principles that can be applied across the entire mixed economy sector, which promotes collective leadership understanding rather than individual capability. It creates a greater level of accountability and provides assurances that the sector can collectively embrace a more equitable and pragmatic approach to organisational leadership, with the respective professions valued, discipline-focused innovations encouraged, but siloes removed.

The challenges facing the sector and its individual organisations cannot be addressed through reliance on one dominant voice, expertise or mindset.

Leadership as coordinated patterns of distributed influence will help reduce the long-held burden of isolated leadership roles in the sector, which have in recent years been shown too often to come at too great a personal cost. Perhaps more profoundly, this integrated approach challenges the historical paradigms that have long segmented education's operational layers.

By placing pupils and their futures at the centre of every leadership decision across each of the three disciplines, the integration of informed, perceptive governance visionaries, inspirational, imaginative educators and enterprising, vigilant business practitioners becomes not just strategically sound but an ethical imperative.

This approach prioritises a moral purpose to educational leadership, where organisational improvement is accessed through an emphasis on simplicity and pragmatism, and where isolated decision-making gives way to internal coherence at all levels of the organisation. The system must therefore finally disconnect from any traditional siloed approaches that remain, in order to embrace a new, multi-profession leadership ecology.

The children and young people in our schools deserve leadership that harnesses every available insight, expertise and perspective in service of their success. The three strands model provides a framework for achieving this integration. The question that remains is not whether joined-up leadership works – the evidence is clear that it does – but whether we have the collective will to implement it.

The time for action is now.

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