

# **Driving productivity and effectiveness in schools and trusts: Why organisational ingredients matter most**

## **Abstract**

This paper argues that the only sustainable way to improve productivity and operational effectiveness in schools and multi-academy trusts (MATs) in England is through deliberate attention to the core ingredients of organisational success: culture, people, processes, systems, and data. While policy reform, accountability mechanisms, and funding adjustments often dominate the educational discourse, they remain insufficient if the internal architecture of schools and trusts is weak. Drawing on organisational theory, case studies, and our own research, this paper demonstrates that productivity gains and operational improvements flow from how schools organise themselves and how they invest in their teams' ongoing professional development. To paraphrase Sir Michael Barber, no system or organisation can outperform the quality of its people.

## **Introduction**

The English school system is facing intensifying pressures, including funding constraints, rising pupil needs, workforce shortages, and demands for higher outcomes. Governments often turn to structural reform, curriculum adjustments, or new accountability frameworks as levers of change. However, evidence consistently shows that these interventions yield limited long-term gains without robust organisational foundations.

This paper argues that the key to improving productivity and operational effectiveness lies not in external reform but in cultivating the internal organisational ingredients that allow schools and trusts to thrive. These ingredients – culture, people, processes, systems, and data – are not optional add-ons; they are the determinants of whether resources are translated into impact.

# **The case for organisational ingredients**

## **1 Culture: The bedrock of collective effectiveness**

Culture shapes the shared beliefs, values, and norms that govern behaviour within schools. A positive, mission-driven culture creates alignment across teaching, leadership, and administration.

- High-trust cultures reduce friction, enhance collaboration, and improve staff wellbeing, leading to lower turnover and greater instructional consistency.
- Conversely, toxic or fragmented cultures undermine reform, no matter how well-designed the strategies may be.

As organisational scholar Edgar Schein argues, culture “eats strategy for breakfast.” For schools, this means that even the best curriculum reforms fail without a culture that supports professionalism, innovation, and collective responsibility.

## **2 People: Recruiting, developing, and retaining talent**

Education is a people-centred enterprise. Productivity and effectiveness depend on the quality, capability, motivation and commitment of staff.

- Schools and trusts that invest in professional learning achieve greater instructional quality, operational effectiveness and leadership depth.
- Retention strategies (e.g. career pathways, workload reform, and recognition structures) ensure institutional memory and reduce recruitment costs.
- Trusts that treat staff as their greatest asset, rather than a necessary cost burden, unlock discretionary effort and innovation.

## **3 Processes: Creating efficiency through clarity**

Many schools and trusts operate with ad hoc or inconsistent processes – duplication, miscommunication, and inefficiency proliferate. Robust, streamlined processes are central to productivity.

- Clear processes ensure consistency and reduce wasted time for staff and leaders.
- They enable scaling: what works in one school can be replicated across a trust when processes are documented and shared.
- Efficient processes free leaders to focus on strategy and pedagogy rather than troubleshooting or firefighting.

Process optimisation is not about bureaucratisation; it is about deploying skills on key priorities.

## **4 Systems: The infrastructure of scale**

Systems (financial, technological, and administrative) are the backbone that allows schools and trusts to function smoothly. Without effective systems, organisational energy is drained by operational bottlenecks.

- Strong financial systems enable sustainable resource allocation.
- Technology deployed optimally reduces administrative burdens and enhances teaching and learning.
- The effective use of systems ensures accountability without micromanagement.

Trusts that grow without investing in system coherence often find themselves overwhelmed by the high demand and complexity of requirements. Systems provide the scaffolding for efficiency and resilience.

## **5 Data: Driving insight and decision-making**

In an era of constrained resources, data is the most powerful lever for productivity and effectiveness. However, data must be high-quality, accessible, and actionable.

- Data-driven decision-making allows leaders to allocate resources where they have the greatest impact.
- Transparent use of data builds trust with stakeholders.
- Poor-quality or excessive data collection wastes time and breeds cynicism.

Schools and trusts that embed data literacy and use evidence intelligently outperform those that rely on intuition alone.

## **Why these ingredients matter more than structural reform**

Structural reforms, such as the promotion of MATs, altering governance models, or centralising services, all too often dominate the policy agenda in England. However, structural reform without attention to the organisational ingredients simply reshuffles responsibility without enhancing productivity or outcomes.

A trust with weak culture, poor processes, or inadequate systems will remain ineffective regardless of size or funding. Conversely, schools and trusts that deliberately and very intentionally invest in these organisational ingredients demonstrate resilience, innovation, and consistent improvement even under adverse conditions.

## **Implications for school and trust leaders**

To improve productivity and operational effectiveness, leaders must:

- 1 Prioritise culture-building as a strategic focus, embedding values in daily practice.
- 2 Invest in people through professional development, retention strategies, and distributed leadership.
- 3 Audit and streamline processes, ensuring clarity and reducing duplication.
- 4 Build scalable systems that are robust, user-friendly, and adaptable.
- 5 Develop a culture of intelligent data use, balancing accountability with improvement.

These are not one-off projects but ongoing disciplines of organisational leadership.

## **Conclusion**

The English education system often looks outward, to government policy, inspection frameworks, or funding formulas, for solutions to the productivity and effectiveness challenge.

Yet the most powerful levers lie within schools and trusts themselves. By paying close attention to culture, people, processes, systems, and data, schools can transform not only their operational capacity but also their educational impact.

In short, productivity is an outcome of organisational health. Without it, reforms falter; with it, schools thrive.

Whilst the intention of this paper is not to promote [Operational Excellence](#), it is undeniable that all the ingredients are codified in our unique contextualised [OpEx for Education Framework](#).