

# Flourishing together



A collective vision for the education system

## **Confederation of School Trusts**

The Confederation of School Trusts is the national organisation and sector body for school trusts in England, advocating for, connecting, and supporting executive and governance leaders. Our members are responsible for the education of more than three million young people.

Bringing together trusts from every region and of every size, CST has a strong, strategic presence with access to government and policy makers to drive real change for education on the big issues that matter most.

## **Catholic Education Service**

The Catholic Education Committee was founded by the Vicars-Apostolic of England and Wales in 1847, as the Catholic Poor-School Committee. It is the education agency of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales and represents the collective view of the Bishops on national education policy.

The Catholic Church provides 2,169 schools (including academies, special schools and sixth-form colleges) and four universities in England and Wales. The CES negotiates with the UK and Welsh Governments and other national bodies in order to safeguard and promote Catholic education and to offer a Catholic contribution to English and Welsh educational debates. It seeks to ensure the principles of Catholic teaching are reflected in all aspects of national education policy.

## **National Society for Education (Church of England)**

The National Society for Education was founded in 1811, providing education through Church of England (and also Church in Wales) schools. There are over 4600 Church of England schools, educating over 1 million children. We work with dioceses, school trusts, schools, FE and HE institutions and other sector partners to deliver our three core priorities – Developing Leaders, Shaping Policy and Growing Faith.

The NSE's work is based on the Church of England Vision for Education: Deeply Christian, Serving the Common Good (2016), with its four pillars of Educating for Wisdom, Knowledge & Skills, Hope & Aspiration, Community & Living Well Together and Dignity & Respect. Our vision is for 'Educating for Life in all its Fullness' (John 10.10), which is a holistic and transformational vision of human flourishing for all.

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# Defining our collective narrative

Our education system needs a clear and compelling narrative around which to build over the coming years and decades.

A collective purpose, a shared vision and a uniting concept towards which we focus our time, resources, leadership, energy, expertise and wisdom.

A generous, hospitable table to which all are invited and at which everyone feels welcome.

A shared vision which begins with a core belief in the inherent worth of every child and adult in the system.

We believe our political leaders, schools and school leaders have a foundational question in common – how do children and young people, and those who educate them in our schools flourish? We believe flourishing is both our optimal continuing development, and living well as a human being.

The Confederation of School Trusts, Church of England and Catholic Education Service have come together to set out a collective and hope-filled vision - **that the best unifying concept around which to build the education system for the coming decades is that of *flourishing*** – flourishing children and flourishing adults in flourishing schools.

In this paper we will unpack this vision, its underpinning thinking, and explore a range of shifts for the sector that taking this approach together could involve. While this vision has implications for church schools (which make up around a third of the system), this unifying concept is offered to all schools, those founded in faiths other than Christianity and those not founded in any faith but grounded in secular values. Equally, while it may open particular opportunities for those leading school trusts, it is offered to the whole sector – around which we can all gather, to seek collectively and lead the change we know is needed to enable each and every child we serve to flourish.

We need a core purpose which is the bastion of the **dignity** with which each is treated, the **hope** with which each is instilled, and relational community in which each are located, and the practical **wisdom** with which each is taught.

A vision centred on serving the **common good**, relentlessly prioritising the most **vulnerable** in every classroom, corridor, school and community. It is

a vision that does not simply enable academic excellence, but makes long-lasting life-enhancing contributions to the flourishing of society through **mutuality** and **solidarity**, the pursuit of **peace**, the pursuit of **social justice** and prioritisation of the **environment**.

There are of course many narratives which already permeate and characterise our system – sometimes demanded in justifiable response to events (such as the culture-shifting impact of COVID or the ongoing climate crisis), but often overly defined by short-term changes of policy or procedure, frequently done to, rather than developed by and with, the school system.

Some of these narratives can be positive – success in international academic excellence comparisons, raising standards in core measurements, structural integration of schools into school trusts working in deep and purposeful collaboration in a single legal entity. Others can be deeply problematic – chronic de-prioritisation of resources for the most vulnerable, comparative judgement accountability, fear and anxiety, workload challenges through the demand to do ‘more with less’, competition over systemic collaboration.

We are collectively **called** to the flourishing of all children and all adults across the sector, a pursuit of flourishing that leads to transformational impact on every unique community that each school and school trust is called to serve.

As relational beings and institutions we are **connected** for flourishing – the deep commitment to mutuality and collaboration which prioritises the other, pursues equity, diversity, inclusion and justice, and understands flourishing as an inherently social and relational construct – that we flourish together, not alone.

A shared calling and relational connection leads us to become **committed** to the flourishing of all – taking courageous steps together to re-shape the sector so that education can once again become a career in which adults can expect to flourish, serving children who are each supported, encouraged, empowered, loved and equipped to flourish both during their time in school, and throughout their own adult lives.

# Unpacking our shared thinking

There are many traditions from which to draw thinking on ‘flourishing’, reaching right back to the foundational thinking of Aristotle, virtue ethics and eudaimonia (which we think is best translated as flourishing).

We draw on teaching across all faiths, Enlightenment thinking, alongside more contemporary models drawn from positive psychology and sociology, then outworked in business, economics, education, health, sports, politics and the arts. The Church of England and Catholic Education Service draw heavily on Jesus’ promise of ‘life in all its fullness’ (John 10:10) as a grounding text for educational vision – the Greek word we translate as ‘life’ here, is the word ‘zoe’ – this powerful concept means that the vision of flourishing in education is not reduced to simply academic performance outcomes, but rather calls us to a deeper, broader, social, moral, spiritual, and cultural flourishing of every unique individual, all created in the image of God. We believe that each individual has a unique vocation, a unique contribution to make to society, and that in order to flourish, they must be enabled to discern and fulfil that vocation.<sup>1</sup>

CST’s vision for flourishing is deeply resonant, grounded in mutuality, collaboration, collective voice and shared action, seeking an education system that is coherently shaped and collectively led to prioritise the flourishing of all.

Equally, our vision of flourishing together is highly influenced by the African concept of **ubuntu** – best translated as ‘I am, because we are’ – a beautiful, compelling relational vision of life in relationship – where the mutuality of flourishing together is the central concept around which any community, school, team, or classroom should be built. It is a calling away from an overly individualised notion of flourishing, and a call towards one where at every level, the flourishing for all is prioritised.

To enable us to achieve this hope-filled vision we require frameworks around which our collective work can be co-constructed. Our challenge to ensure true human flourishing calls us to seek to form our own characters through the pursuit of personal characteristics, or virtues. Virtues are strengths of

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<sup>1</sup> Catholic Education Service (2024). *Called to Flourish in Faith and Hope*

character which are moral, civic, intellectual and performative, such as trust, optimism, service, wisdom, justice, courage and humility.<sup>2</sup> Alongside this framework, the five realms of flourishing<sup>3</sup> put forward recently by the Church of England can assist us in our collective work:

## Purpose

A clear understanding of our shared purpose—**why** we are together at school—sets us on the path to flourishing. A common purpose helps us to be unified around clear goals and to work toward a ‘greater good’ to which we aspire together. It creates a community animated by a spirit of freedom and charity with the capacity to link people through a shared belief formed by the identity, meaning, and mission of an organisation.

## Relationships

Our flourishing is dependent upon **who** we are with – together in community. As relational beings, the degree to which we value, honour, and care for each other – students, teachers, leaders, and families alike – impacts our mutual flourishing. School communities that are characterised by a sense of belonging are places where we can flourish together within a creative and innovative pedagogical vision.

## Learning

Undoubtedly, learning is **what** students are supposed to do at school, and the quality of that learning is supremely important. At the same time, student learning is intricately linked to the learning of educators and the school itself as an organisation. When we all learn together in a ‘community of practice’, as a group of people who ‘share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly’, we grow together. Such growth is designed not only to develop intellectual faculties but to form the ability to judge rightly, to hand on the cultural legacy of previous generations, to foster a sense of values, friendly relations and a spirit of mutual understanding.

## Resources

Schools are real places occupied by real people - **where** we meet together matters. Our buildings are shaped by our access to physical, technological, and human resources, which in turn shapes our experiences at school — students, educators, and families alike. However, simply ‘having’ enough is not really ‘enough.’ Instead, we strive to practise good stewardship and generosity when it comes to our resources by receiving, valuing, cherishing and tending them in a responsible and accountable manner. Sharing resources intentionally in justice and love with others will engender flourishing: competition and scarcity-mindedness will diminish and inhibit it.

2 See the virtues set out in the Building Blocks of Character in Jubilee Centre (2017) *Framework for Character Education in Schools*, and Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales (2020) *Formation in Virtues: Educating the Whole Person*

3 These five realms are unpacked further in National Society (2023) *Our Hope for a Flourishing Schools System: Deeply Christian, Serving the Common Good*, and Swaner & Wolfe (2021) *Flourishing Together: A Christian Vision for Flourishing Children, Flourishing Educators and Flourishing Schools*

## Wellbeing

The physical and emotional health of students, characterised by healthy habits and developing resilience, is critical to whether – and **how** – students flourish. The same holds true of teachers and leaders. In order to offer authentic presence and caring to students, educators must first offer that to themselves. Those in helping professions like education can only help others out of a place of abundance; otherwise, educator burnout and poorly educated students will result. For this reason, flourishing schools prioritise the wellbeing of all their community.

Educational leaders face a wide range of persistent and complex problems.

In order to solve these problems together, we will need to draw holistically from more than one of these interacting realms – for example **addressing the challenges of teacher recruitment/ retention** would need to consider the interactivity of **resources** (pay, conditions, physical environment, flexibility), **purpose** (understanding of mission, vocation, personal values alignment), **wellbeing** (work-life balance, rest, anxiety), **relationships** (culture, support, shared identity) and **learning** (professional development, mentoring, expertise).

Equally **planning effective approaches to sector-wide curriculum reform** would need to consider them all too - for example considering **purpose** (defining outcomes, values, intent, academic, vocational, technical, transition from primary to secondary), **learning** (professional development, assessment methodology, performance measures), **resources** (teacher supply, physical resources, funding) etc.

Therefore using these five realms as the grounding framework for flourishing is a holistic approach, nurturing mind, body and spirit - a collective endeavour where the five realms interact together around the central concern for the flourishing of children and adults. This should be the plumb-line of policy reform and the lens through which we see and solve the persistent problems we face.

Organisational strength and resilience are key to flourishing. CST has developed seven domains of a strong trust, underpinned by the concept of flourishing. But in this paper, we are primarily concerned with the conditions for human flourishing, those which will allow for cultivation of intellect and right judgement and formation of moral and ethical readiness in professional, civic, family and personal life.

While we are collectively confident that this unifying concept of flourishing and its five realms provide a compelling structure around which to base our thinking, what kind of changes in practice might we imagine seeing in an education system that was built around this? It is to these practicalities that we now turn, through a series of ten proposed shifts in thinking, practice, policy and implementation.

# Ten flourishing 'seeds' to plant together

We believe that we are called to flourish together – that it is part of our human vocation, but however attractive the 'flourishing' concept is in theory, it needs to be brought to life in the day-to-day lived experience of children and adults across the sector. Human beings flourish in relationship with others and when we respect the dignity of all, we come closer to realising the kind of just, peaceful and joyful community to which we all aspire. The challenge is to find ways in which this flourishing can be creatively, imaginatively and engagingly undertaken in our schools. An all-round education seeks to develop every aspect of the individual: social, intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual - there is an ecology of human growth which means that if any one of these elements is overlooked all others suffer. To make this journey is a complex process but one that requires tangible actions and developments – key shifts for us to make, or 'seeds' to plant together.

When we plant seeds, we do so knowing that they need the right conditions to grow, establishing roots to enable their long-term flourishing, growing at different speeds and in different seasons but always consciously and mindfully nurtured. None of these shifts are achievable overnight, and in fact, most are only achievable by taking deliberate steps together towards an expansive long-term view that far outlasts any school year or maybe even term of parliament. Therefore, this journey is one of accompaniment: fellow travellers who learn, grow and serve together. As the proverb goes: "If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together".

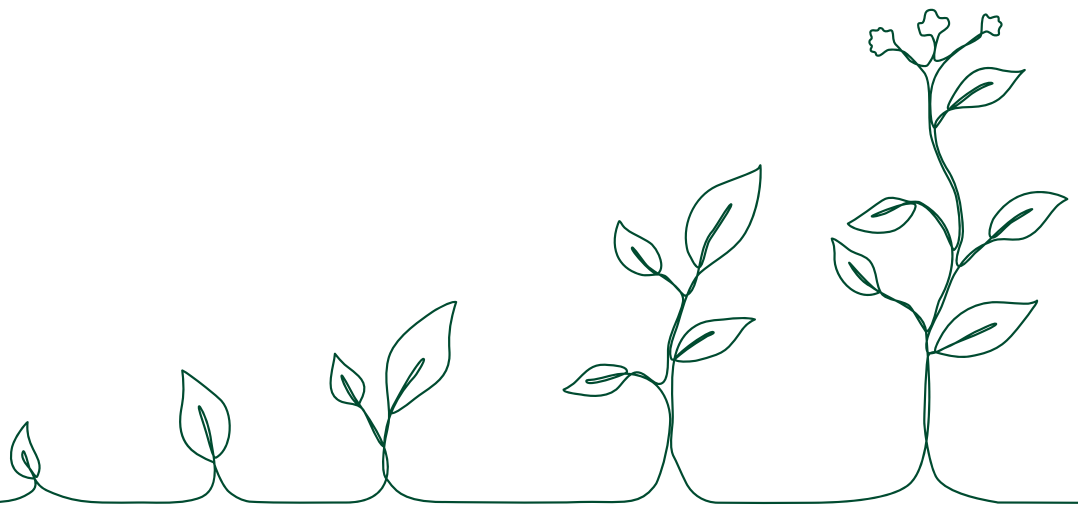


# Seed 1

## Deepening and broadening our collective thinking on flourishing in education

Our three organisations are committed to partnership in thinking and research into the potential impact of flourishing as a unifying concept, drawing on a wide range of expertise nationally/internationally and seeking to build a **coalition of partner organisations committed to sharing this journey** – including but not limited to other national organisations, universities, school/trust leaders, local authorities, dioceses, politicians and policy makers. This will find its form in regular think-pieces, blogs, journal articles, events and symposia over the coming years, and could grow into shared commissioning of primary research and evidence reviews.

Our vision is to amplify our collective voice, to deepen, broaden and lengthen our thinking, to learn from a wide range of partners, and to strengthen our underpinning evidence base to inform changes of practice through a shared culture focused on the flourishing of children and adults.



## Seed 2

# Eradicating child poverty

In the early nineteenth century the Churches led the way by establishing schools across the whole country that were free at the point of use, prioritising the poor and disadvantaged.

Catholic Social Teaching relentlessly calls us to prioritise the needs of the poor at every opportunity: a just society can become a reality only when it is based on the respect of the transcendent dignity of the human person. CST is founded on a deep and sustained commitment to mobilising education as a force for social justice.

A basic moral principle for judging a fair society is the way in which it treats its most vulnerable members, whose needs should come first. Any vision for a flourishing schools system should therefore be grounded in structures, resource distribution that enable social justice, seeing **education as a primary lever of social change**.

This requires a new mental model of leadership – civic leadership. CST has led the call for civic leadership, making the case that education leaders should work collaboratively with other civic actors and church leadership for the wider common good. Flourishing schools can transform communities but they need wisdom and a shared vision which will allow an abundance in resourcing, and an understanding of context in accountability to provide them the conditions for such transformation for the long-term.

But schools cannot eradicate child poverty on their own – we need a government which is committed to work across departments and across parliament on a long-term child poverty eradication strategy.

# Seed 3

## Pursuing equity, diversity, inclusion and justice for children and adults

Our education system has a huge journey to travel together if it is to genuinely reflect and celebrate the vibrant diversity of the society and communities it seeks to serve. The call to **flourishing together requires humble, courageous shifts in relation to all under-represented groups across all protected characteristics**. Without asking who is (not) at the table, and inviting them to it, we simply continue to reinforce prejudice and injustice.

This is complex, brave work requiring innovation, wisdom, contrition, passion, integrity and highly developed interpersonal skills. We cannot tolerate the current structural inequalities in the system, and we recognise our own parts in reinforcing inequality for generations. This journey requires long-term commitment, and short-term urgent action, involving representation at all levels.

True flourishing will also require those with power to make way for those who do not have it yet: “I cannot claim to be realising the fullness of my human dignity if doing so requires me to trample on yours.”



# Seed 4

## Deepening integration into communities

Schools are deeply rooted in context and place. They serve real and unique communities with vastly different needs and priorities. They are resourced in different ways, and find themselves in a wide range of structural systems. They are the anchor institutions for their communities, frequently acting as the backstop for society, providing services and support far beyond the delivery of excellent education.

Our vision for flourishing cannot be homogeneous or impose singularity of thinking, but is more organic. A society that wishes and intends to remain at the service of the human being at every level is a society that has the common good – the good of all people and of the whole person – as its primary goal.

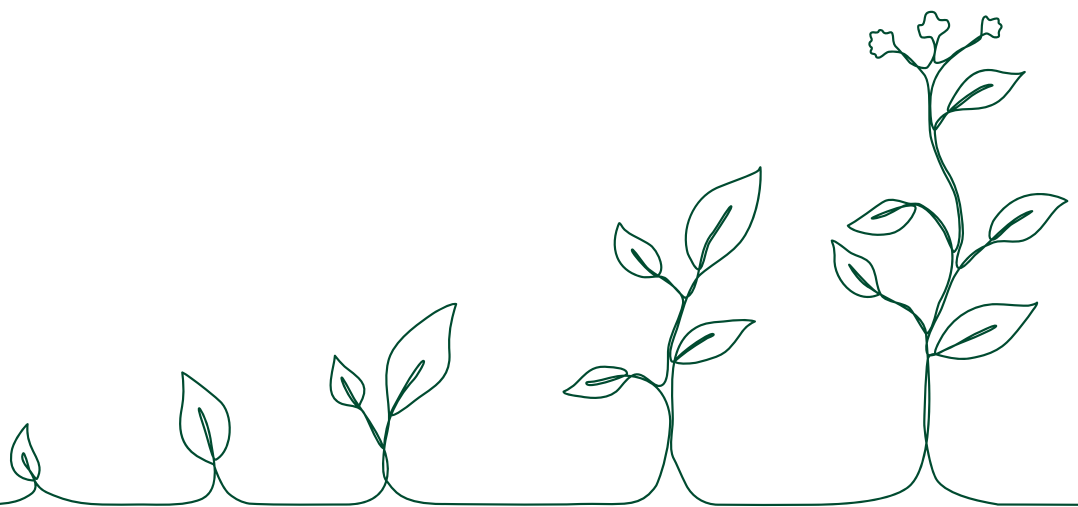
Therefore, **our vision for flourishing involves deepening our integration into communities and working with communities** in a way that acknowledges the beautiful and unique characteristics and strengths that communities bring, and also working with communities to create a hopeful, inclusive and tolerant society.

## Seed 5

# Giving priority to the voices of children and young people

We recognise that while our organisations are focused on the flourishing of children and young people, we do not always make adequate space for their voices to be heard and responded to. If we are to truly focus on flourishing, we will need to **establish and embed systems and processes to gather and respond to young people's voices**, and mechanisms to enable leaders to respond to them.

This may involve, for example, approaches to developing younger leaders, pupil voice informing policy development and advocacy, and improvements in young voices being represented in governance structures. This system of relational dialogue, interacting in a constructive way, exercising tolerance, understanding different points of view and creating trust in an atmosphere of authentic harmony will ensure that the voices of all pupil groups are heard, with a particular focus on those from disadvantaged backgrounds, pupils with special education needs and disabilities, and those in a minority in relation to all protected characteristics.



## Seed 6

# Making our education system truly inclusive for children for whom our schools are currently working less well

A SEND system that is broken needs long-term resourcing and urgent reform. It requires the whole system (government – nationally and locally, sector bodies, schools, school trusts, dioceses and a wide range of specialist providers) to work together to plan and resource beyond the term of any parliament.

But this is also true for a range of other children for whom our school system is working less well, including children in the care system and those with a social worker, children who are deemed to be young offenders, those at risk of offending, gang-involved children, children experiencing mental ill health, children living with acute health needs, young carers, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and those fleeing violence, children living in families where there is domestic violence, drugs or unsafe homes and those experiencing trauma.

**No system could be said to be flourishing if children with the greatest needs were not prioritised.** Treating children with dignity means seeing their unique and inherent worth, and ensuring that each child is appropriately supported, loved, empowered and championed, and that each adult supporting that child has the time, resources, expertise and collaborative networks to ensure the tailored support meets each individual need.

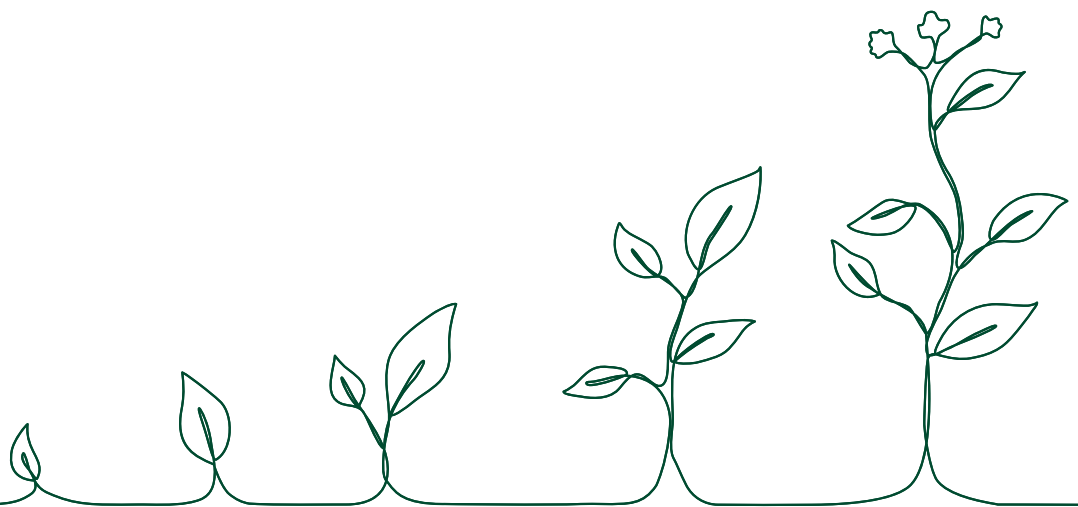
# Seed 7

## Planning and resourcing services around schools to support children and families

The unifying concept of flourishing means that services around schools – both proactive and reactive – need to become appropriately planned, generously resourced, and effectively implemented by well-trained professionals across a range of bodies.

Where schools feel isolated, they need to be connected to and supported by significantly improved services across the whole public sector – but this can only be achieved through a joined-up approach in thinking and policy and an understanding that our educational vision encourages an understanding of human life as an integration of body, mind and spirit.

As such, a flourishing school system will prioritise the good mental health and wellbeing of all the adults, for without flourishing adults there will be no flourishing children.



## Seed 8

# Reforming accountability to enable schools to flourish

The highest form of accountability is the individual's professional accountability for the quality of their own work and to the people whom the profession serves. So in our schools and trusts, we are accountable first and foremost to the people we serve and entrusted to our care. We believe that accountability is necessary in all professional realms and for public services.

However, as Professor Onora O'Neill wrote on the question of trust: "We cannot have any accountability without some forms of trust... A quest for a trust-free world is based on fantasising that there can be an infinite regress of accountability."<sup>4</sup>

**We need to work together to consider what forms of accountability are needed to support which relations of trust and which professional standards, so that our schools can be places of flourishing.**

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<sup>4</sup> O'Neill, O (2003). Trust with accountability *Journal of Health Services Research & Policy*, 8 (1)

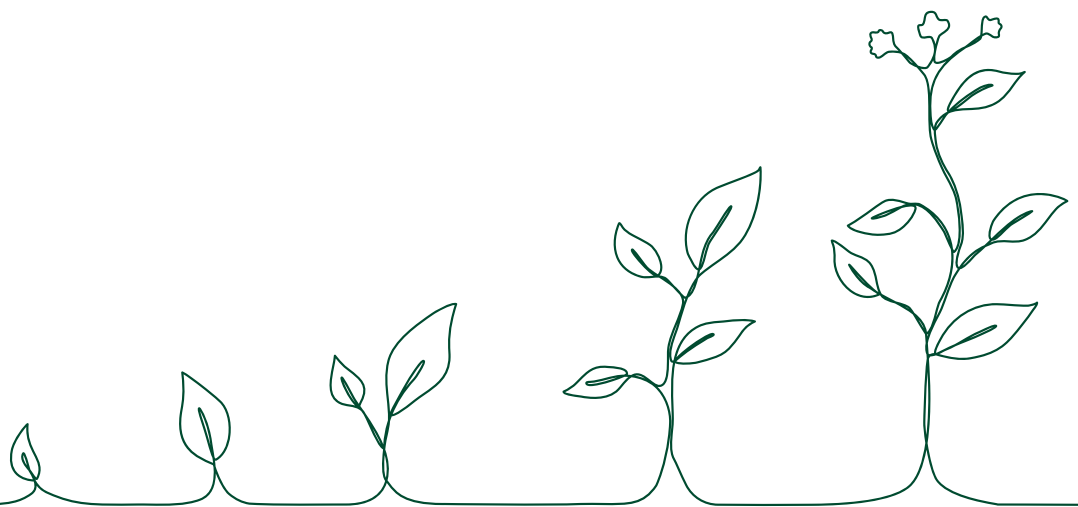


# Seed 9

## Broadening approaches to professional development for teachers, support staff and leaders

To be an educator is a sacred privilege and an awesome responsibility and we hold our teachers and all who work in our schools in high esteem. We collectively recognise the hugely positive impact of the evidence-informed professional qualifications that have been developed with the Education Endowment Foundation over the last few years. And we are also committed to developing the ‘Flourishing Leadership Framework’ built around the five realms of flourishing and drawing on a wide range of educational research partners both nationally and internationally.<sup>5</sup>

This evidence-rich framework will provide the grounding for leadership development programmes and networks, complementary to early career teacher development and national professional qualifications, but adding further breadth and depth to leadership development. This approach will deliberately include those not in teaching roles, **ensuring a focus on the flourishing of all adults in the system**, including paid staff, and those responsible for governance. This is inextricably linked to the deep need to avert the crisis of recruitment and retention facing so many schools and school trusts.



<sup>5</sup> The Church of England is already developing this with a large group of school trusts and dioceses for piloting in Autumn 2025 – it also involves research partnerships with a group of higher education institutions, including the Harvard Flourishing Program.

## Seed 10

# Re-shaping education as a career in which adults flourish

The education system stands or falls on the extent to which it is led by adults who are themselves, flourishing. Children need to be empowered to think, create, analyse, debate and challenge by **adults who are themselves well rested, valued, supported, paid and championed by society.**

These adults are the ones who connect with students, conveying an understanding of life and the human person, but in order to do so effectively, they must reflect on what they bring of themselves to their work. The adults in our system cannot work much harder, or give many more hours to their jobs, and unless education reclaims its status as a career in which an adult can expect to flourish, there will continue to be deep challenges of recruitment and retention of staff. Our hopes for the flourishing of adults includes all colleagues right across staff teams, in all roles, and those volunteers responsible for governance at all levels.

Teaching is the only career that our children and young people are exposed to every day during their school lives. Therefore, while promotional campaigns and recruitment incentives may help, there are more fundamental shifts to make in relation to working conditions, relational trust, professional development, accountability and lifestyle if we are to re-shape education into a career pathway in which adults can expect to flourish.

# The Class of 2040?

Were we to think of a reasonable long-term timeframe for this re-building around the unifying concept of flourishing, 2040 might not be bad starting point.

It is sufficiently far in the future to enable genuine social change and ambitious reform at appropriate scale.

Imagine Lena, who will graduate from Year 13 as an 18-year-old in 2040.

Who can say what they will study, how they will be assessed, where they will progress after school.

It feels a long time away.

However, Lena, who will be part of the Class of 2040 is **already in the education system – currently in early years.**

This means that while we need to take the long-term view, each and every child only gets one shot at their education journey and so therefore there is a balance of long-term thinking and the catalysation of short-term energy required.

Building our thinking, practice, resourcing, policy and implementation around the unifying goal of flourishing means that certain urgent tasks are needed in the ecosystem – pruning, re-locating, watering, removing. We cannot wait for these.

However, for the ecosystem to truly flourish for the long-term, we need to move together to choose wise long-term priorities, resource them appropriately, adapt them over the years to changes in conditions, but ultimately see those seeds grow roots that will enable this vision to endure.

We are asking a core leadership question together: What could only happen in the long-term, by taking a collectively long-term view now?

We have much to learn so we invite you to join us on the journey in re-building an education system focused on the central goal of the flourishing of children and adults.

