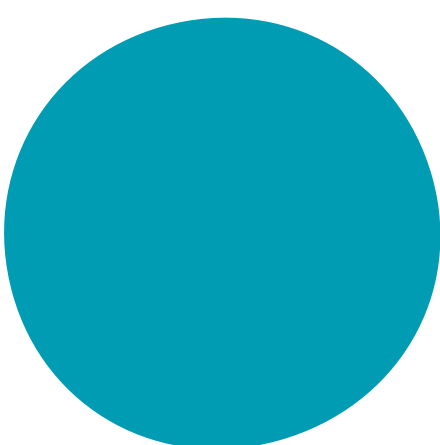




How do ***strong schools stay strong?***

2026 Edition

By Alex Galvin

Foreword: Why SSAT are still thinking about how strong schools stay strong

It has been only eight years since SSAT last published a practitioner-led report about how strong schools stay strong, so why have we returned to the topic? Surely the respondents in 2026 would be saying pretty much the same things as their counterparts in 2018, wouldn't they?

Our starting point, as always, was to listen to the voices of our members. And one thing that they kept on telling us was that there was a need to revisit the topic to capture the myriads of ways in which the concept of 'strength' has been redefined over the past eight years.

- ▶ There has been **unprecedented churn within government**, with school leaders enacting policy from three different governments headed by no fewer than six prime ministers since 2018. There has been a (sadly) less unprecedented turnover of nine different education secretaries over the period since we last published our members' thoughts about strong schools. Competing ideas about what makes a school strong for policymakers shape the landscape for school leaders in building strong schools.
- ▶ There have also been equally significant **changes in the regulatory and inspection sphere**. Since 2018 we have seen one set of radical changes to the Ofsted inspection framework – relentless in its focus on curriculum – come and go. Another new, equally revolutionary framework – in its focus upon inclusion – has been introduced and has already been significantly revised. Alongside the changes in how policy impacts schools, inspection has provided the benchmarks for a different kind of school strength.

- ▶ All of which sits against the backdrop of the more incremental, but no less influential, changes to **governance and system support** for school leaders. In 2018 fewer than a third of schools were in multi-academy trusts. In 2026 more than half of our schools are part of school groups and this is growing quickly, especially for primaries. Clearly, school governance has a significant impact on how policy and accountability, and their impact on school culture, are managed to ensure schools become or remain strong.

- ▶ And finally, underpinning much of the changes around policy, regulation and governance, **the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic** has had a massive impact on what it means to be a strong school in ways school leaders could only have imagined (in their worst nightmares, perhaps?) back in 2018. The consequences of the pandemic – for society generally and school culture specifically, were seismic – amplifying existing pressures, and creating brand new ones, for schools becoming and staying strong.

All of which answers the first of my questions at the start of this foreword: why SSAT has, with the support of our Leading Edge school leaders, returned to the topic of strong schools? The second of my questions – are respondents saying the same things as they did back in 2018 about how schools become and stay strong – are answered within. Without giving spoilers, the answer is both an emphatic 'yes' and a rather more nuanced 'no'. Read on to find out more.

Keven Bartle
*Director of Education
for SSAT*



How do strong schools stay strong?

In 2018, Sir David Carter, then National Schools Commissioner, posed this question to the SSAT Leading Edge headteachers' steering group. At the time, he was working on a document which set out different stages of school improvement and he was interested to hear the reflections of the network. We decided to pull together a response to the question, which was published that year.

This publication revisits the same question eight years on. It aims to capture the lived experience of 29 successful school leaders from the SSAT Leading Edge network, in their own words.

All of the contributors were asked the same four questions and were free to take their response in any direction.

- How would you define what it means to be a strong school?
- How do schools become strong?
- How do schools stay strong?
- If you were to give one piece of advice to a school leader who is beginning a school improvement journey, what would that be?

Many were keen that we stress that they don't claim to have all of the answers. And, perhaps it is important to state from the outset, we are not suggesting that we can shape a straightforward response to the question.

However, all 29 contributors are people who have successfully led school improvement; who continue to successfully lead school improvement. They represent schools in a wide range of geographical areas, in a variety of socio-economic contexts. Some of their schools have a very long track record of exceptional performance, some are in a period of rapid improvement. Some contributors are very long-serving headteachers, others are relatively new in post.

Many have experience of working beyond their immediate context to support school improvement elsewhere. This publication aims to pull together their expertise, share some ideas and prompt useful conversations. We are very grateful to everyone who took the time to share their insights and experience.

Defining strong

'Strong' has acquired new connotations since we originally considered this question. This is not about Ofsted, but as Jane Waters suggested, a quotation from the 2009 Ofsted report 'Twelve outstanding secondary schools: Excelling against the odds'¹ provides a useful starting point when we are exploring what we mean by a strong school:

"They excel at what they do, not just occasionally, but for a high proportion of the time."

Clearly, outcomes matter. However, there was a consistent view that this is just one part of the picture. Children get great examination results in strong schools, but they are also supported to be happy, confident, successful people in a wider sense. Strong schools are harmonious communities that bring out the best in students and staff alike.

"Strong schools are happy and high-achieving – not sure which way round those should go, but there should not be a trade-off between the two" (*Sarah Creasey*)

"A strong school is just a place where children can thrive. Children and staff can thrive. It's a happy place. It's a fun place. It's a place where people feel safe, they feel cared for, they feel known and they've got the ability to develop and improve." (*James Granville-Hamshar*)

“You’ve got to have the results, and you can’t take your eye off that. But you do that through engaging the students, through an engaging curriculum underpinned by pastoral support and enrichment and the broader curriculum beyond the classroom... And so they feel that sense of belonging, they want to be in school, they want to participate and get involved.” *(Felicity Corcoran)*

A key feature of strong schools is often consistency - a collective understanding and shared sense of purpose. Lisa Mills attributes this to shared values: “Having networked, worked, collaborated, had the opportunity to visit lots of other high performing contexts, it’s always very clear to me that those leaders have a very strong sense of who they are, who the school is and that permeates through the organisation. They can talk in terms of the school’s values...you feel that emotional connection because everything is so values-driven.” *(Lisa Mills)*

Our original publication opened with the reflection ‘strong schools do ordinary things extraordinarily well’ and that remains at the heart of this publication. Schools within the Leading Edge network often say that they are not sure they are doing anything different to others – and in terms of what they are focusing on, this may be true.

The difference is always in the detail – in precisely how they tackle familiar challenges.

Becoming a strong school

For leaders embarking on a school improvement journey, the challenges can be varied and complex. Leaders may need to address the underperformance of students, staffing challenges, low morale, a poor reputation in the community, the list goes on...In short, it may well be difficult to know where to start.

For most contributors, the starting point is always to get to know your school – to speak individually with all members of staff – teachers and non-teachers, and to take every opportunity to hear the views of parents and students. However, this isn’t necessarily about a rush to identify the changes that need to be made. It is about gaining a balanced picture which enables leaders to play back reflections in a way that encourages staff engagement – ‘this is what we are really good at, this is what we need to work on.’

Even when previous decisions may seem questionable, it is important to take time to fully understand the rationale behind the choices that have been made. As Sarah Creasey says:

“Autonomy is needed to really shift practice. It is unusual for people to do things that are really having a negative impact. There are usually good reasons for what people are doing and you need to understand their logic.”

Unless it is a very new school, leaders are inheriting a community with a back-story. There may be room for improvement, but there will also be important stories that have shaped its history and traditions which are valued by the school community. As Jane Waters advises:

“Be respectful of your school’s legacy, it’s your community’s legacy. It’s your community’s school, not your school.”

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Similarly, Peter Mayland and Linda Burrows speak about the importance of recognising that you are temporary custodians of a school – building on what has gone before you and shaping a legacy that will live on after you leave.

Change may be needed, but balancing a drive for improvement with a willingness to listen and see what can be built on is more likely to keep colleagues and the community on side.

“Changing the values would have been an easy thing to do as a new headteacher, but actually they are strong values...I think that sense of institutionalising the culture is really, really important. We talk about that idea that habits make culture and cultures make tradition. As quite a new school, the tradition here isn't quite there, and therefore in the journey the school's on to be consistently strong, we need to embed some of those things, even if they're not things I necessarily started.” (*Chris Sykes*)

Sustained and embedded improvement depends on the positive engagement of all staff and the wider community. Richard Laws explains:

“It needs everyone working in the same direction – the staff, the kids, the parents, it's that triangle. If you've got any part of your community who aren't going in the same direction, who don't believe in what you're trying to do, then it's going to be difficult. What you've really got to do is work to make things better together.”

Irrespective of the school's development areas, many contributors stressed the importance of identifying a manageable number of priorities. This can be particularly challenging when it feels like there is a lot to do. Of course, in some circumstances, immediate action is required, however, where there is space to bide your time, this can be beneficial. Trying to tackle too many things at once can result in nothing being fully implemented.

Successful implementation builds trust amongst the school community, and it may be that doing some initial groundwork paves the way for future projects, as Craig Hewitt explains:

“There were things I knew from day one that I wanted to change, that I left for around 18 months. They weren't having such a massive detrimental effect and ...I wanted to do things that were more positive and more impactful, that got people on board.”

This is about judging the right time for introducing new ideas and assessing staff readiness for change.

“You sow a seed, slowly over time it grows and grows and you get to the point where it is strong enough to be planted out. It's about getting to an optimal moment where you can say, right now is the right time to do this.” (*Fae Dean*)

The implementation climate is rooted in school culture and the view of many contributors was that you start from culture and build up – whether that is working to change the attitudes and behaviours of staff, students or both. Without secure foundations, new initiatives are built on shaky ground. As Peter Mayland says:

“If it's not stable, and you keep building on top of it, it will eventually crumble.”

Josie Belli, reflecting on her experience of working with schools across their multi-academy trust explains:

“You need the culture right – all the way through. Where we've tried to look at things like behaviour policies or learning and teaching actually, before the culture is right, it hasn't worked. From the ground up, the culture needs to be right – that is the children come first.”

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From a focus on school culture, tangible benefits begin to become evident through positive engagement with staff and students.

“We started with relationships, with culture. We didn’t start with attendance – actually attendance will only improve once pupils feel it is worth coming in.” *(Robin Newman)*

“First focus on culture for behaviour and ensuring that you’ve got a strong research-based process in classrooms. Once you’ve got those two right, attendance then follows, staff retention follows, staff happiness follows, outcomes follow.” *(James Granville-Hamshar)*

Where outcomes have been disappointing, there may be a culture of low aspirations across the school community. Challenging preconceptions can take time, but establishing a culture of belief is essential.

Dr Joan Deslandes reflected on the need to tackling the limiting beliefs some people might have about her pupils:

“Some people come in with preconceived ideas about particular types of pupil cohort. And I think, for me, establishing that our cohort, whilst disadvantaged, whilst highly diverse, whilst in some parts highly challenging, also was a talent pool of great ability and possibilities was important. Bringing that home to our staff, the children themselves and their parents was important. And I walked that path myself. I understood how important it is for young people to know that their teachers are really committed and determined to support them to do well.”

Or as Liam McGillicuddy puts it

“never say that it can’t be done here.”

Communication is paramount throughout any school improvement process. There are several layers to this – the need to secure support for what you are trying to achieve; ensuring that colleagues truly understand the practicalities of what they are expected to do; and the need to reset beliefs and assumptions.

As Kieran Robinson says:

“it’s not just about improving standards, it’s about improving your reputation, and that can take a long time.”

During a process of change, it can be challenging for the wider team and other stakeholders to recognise the strategic underpinning of decisions that are being made. Across the school community, people need to be supported to understand what is happening and the wider vision that is informing decisions.

“The more that you relentlessly communicate the vision and make sure that you are clear about it from the outset, the more likely you are to get people on board with whatever it is that you are going to do.” *(Lisa Mills)*

“You need to narrate what you want to do: this is what we’re doing and this is why we’re doing things. You just have to keep telling that story, and it obviously needs to be authentic.” *(Robin Newman)*

Uniting a school community around the vision, or around a programme of change requires leaders to be really clear about the problem they are trying to solve. With many competing priorities, it can be very difficult in practice to step back and accurately diagnose the key issues.

“Really getting to the crux of the problem is the most critical thing, because that sets the benchmark for the rest of your journey and the success. If you cannot name and articulate with absolute precision... with specificity what the problem is, then everything that follows will be somewhat superficial. From there, work out what’s the outrageous, ambitious outcome from here?” *(Deborah Emmanuel)*

School leaders continually juggle competing priorities. Whilst contributors consistently stressed the importance of identifying a small number of focus areas, they also all acknowledged how easy it is to be distracted.

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It takes confidence to remain on your intended path and not be swayed by what others are doing. As Dave Potter says:

“You have to be as strong about saying no as you are about saying yes...they might be strong strategies, but they have to serve the purpose of your school. Otherwise, you are just collecting things.”

All contributors stressed the importance of context. Development needs to be rooted in the specific circumstances of your school and shaped around a collective understanding of what you are working towards. Habit change is difficult, and teachers are unlikely to adopt new approaches through being told that they have to change how they do things.

Lyndsey Morgan explains how co-constructing a clear shared understanding of what great teaching and learning looks like in your school supports the positive engagement of staff and builds upon existing practice:

“It is important to codify learning and teaching, quantify exactly what it is in a set of principles that aren’t off the shelf, but are co-constructed by different groups within the school. So, firstly identifying what excellent learning and teaching looks like in a set of teaching principles, and then to really break that down into the how – e.g. how do we ensure that there is high challenge for all? What does adaptation look like at St Paul’s?”

Linda Burrows highlights how this process builds confidence in the team, encouraging experimentation, but within a consistent structure:

“You have individual members of staff having the confidence to experiment, but not going off and doing something random...they’ve got the authority to try things, but they also know that it’s serving high quality teaching.”

This process of co-construction ensures not only that staff are united around a strong shared understanding of high-quality pedagogy, but also ensures that the focus is on a shared moral imperative to give learners the best possible experience. As Tyson Lane explains:

“The why can sometimes be missed, because it’s assumed we are all doing sort of the same thing. But actually, the moment we stop talking about our students is the moment we lose sight of our why and how our why is unique to the setting.”

Lastly, it is important to recognise that the process of getting to a strong position will inevitably have its challenges. Many headteachers spoke about the days which don’t feel good – about the times in which they have doubted themselves and continue to do so. Sustainable improvement takes time, and results are not always immediately evident:

“If you are going to do something. If you’re going to bring about a real change that is truly embedded, then you are not going to do that in a year. You need to trial things first and then give it time, maybe two or three years to do it properly.” (*Erika Podmore*)

And during this process it is important to recognise achievements in the moment, even if there is more to do. Back to Tyson Lane:

“If you just focus on the end result all the time, you miss the fun part, which is actually the journey. And for the children you’ve got in front of you now, even if we may be on a journey, that is their experience. So, you mustn’t forget to celebrate what is being achieved by the cohorts you have now.”

Sustaining a strong school

It is fair to say that once a school has got to a strong place, it will probably have some advantages. It may find it easier to attract students and staffing may be more stable. Nonetheless remaining a strong school is challenging.

All schools operate in an environment of continual change. Students and staff come and go, the demographic of the community may change, expectations change. To maintain a strong position, leaders can never be complacent. There isn't a point at which they can sit back and think that their work is done.

"School improvement is a constant sigmoid curve, we have to keep asking 'how do we avoid decline?' This requires forensic horizon-scanning, ensuring that the eyes of SLT are consistently on the data. We need to make sure that we are robustly strong; that our CPD offer is right, that we are moving knowledge around the school system." (*Sarah Creasey*)

"It's never done. School improvement is never done. Your school culture is never done. You're always striving for improvement. And you regularly reboot your work and your culture as a school. You keep revisiting ideas, concepts, work and giving it a reboot to maintain the energy and drive that is needed." (*Lisa Mills*)

Many contributors stressed the importance of this ongoing review process and the search for incremental improvements. As Felicity Corcoran puts it, "not new, but better." This process requires a relentless focus on the quality of teaching and learning and on the extent to which the vision for the school is being enacted.

There is often talk of 'best practice' in education, but this was questioned by several contributors. However successful an approach has been in a particular context, this provides no guarantee that it will work elsewhere.

As Dylan Wiliam famously explained In education, "what works?" is not the right question because everything works somewhere and nothing works everywhere, so what's interesting, what's important in education is: "Under what conditions does this work?"²

Zoe Morris also makes the point that talking about best practice may not recognise the ways in which our understanding is always evolving.

"It's not about what really great practice looks like, because I think that can keep changing...I think we'll never know exactly what great practice looks like because somebody should be pushing it further all the time. In every generation, people push it on that bit more."

The ongoing search for incremental improvements will always mean regularly revisiting key areas of practice. Day-to-day and month-to-month, this means maintaining an unwavering focus on core elements of provision, refusing to be distracted and being willing to return to similar conversations again and again.

"We need everyone to embrace a journey of continuous improvement. There is no idyll at the end, no point that we get to and stop. Sometimes we can feel like education is a bit cyclical, things do come back again, but they always come back again with slightly different framing, a different perspective or a new set of glasses through which to see them. You have to be open to that, and not too cynical, even when it is just rotating back around." (*Kate Page*)

"From the point of view of the curriculum and learning and teaching, there are only five or six main focus areas. So, assessment, feedback, scaffolding, instruction... we've also done a lot of work on literacy and oracy. There isn't going to be any other groundbreaking thing that none of us have ever thought of in a classroom...You could teach for 40 years and still be pulling on those five or six strands in the classroom." (*James Granville-Hamshar*)

Maintaining the highest standards in teaching and learning requires continual review and evaluation – as many contributors stressed, it is the focus of leaders at all levels all day, every day.

“We’re always reflecting on the school’s context, mission and values, making sure that what we’re providing is taking account of these things, and we’re not just doing the same old thing because it worked before. We’re thinking about what needs to be added, what needs to be taken away. You need to maintain initiative about what needs to be done next to keep the offer to your pupils on the cutting edge of being transformational.” (*Dr Joan Deslandes*)

“I can’t dress it up any other way, as a leader, and particularly as a senior leader, you’ve just got to love the monotony of doing the same stuff and doing it really, really well. And you just cannot take any shortcuts on that. There’s no way around it, you’ve got to focus on the absolute core purpose. Teach the children well, have high expectations of them and make sure they get strong outcomes. You’ve got to come to terms with the monotony of doing that all day, every day.” (*James Granville-Hamshar*)

“You don’t talk about stuff in meetings, you talk about teaching and learning.” (*Jane Waters*)

Sustainably strong schools always have excellent teams. The contributions of all staff are valued and recognised. As Liam McGillicuddy explains:

“Everyone is critical to the school, it is never down to one person. Hero heads only work temporarily. It’s about a healthy organisation in which everyone’s role is valued.”

Whilst a headteacher may need to take a more directive approach when leading a school to a strong place, contributors unanimously stressed that in the longer term, schools remain strong when colleagues are given the autonomy required to work to their full potential.

“If staff and students don’t feel agency and don’t feel that they have a voice in the change, they can’t see the impact and feel success. I think that is huge.” (*Jane Waters*)

“We work hard at planning for [middle leaders]. But importantly, we really trust them and support them, because they are the ultimate experts in the room, who are designing curriculum at classroom level...We are always thinking, ‘what do they need right now to amplify what they are doing?’” (*Deborah Emmanuel*)

“Consistency is really important, but uniformity, in my book, is not always desirable because it can put a cap on the most talented teachers that you’ve got in your school. I think you can achieve consistency by having a common set of principles that we’re all signed up to, the whole staff is signed up to, the students understand as well, without having a really rigid framework for teachers.” (*Martin Jones*)

Felicity Corcoran describes this as “visible consistency” – the importance of establishing a shared understanding without being overly prescriptive. This consistency is shaped by careful co-construction, involving all members of the community. Opportunities to collaborate, to shape new approaches and articulate ideas in a way that is rooted in your context support effective implementation and engagement.

“It is so important to have a shared and co-constructed language, whether that is to talk about vision, or ethos or learning and teaching.” (*Lyndsey Morgan*)

Schools with established high-performance often find themselves revisiting approaches which work well in order to identify where incremental improvements can be made. This can feel risky, but can have benefits that go beyond any improvements that might be made: “You might have a number of years where something is completely embedded and people are really aligned to it. But as staffing changes, and priorities change, you need to realise that there are staff now who didn’t experience the initial initiation and implementation of the work. So, you’ve got to go back round, but you can’t just recycle and do exactly what you did before, because where’s the

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opportunity for new members of staff to be part of creating a shared vision? So, you've got to think about that process of getting buy-in and making sure that people are crafting it together." *(Tyson Lane)*

"Even if you develop a really good system, you shouldn't just allow that system to sit there. You should always be looking to change it, adapt it, bring in new angles." *(Kieran Robinson)*

A consistent theme in conversations was the importance of really taking time to focus on key priorities, allowing for staff to work collaboratively and enable effective implementation.

"It's about doing the one thing in terms of change or implementation that is going to make the biggest impact over a sustained period of time, allowing space for experimenting, trialling, coming back, reflecting. When there isn't that clear focus, professional development tends to land badly. And if you know it is a priority, stick with it. Unless it's being fully implemented with consistency everywhere and the impact is clear, you can't, you should not move on to anything else." *(Josie Belli)*

Part of this process is recognising that in some aspects of practice, there may not be easy or quick answers. Research and practice in other schools can help to shape the conversation, but do not remove the need for deep thinking about the implications in that context.

"Take account of research, understand how that research can be applied to your own school community, but also question the research and be confident in deciding where that research may not align with the needs of your cohort at that time."

(Dr Joan Deslandes OBE)

"There are some things you can fix quite quickly. There are operational things. And then there are other things that really need thinking about – how do we make an effective change and really embed it? At the moment, we're doing some work on assessment and we are properly in messy thinking phase. We keep going forwards and backwards, forwards and backwards.

And I'm saying to middle leaders – that is fine. This is not something we can just get sorted. We need to be having this discussion. It might take us two years to get there." *(Chris Sykes)*

Effective collaboration is supported by a culture which sets high expectations whilst also creating an environment in which teachers feel safe and supported, something Craig Hewitt, referencing Mary Myatt, describes as "high challenge, low threat."³ Strong schools set high standards for their teams, but sustainability is supported by care of staff and a willingness to listen. As Rachel Kruger says, "optimism and kindness are underrated management strategies." Dave Potter explains:

"Every decision comes back to the children. We want them to have the best possible experience. To achieve that we've all got to play our part in making this a really great place to work."

"It's not about belonging, it's about mattering. I think that's what you've got to do for staff and students alike, you've got to create a sense of botheredness. Staff need to feel bothered about what they do. Staff need to feel that what they do matters, because actually that's where you get great collaboration, that's where you get great ideas." *(Tyson Lane)*

Careful thought is given to ongoing staff development and the challenge of implementing sustainable and impactful change. This often involves recognising what is already successful, as well as driving new initiatives:

"When I was first running training, before I was a headteacher, I planned the sessions thinking about the four teachers who wouldn't engage...Then I thought, actually, this is the wrong way round. 95% of my staff are awesome, they're going to do great things. I'm going to lead things in terms of what works best for those that are really on board. So it's about treating staff with dignity, treating them kindly, so that they want to go the extra mile." *(Richard Laws)*

“We’re not competing with each other; we are supporting each other to be the very best that each individual can be and better than they believe they could be. It’s about noting where you see a talent, feeding it, encouraging that talent, motivating them to share that talent and recognising the positive impact of their talent in terms of pupil progress, achievement, personal development and character.”
(Dr Joan Deslandes OBE)

Students also play an important role in shaping practice and most schools with established high-performance recognise the importance of students’ views in quality assurance and ongoing improvement:

“Every senior leader is involved in student leadership and every member of the team brings that voice into SLT on a weekly basis.” *(Kate Page)*

“Our student voice also drives our vision forward. It’s very real within our school. It is important to listen to the students. Our students have high expectations and are part of the continuous improvement process. This create a culture of respect and high aspirations”
(Jacqui O’Neill)

This includes really empowering students to take ownership of their own learning. Jane Waters explains: “You see schools really trying with formative assessment, but what they haven’t done is train the children. We do it with year 7. What is formative assessment? What does it mean for you? What’s your role as a learner in this relationship? I think it’s really important that children really understand, otherwise you’re going to get teachers working super hard and kids kind of along for the ride.” *(Jane Waters)*

This reflects a more general willingness to listen among the leaders of strong schools. They proactively seek feedback from all members of the school community and are always willing to consider a range of ideas. They recognise that people may not always come forward with their views and create opportunities which enable a range of voices to be heard.

They also recognise that there is always more to learn – whether that learning comes from their own school community or from outside.

All of the school leaders in this publication choose to connect with one another and share their time and expertise generously both locally and nationally. They value the ways in which different perspectives can challenge their thinking and support ongoing improvement.

“It’s really important to think about system leadership. It’s about making sure that you don’t become siloed as an outstanding school, always looking out towards other schools. Even if you think you are a better school than them, you need to recognise that there will be things you could be learning that they are probably doing better than you. Never be arrogant, never be complacent, always look for collaboration.” *(Kieran Robinson)*

“What you don’t want to become is an echo chamber. So even amongst schools within our trust that we work really closely with, we’ll get to a point where we say, actually, we’re all in agreement around this. Why don’t we go and visit another school? You need different practice to challenge your ideas. I think that’s really important for strong schools. If they do what they always do, it won’t take long for people to catch up and overtake. And it won’t take long for it to become dated and not really fully understood.”
(Tyson Lane)

In the first version of this publication, Darren Turner talked about the importance of maintaining a “healthy dissatisfaction” and this is evident in all of the schools that contributed this time. No matter how successful they are, they continue to search for ways to refine their practice further. Leaders remain humble and open to the idea that there is always more that they can learn. Schools that remain strong maintain a constant focus on how things could be better, whilst celebrating current successes and creating an environment in which learners and staff alike can operate at their best.

2018–2026 What has changed?

Not surprisingly, there is a good degree of consistency between this document and the original ‘How do strong schools stay strong?’ published in 2018. The idea that strong schools do ordinary things extraordinarily well remains at the heart of what contributors said. Similarly, it will come as no surprise that teaching and learning remains the core business, or that strong schools are built and sustained by the people who lead them and work in them.

However, there were some noticeable shifts of emphasis in what school leaders told us:

Culture as the starting point of school improvement.

Ethos and values featured in 2018, but contributors in 2026 gave culture greater prominence as the foundation stone of school improvement. There was greater emphasis on relationships, belonging, shared values and creating the conditions for pupils and staff to thrive.

Agency rather than compliance

Perhaps in response to increased attempts to codify key aspects of practice and school leadership since 2018, there was far more discussion about the risks of a compliance culture. Contributors frequently stressed the importance of agency – both for leaders and teachers. Agency was seen as important in two ways – to enable teachers and leaders to make professional judgements and to maintain morale and motivation.

More attention to co-construction and implementation

There was some consideration of implementation in 2018, but mainly in terms of avoiding initiative overload. Perhaps as a result of greater exploration of effective implementation in education since 2018, notably the EEF guidance, contributors spoke in much more detail about conditions required to successfully lead change. In particular, there was much more discussion of the importance of co-construction.

A more human definition of strength

Both publications mention happiness, but contributors in 2026 developed this idea more fully. Contributors consistently explained that strong schools not only achieve good academic outcomes, they are also places where children and staff feel safe, known, cared for, engaged and able to thrive. The connection between belonging, attendance, engagement and outcomes is much more clearly defined.

A more nuanced approach to ‘best practice’ and research

Both publications recognise the importance of evidence-informed approaches. However, contributors in 2026 placed far greater emphasis on the importance of context and the need for leaders to make informed decisions about how to address their development priorities. Whilst learning from other schools was seen as hugely valuable, contributors stressed that ideas may not be transferrable, even if successful elsewhere. They also queried the idea of ‘best practice,’ since this could suggest an endpoint, whereas strong schools are always seeking to develop further.

Increased prominence of student leadership

The 2026 publication shows the ways in which students are now playing an essential role in school improvement. School leaders described the ways in which students’ views are always central to strategic discussions. There was also more consideration of how students are encouraged to take ownership of their own learning – for example training students in formative assessment.

Greater concern about leader sustainability and emotional load

There was more discussion about the pressures of school leadership in 2026. Many contributors talked about the importance of bravery and the need to 'take things on the chin' to protect colleagues. They talked about the emotional toll this takes on both them and their families. This raises significant concerns about sustainability, particularly given that this experience is undoubtedly amplified for leaders working in less stable schools.

Parental complaints and social media are a bigger issue

The pandemic continues to have a significant impact on the experience of school leaders. Contributors consistently talked about the before and after of the pandemic, with one of the most noticeable changes being the fracturing of parent-school relationships. Leaders are seeing a greater volume of complaints, including some written using AI which require complex responses. Public scrutiny on social media further intensifies these pressures.

Accountability is framed differently

Accountability, and specifically the role of Ofsted continues to be a concern for many school leaders. Concerns remain about the challenge of moving goal posts. In 2026 leaders explained a bigger tension – the need for leaders to make contextualised decisions in a system that is increasingly seeking to identify linear solutions. They also flagged the challenge of sustaining key initiatives whilst also responding to changing national expectations.

Leadership stability is a key issue

Recruitment and retention were flagged as important concerns in 2018 and this remains the case in 2026. However, in 2026 there was more discussion of the importance of maintaining stability within senior and middle leadership and the challenges of achieving this. It is notable that the majority of schools featured have benefited from consistent leadership. This supports successful implementation and maintains a consistent culture.

Challenges for system leaders

- ▶ How can all future school leaders access positive role models, mentoring and principled leadership development?
- ▶ How can headship be made more sustainable?
- ▶ How can the retention of school leaders at all levels be supported?
- ▶ How can school leaders be supported with the pressures created by parental complaints?
- ▶ How can schools maintain a relational culture in an age of social media?
- ▶ How can schools maintain a continuous drive for improvement without creating relentless and unsustainable pressure in a culture of high-stakes accountability?
- ▶ How can the system enable high performance through agency, context and professional judgement rather than compliance?

12 consistent features of strong schools

Strong schools...

1. Do ordinary things, extraordinarily well.

Strong schools may or may not be very innovative in their practice, but the quality of what they do is always in the detail of what they do day in and day out. They have highly effective systems that support excellent teaching and learning. At Drayton Manor High School they talk about “exceptional basics”, at Churchdown School they talk about being “experts in simplicity” – they maintain a relentless focus on excellence in the day-to-day.

2. Ensure that children's needs come first.

Strong schools keep the main thing the main thing. The focus is always on the experience of the young people they are working with – this creates a moral imperative, drives strategic decisions and provides the standard by which practice is quality assured. Many contributors said that they routinely ask the question “is this good enough for my child?” or “would I recommend our school unreservedly to a friend?” If not, why not?

3. Are rooted in their context.

Strong schools are rooted in a deep understanding of their context, recognising that there is no set formula for high performance. Decisions are always informed by a deep understanding of their learners and their community. Leaders recognise that the context in which they are operating is ever-changing and engage widely and meaningfully with all members of the community to support their understanding.

4. Really focus on teaching and learning

This might sound like stating the obvious – all schools focus on teaching and learning. However, strong schools ensure that nothing distracts their whole team from delivering and refining the best possible experience for learners. They take a forensic approach to teaching and learning, continually quality assuring and searching for incremental improvements. They ensure that other development priorities do not detract attention from the core business of what is happening in the classroom. As Zoe Morris flagged, they move beyond ideas around ‘best practice’, instead focusing on ongoing refinement and adjustments. Leaders use research, but selectively, making carefully considered decisions about what to share and when to introduce new ideas. They sense-check new ideas with the wider team and trial new approaches. Systems and structures ensure that teaching and learning is always the main topic of conversation. As Felicity Corcoran says, “until you get teaching and learning right, it doesn't matter.”

5. Aim for consistency, not compliance in teaching and learning

Leaders in strong schools recognise the importance of establishing a shared understanding of the kind of learning experience they want for their learners, what the team at St Michael's Catholic College describe as "visible consistencies." They establish routines and expectations and work collaboratively across teams to clearly articulate what great practice looks like in their context. They ensure that curriculum plans are high-quality and that teachers have excellent subject knowledge and pedagogical skills. However, importantly they also ensure that teachers have sufficient agency to utilise their professional judgement, bring their personality to the classroom and adapt meaningfully to the learners in front of them. They champion creativity and enable teachers to operate to the best of their ability. They understand the difference between delivering a curriculum and teaching it.

6. Take a holistic view of education

Outcomes matter, but strong schools take a broader view of success. They focus on the whole child, and what that child needs to thrive both during their time at school and beyond. They recognise the interconnection between high-quality teaching and learning and curriculum and learner engagement, attendance and ultimately outcomes. They recognise the value of learning beyond the classroom, and consider their curriculum offer in terms of the lived experience of their learners. Sustainably strong schools are happy schools, where children and staff want to be.

7. Have empowered teams, in which everyone can work to the best of their ability.

Strong schools have confident senior leaders who recognise the expertise in their team and empower colleagues at all levels to work to the best of their ability. They understand the limitations of trying to drive improvement from the top down and instead focus on getting the right people in the right places and then giving them the agency to lead. Strong schools carefully balance challenge and support, recognising that sustained high performance often requires a degree of discretionary effort, and that people give of their best when they feel valued and trusted. Craig Hewitt describes this as "high challenge, low threat."

8. Have empowered students who engage meaningfully with their own learning and with school development.

Strong schools give careful thought to the role their learners play in the success of the school. They ensure learners are proactively engaged in their learning and give a high priority to student leadership. Assessment is used to support meaningful conversation.

9. Have a strong sense of who they are

Strong schools have strongly held values that the whole community live out. These values are at the heart of the community and inform confident decision-making across the school. This goes far beyond members of the community knowing what the values are - they speak to the core motivations and moral purpose of the whole community. These values also ensure that leaders are able to establish a clear and consistent sense of direction, and have the confidence to say “no” when they know that something isn’t right for them, or isn’t right for them right now.

10. Focus on being in, not buying in

Strong schools are good at implementation. They plan development carefully, use research judiciously and give projects time to really embed. Importantly, they always consider how they will unite their team around an idea. They are not afraid of what the team at Upper Shirley High School describe as “messy thinking” – allowing time and space for the team to really explore challenging issues. Leaders value and draw upon expertise across the team, enabling staff at all levels to contribute and shape ideas. They research and test new approaches before rolling them out, seeing how they land with the team. This creates a sense of shared ownership and collective pride – meaning staff are not only following, but are driving the agenda.

11. Have leaders who step back and see the bigger picture

Schools always operate at a fast pace, and it is really easy for leaders to be drawn into what Lisa Mills describes as “busy work.” Where leaders try to directly involve themselves in everything, they lose the ability to reflect and make strategic decisions. Leaders in strong schools, stop, question what their role needs to be and are happy to delegate. They ensure that they have sufficient time and space to determine what will really make a difference for learners and explore the root causes of issues rather than being overwhelmed by immediate concerns.

12. Know they don’t have all of the answers

Even the most experienced, successful leaders know that they don’t have all of the answers. Indeed perhaps, it is that knowledge which underpins their success and informs their search for ongoing improvement. They operate in an ever-changing landscape, in the knowledge that what worked once, or what works currently elsewhere may not provide the answers. They remain open to new ideas, open to feedback and excited about possibilities. They choose to connect with other schools and welcome opportunities for professional dialogue.

With huge thanks to all of the contributors to this publication, who all gave their time and expertise so generously.

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- ▶ **Connections for senior leaders** – The SSAT Framework for Exceptional Education is updated bi-annually by Leading Edge schools at a planning day. Leading Edge schools can apply to be accredited for 'transforming' practice in up to four strands of the framework per year. The accreditation process involves a peer review with another school and a visit from a member of the Leading Edge team.
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