

Our Strategy

2026-31





Our purpose and ethos

Education is the most important role we can have: it is the entire foundation of the future of our society. For 140 years, our purpose has been that children and young people receive an excellent education, preparing them for success in life. So we know that our duties to society are greater than the performance measures or the priorities of the day and we put children first.

Our enduring educational principles are expressed through the 'Framework for Excellence'. The principles of 'powerful knowledge' and 'education with character' articulate our ongoing view that effective cognitive and personal development remain the best preparation for a fast-changing and unpredictable world; 'the best from everyone', that having the highest expectations brings out the highest performance; 'leadership in every role' that organisations are at their best when everyone has space to take responsibility and the lead.

Most fundamental of all for this strategy, the principle of 'continuous improvement' is that however good we become, we can be and should strive to be better. Colleagues in United Learning schools have achieved remarkable things – for example, 98.5% of our schools inspected over the last cycle were judged 'good' or better, compared to only 15.5% of those academies when they joined us. Those achievements are the reason why we can now even think about setting the ambitious goals of this strategy.

Our operational model also remains the same. Heads run schools and respond to the community they serve, reporting to Regional and Education Directors. We aim to operate with high trust and high accountability in every part of the organisation and to live out our core values of love, integrity and determination in all that we do. We work to bring out the best in everyone and make sure that help is always available to those who ask at United Learning.



Our size and shape

We aim to benefit as many young people as possible. Over the last decade, we have taken on some of the most challenging schools in the country and turned them around. And we have been joined by thriving schools who saw the benefits of being part of something bigger.

We will continue to take the same approach to the growth of the organisation. We want to use our capacity and capability to benefit as many children as possible and so we will take on schools where we can improve them, especially where there are challenges and especially where we have a unique contribution to make.

The key constraint on our growth is leadership capacity and we therefore aim to grow leaders and leadership not only to run our current schools to an excellent standard, but also to ensure we have leaders for the next stage of our work. With continued focus on growing leaders, we continue to believe organisational growth of around 10% per year is sustainable in the medium term.

However, we will only take schools on where we can do an excellent job and where we can do so without negative impact on our current schools. We are conscious as the largest group of schools in the country that each time we grow further, we reach a new largest size for our type of organisation, so we will continue to be thoughtful and reflective about our growth, its implications for us and the lessons to be learned.

Geographically, we continue to want to avoid isolated schools and to ensure that we have clusters of 3-5 schools of the same phase which can support one another and provide meaningful opportunities for staff and pupils. We continue to prioritise filling gaps in our footprint on this basis and will adopt a similarly strategic approach to the growth of our independent school group.

We continue to value the unique benefits of a Group which spans state and independent sectors. Many of the established strengths of the organisation (such as United Teaching and the United Learning curriculum) have grown from this collaboration and we intend to revitalise and strengthen educational collaboration between the two sectors.

We have taken the decision to bring special schools into the organisation for the first time. We recognise the national need for excellence in special education and will build our central expertise and resource to support not only the special schools joining us but also the thousands of children with identified special needs in our mainstream schools.

We also intend to establish a subsidiary for Church of England schools. This recognises the Church's decision that their schools can only join trusts with Church articles, while bringing the benefits of our school improvement capability to these schools.

Our educational goals

We are proud of our impact in turning schools around and raising standards. However, we continue to believe strongly that a much better education system is possible in which far more young people reach expected standards.

We do not know what could be possible, but do believe that nationally, at least 90% of children and young people can reach these standards, not at some indeterminate point in the future, but soon. So we set ourselves a **'90% system'** goal for this strategy period – that not only can 90% reach expected standards but that there is corresponding improvement at every level of the distribution.

At the same time, we recognise that while inevitably we will measure success in part through tests and exams, 'performance' matters only in so far as it measures what we really want – genuine understanding and 'being good at' the subjects of the curriculum. We therefore want to push back against some of the pressures and consequences of exam-dominated accountability and emphasise teaching for understanding and capability, not the ability to answer formulaic questions.



We therefore make **'scholarship and proficiency'** a goal of equal importance to the 90% system. 'Scholarship' emphasises depth, understanding, curiosity and fundamental capability. 'Proficiency' emphasises that in all subjects, including those with a strong practical component – art, music, sport, for example – we want pupils to develop specific skills and capabilities that a professional in those areas would recognise as 'becoming good' – at a specific sport or musical instrument, for example.

We also see the development of scholarship and proficiency as a fundamental enabler of the 90% system. It is through greater understanding and skill that children will do better; with less, not more, focus on specific question types or mark schemes.

Thirdly, we continue to make **character** central to our aims. We continue to believe that all three senses of the word that we have emphasised ('grit', 'integrity', 'interests') are of fundamental importance to human development. In an increasingly technological world, these fundamentally human qualities will be of even greater importance.

Our goals

90% system

A major improvement in attainment, so that at least 90% of pupils achieve expected standards at every stage of education, with corresponding increases at every level of attainment.

Scholarship and proficiency

Emphasising depth of understanding, extended work, the application of concepts and skills in unfamiliar situations and with a focus on becoming genuinely good at each discipline.

Character

Young people who are of good character – showing integrity; have character – showing grit and resilience; and are characterful – developing lifelong interests and passions.





The aims of challenging targets

Our '90% system' targets will apply at every stage – including the early years, phonics, KS2, GCSE, A level. School level targets will be appropriate for the context of the school based on the view that nationally, 90% can reach expected standards while the entire distribution of performance can shift upwards as all children, regardless of starting point, make exceptional progress.

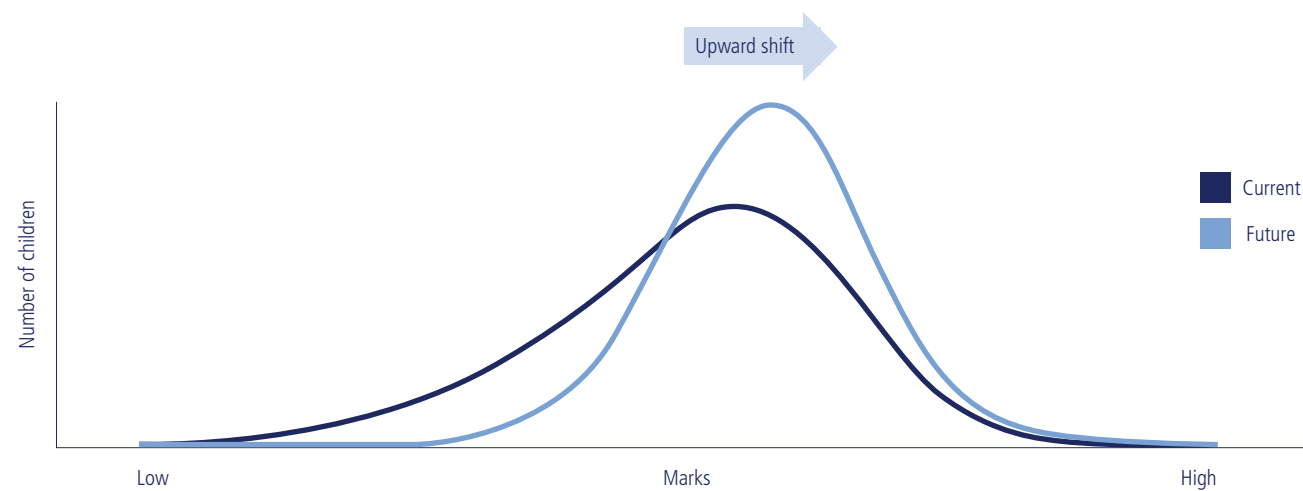
For example, at GCSE level, if 90% of the cohort can reach at least grade 4, 70% grade 5 and 25% grade 7, then a school's target for 2031 will be based on the model that children in the top 90% at KS2 reach grade 4, those in the top 70% grade 5 and those in the top 25% grade 7.

Our goals are inclusive, not exclusive. We believe that higher achievement is possible across the spectrum – but especially at the lower end of performance. Inclusion of those with disadvantage or additional needs is only inclusion if it leads to good outcomes and better preparation for life. A practice is not meeting a child's needs if the child is not able to progress and succeed.

These targets are not about accountability. We are serious about the three goals and will pursue them relentlessly, but we are determined not to create perverse incentives or a threatening environment for leaders or other colleagues.

We are seeking here to create a *galvanising* goal which makes us curious and determined to make a difference. We do not believe that we know everything we will need to know in order to succeed. Nor do we have a magic wand, a set of processes or a formula to apply.

Success will rely on our ability to learn and innovate. Doing this successfully will require us to be open to new ideas; to collaborate – developing new practices, evaluating them rigorously and sharing the results; and to be self-critical and honest, becoming more willing to discard things which aren't working or have low leverage as well as to 'steal with pride' and adopt things which are showing impact elsewhere.



The 90% system: at least 90% of children to achieve expected standards, with corresponding increases at every level of attainment

Our new emphases

We recognise that we cannot 'think pupils' thoughts for them' – it is only through their own attention, focus and thinking that they can understand and only through their own practice and hard work that they can acquire skills that they need. How hard pupils work both in school and 'when no-one is looking' is a key factor in their success and progress.

We will substantially raise our expectations of children and young people's independent study, looking for high quality work which is a product of pupils' own thinking in and out of school. We will do so supportively and with care, recognising

that absorbing and meaningful activity requiring a young person's full attention over a prolonged period is positive, not stressful, and can be an antidote to many current concerns about childhood.

We will look systematically to develop and test practices which move on our expectations of children and young people, including: how we create opportunities within the timetable for genuinely self-directed work; expectations of work outside the timetable; the balance between what is done within and outside lessons; and making sure that our digital tools encourage self-study and independence.

We are also conscious that parents and parenting are fundamental to shaping the success of children, but that schools' ability to influence parenting is a relatively unexplored avenue of school improvement. Our experience with United Communities, however, shows us that a listening, strengths-based approach to working with partners can repay great dividends for all involved.

We will therefore develop and implement a programme to support schools to work with parents as partners, starting by listening and seeking to understand, identifying strengths and then identifying actions to make it more likely that parents will be able effectively to support their children's learning. We will learn from the experience of our schools with developed community hubs as we design and deliver this programme.

Likewise, we know that parents can support children best as part of strong communities. With the support of United Communities, we will embed and deepen our approach to community development with our schools that have community hubs, extending this approach to new schools and areas over the next five years. We will learn about the practices and strategies that best contribute to bringing about meaningful locally-led change in areas that matter to our pupils, families and wider communities.





Our core educational processes

What distinguishes a school from any other organisation is its curriculum; and it is the curriculum, its teaching and its assessment which are central to any school's educational processes. Our existing United Learning curriculum and its associated resources have been instrumental in supporting the work done by colleagues in schools to raise standards, especially through the strength of scaffold it provides.

In renewing our focus on scholarship and on pupils' own hard work, we want to make sure that this strength does not become a barrier. So we will re-think the resources we produce to support teachers so that these promote more reflective practice and more extended work and more thinking by students. Through more 'textbook-like' materials, we will support students to work independently and to take control of their own learning. We will also develop digital tools to support teachers' planning.

New approaches to formative assessment will support teachers to respond effectively to students' misconceptions or areas of weakness. New approaches to summative assessment will support the development of scholarship by avoiding formulaic questions and promoting more individual responses depending on sound conceptual understanding. Better collection and use of data will enable us to evaluate and refine curriculum resources as well as to support school improvement.

United Teaching is a particular strength of the organisation and the work of the United Teaching team to develop new and early career teachers has been fundamental to the improvement of schools across the Group. Its model of a clear curriculum and centrally-led training with extremely close working with school-based mentoring has shown consistent long-term impact.



We are asking the United Teaching team to lead a new programme of development for experienced teachers. This will aim to give every teacher access to exceptional professional development support to improve and refine their practice and develop their career. It will involve mainly in-school delivery, with substantial input from subject advisers and mainly be subject-specific at secondary level. It will focus on scholarship, depth, student hard work and inclusive teaching.





Exceptional leadership

Heads are the decisive influence on the culture and climate of a school, its ethos and the behaviour of students and of staff one to another. We know that exceptional Heads create exceptional teams with the highest expectations and that this leads to excellent education for children and to the growth of other leaders in the school.

Therefore, just as we want to make the best standard of current teaching the norm across the Group, so we want to do the same at Headship level. Alongside existing leadership development programmes at all levels, we will create new programmes for Heads in the Group. First, an extended 'induction' programme for Heads in their first three years in the Group. This will have a clear curriculum and an identified peer group of colleagues (across phases and sectors) at a similar stage of their Headship. Second, a substantial new development programme for experienced Heads, based in school and supported by Regional Directors, but with off-the-job elements.

Our aim is that all Heads should be developing and seeking to achieve genuine excellence in their leadership, in the interests of children and young people. We want the programmes to be based on very honest conversations about strengths and weaknesses and therefore sufficiently bespoke to be of substantial value and impact for individuals, while also strengthening the collegiate sense of Heads working with peers.

On the same basis, we will put in place a more formal development programme for Regional Directors to support them to continue to develop and grow as leaders, especially but not only as they make a transition from school leadership.

Inclusion

As we publish this strategy, we are conscious of a seriously failing national 'SEND' system. Our goal is simply that we meet effectively the needs of many more children.

We have seen many more children coming into school far from ready for that environment. However, we have seen that meeting the needs of some of those children early and effectively can mean that they are able to access the curriculum successfully and do not need to be identified as 'having a special need'. We are also aware that all children have needs which deserve to be met and that we should do nothing which lowers expectations of any child.

We will focus on three main areas of improvement. First, we believe that mainstream teaching can be developed and enhanced to meet the needs of more children. The fundamentals of this are the 'Rosenshine principles' with specific thinking about how best to adapt teaching to meet more needs. This will substantially inform future teacher development. Likewise, we will build on the successful 'pedtech' trials in primary academies, which have shown significant impact in meeting needs, and look to develop and extend these models to more schools, phases and year groups.

Second, we are seeing a national proliferation of 'resource provisions' and similar. We see substantial risks in this: if done badly, it could lower expectations and mean some children lose contact with the curriculum. We will set out clear expectations for quality, inclusion and engagement with mainstream and ensure that we implement a rigorous approach to assessing and evaluating these provisions.

Third, we will bring special schools into the Group for the first time. We will ensure that support for these schools is properly organised around them and that we draw on their expertise across the Group as a whole.

We will also continue to explore the idea of a 'virtual school' to support children who do not have access to a strong curriculum.





A remodelled workforce

We will continue to ensure that we are developing the workforce in the best way, taking advantage of freedoms in relation to pay and conditions. We continue to want to see more highly skilled staff in pupil-facing roles, more reward for teachers staying in the classroom and a more devolved model of leadership and management.

We will continue to grow both United Teaching and our Apprenticeship provider, to support development of all staff and will work to acquire degree awarding powers to strengthen our offer further.

Digital strategy

Our approach to our digital strategy recognises that after many false starts, there is genuine potential for new technology to solve significant educational problems. We will ensure that we have the right foundations in place. At Group level, this means providing the infrastructure and support necessary to enable effective use of technology at school level. Likewise, there will be universal expectations of schools, including in relation to infrastructure, teacher use of devices (hardware and capability) and budgets which include a long-term plan for refreshing hardware.

We will adopt a highly disciplined approach to innovation and adoption, not only in relation to technology but in all areas. This will be based on effective evaluation. If something doesn't work, we won't do it; if it works everywhere all the time better than anything else, we will support everyone to adopt it; where we can see impact for some pupils in some circumstances, we will support schools to adopt it appropriately.



Financially successful schools

Our ability to achieve our objectives depends on maintaining our financial stability and success. Our central aims are not financial and we will take an educationally- rather than commercially-led approach on both sides of the Group. Nonetheless, continuing to deliver a good deal for children requires organisational and financial stability.

Particularly within the independent sector, which faces the most financially challenging period it has ever faced, continuing to secure exceptional value-for-money for parents through providing excellent quality at a fair price is essential to attracting pupils. That requires continuing focus on operational efficiency without compromise to quality.

We do not think that creating a more 'uniform' group of independent schools or prioritising the United Learning brand would be helpful. It remains a strength that our schools are run locally by Heads, respond to local markets and are therefore distinctive. We will support each school to have a compelling strategy and offer and we will invest more in central marketing support so that the excellence of our schools is more widely known.

Over five years, we expect to invest some £160m in the academies and some £60m in the independent schools. We will continue with our existing approach to backlog maintenance – seeking to meet needs over a ten year cycle. This requires around two thirds of the expenditure envelope, with the remainder focused mainly on ensuring facilities are suitable for the curriculum.





An efficient and effective centre

The centre will lead or facilitate a number of major new programmes in this strategy period, including in relation to teaching, leadership, inclusion, parents and pupils. This will come with a continued focus on efficiency and a continued desire to reduce the proportion of total income spent centrally. Systems improvement will be a key enabler – starting with the project to bring all schools within a ‘single tenancy’, which will facilitate effective collaboration across the Group.

The Best in Everyone

Our drive to create the best places to learn and the best places to work continues. The success of colleagues’ work to do this over the last five years allows us now to set out our most ambitious goals yet. We believe that with the contributions of everyone in United Learning – colleagues in schools and the centre, teachers, support staff, leaders and governors – and with determination and focus, these are achievable goals which can change the life chances of thousands of young people. At the same time, we will continue to look outwards, learn from others and contribute more widely – to other schools and trusts, to specific localities and through our expertise, programmes and resources, helping to bring out the best in children and adults across the education system.



