

# CHARACTER EDUCATION

Lessons from Multi-Academy Trusts



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# Forewords

*‘Recruit for attitude, train for skill’* is an adage which many employers keep in mind when selecting new employees. It captures something genuinely important. Of course, it isn’t the whole story: we’d all be fairly concerned if senior nuclear engineers in power stations were recruited on the basis of enthusiasm and willingness to learn. Knowledge of your subject is powerful and, in most walks of life, indispensable.

But when employers talk about what they look for when recruiting, they balance a requirement for credentials, knowledge and skill with a need for a broader set of personal attributes, characteristics and dispositions. They want to know who candidates are and how they will show up when they come to work. They’d rather have the right character walk through the door every morning, still polishing a few skills, than somewhat higher skills in the wrong human being.

We all recognise that the virtues we value are at their best in combination with one another. Confidence is a great thing in allowing us to bring our best to a situation - but unattractive and perhaps even dangerous without humility. Ambition is a powerful force for good when combined with integrity and used to serve others. Determination wins out when combined with reflectiveness and a willingness to learn.

But if we all understand all of that instinctively in our daily lives as adults, what is the role of schools in developing character in young people? And how can Multi Academy Trusts support them to fulfil that role in practice?

As more educators engage with these questions, we all benefit from an increasingly sophisticated and comprehensive understanding of character development. This publication is indicative of the desire to collaborate within and between school groups to improve the lives of the young people we serve.

**Sir Jon Coles, Chief Executive, United Learning**

Over the past decade, it has been truly inspiring to witness schools nationwide embracing the integration of a robust character development programme, assigning it an equal significance alongside academic excellence. These schools have recognised their pivotal role in nurturing the future generation of citizens, individuals who will not only assume vital roles in our society’s workforce but will also thrive, contribute, and embody the qualities of good citizenship.

This publication offers a glimpse into the remarkable initiatives taking shape within Multi Academy Trusts across our country. This marks the inaugural collaboration of Trusts of this magnitude, a development that fills us with great hope as we progress into the future, firmly establishing Character Education as a permanent fixture in our educational landscape.

We hope you find the ideas and activities in this publication useful. It’s truly heartening to witness numerous Trusts of different size and shape embarking on their character development journeys, and we hope this serves as inspiration for others to commence or continue their own character education journeys.

**Baroness Morgan of Cotes and Professor Tom Harrison**





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# Introduction

Character in schools cannot be treated as just another aspect of school. For it to be truly successful, it must become an integral part of everything they do. This is a common theme observed in many Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) throughout the country. Character education has shown to have a transformative impact in various settings, but it should be approached as a long-term strategy and mindset rather than a quick fix solution.

*A Trust is a family of interdependent schools of character with a shared ambition, where modern minds are shaped and lives are lived.*  
Neil Moir, CEO Alumnis Trust

Leadership plays a crucial role in driving the focus on character development, starting from the CEO and cascading downwards. Successful Trusts in this field have built capacity at the Trust level to continually drive forward the provision of character education. These Trusts adopt a continuous improvement model and are always seeking ways to enhance their practices.

Context is key, as schools need to be adaptable to their local area, and the values of character education must resonate with the local community to foster a sense of shared language and belonging. Trusts strive to systematically embed character education across schools while allowing flexibility in implementation. There is a range of strategies employed by Trusts, but all share the common approach of integrating character education into every aspect of school life.

*It is important that character education is intentional and planned rather than assumed and random.*  
Professor James Arthur, Jubilee Centre

Trusts ask similar questions of schools but acknowledge that responses may differ, recognising the importance of individual contexts. They ensure that a culture of character is established through consistent routines and behaviours, rooted in high expectations and the modelling of good character.

*Trusts are asking the same questions of schools, but are happy there may be different responses.*  
Professor Tom Harrison, Deputy Pro-Vice Chancellor & Director of the Jubilee Centre, University of Birmingham

Character education is not a quick fix solution, and schools should not adopt it solely for the purpose of meeting Ofsted requirements or obtaining recognition through quality marks. Instead, it is essential to understand the transformative impact it can have on young people, developing their phronesis—the ability to make the right decisions at the right time for the right reasons.

By focusing on character, behaviour improves, allowing teachers to teach effectively and leaders to lead confidently. Trusts have faced various obstacles during the implementation process but embrace these challenges and consistently seek forward thinking solutions. While Trusts encounter recruitment challenges, which is a national crisis, they prioritise recruiting staff who align with their visions and invest in their development and retention to enhance the provision for students. Role modelling by staff members in all schools is fundamental for character education to flourish.

*I set the tone for the school. If I was in a bad mood, the rest of the school would be in a similar position.*  
Sophie Murfin, CEO Wise Owl Trust

Trusts recognise the vital role parents play in shaping character development and actively seek to establish relationships with them. They understand that collaboration is essential in this process.

Trusts acknowledge the challenge of measuring the impact of character education, which can hinder its implementation. While certain data points such as attendance, academic results, and safety metrics provide tangible indicators of impact, there are also intangible factors to consider, such as the overall atmosphere and cleanliness of schools.

Time constraints often exert pressure when implementing character education initiatives. However, Trusts appreciate the significance of timely execution and view it as a worthwhile investment. They believe that time is not an insurmountable barrier and recognise its potential for positive influence.



“

*You must ensure that it (character) is seen as everything, rather than another thing.*

Chris Clyne, Regional Director, United Learning

”

For Trusts aiming to integrate character education into their group, several crucial considerations come to mind, as successful Trusts have realised. Firstly, Trusts must establish a clear vision, mission, and set of values that resonate with key stakeholders. This foundation enables a shared language and understanding among all stakeholders. With a clear vision and set of values, staff and students within the Trust are more likely to follow. Context is still a key factor when implementing at school level.

Leadership plays a fundamental role in character education. Trusts emphasise the importance of Trust-level comprehension of what character education entails and what it does not. It is essential to provide professional development and explicit training for all staff, not just leaders. Within the Trust, there should be someone responsible for strategically overseeing character development across the entire group, alongside within the school setting. Trusts should aim to recruit staff members who align with the core vision and values to enhance capacity within the schools. More Trusts are now explicitly thinking about character in their recruitment processes.

Some Trusts have now moved towards looking at performance management or professional development group wide around character and at a school level how staff develop their own character. In some instances, this is also happening at Trust level within central teams.

Trusts recognise the significance of contextual factors but also strive for a centralised approach that ensures systematic integration of character education across all schools within their network. They actively visit schools that have made significant progress in implementing character education to gain practical insights.

Trusts must demonstrate courage and recognise that despite the heightened accountability schools face, it is crucial to take a step back, reflect, and understand the core purpose of nurturing young individuals who can thrive in society. This necessitates investing time and resources in fostering the growth and development of staff, which ultimately has a positive impact on student flourishing.

There is a clear sense that character education gives staff within a MAT a sense of belonging, which in turn will allow staff and ultimately students to flourish.

*Chris Clyne, Regional Director, United Learning*

*Gary Lewis, Chairman, Association of Character Education*

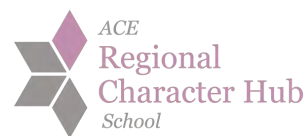
*Professor Tom Harrison, Deputy Pro-Vice Chancellor & Director of the Jubilee Centre, University of Birmingham*







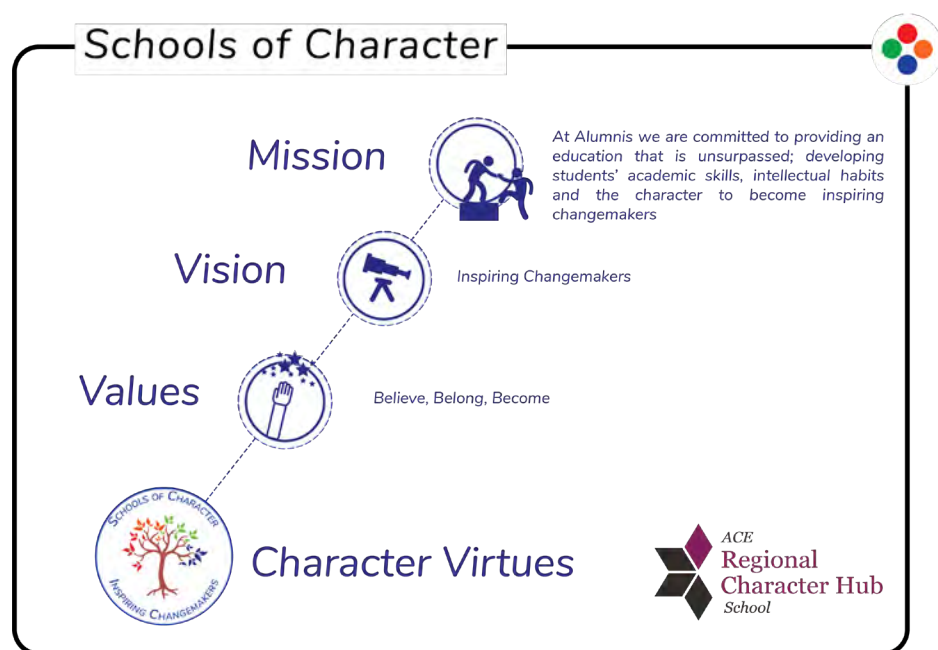
# Alumnis Multi-Academy Trust



ACE School of  
**CHARACTER**

## About us

Alumnis Multi Academy Trust is a Devon based Trust which includes nine primary schools each of which are committed to distinctively cultivating a characterful culture for all. We are a team of interdependent schools of character with a shared ambition where character is developed and modern minds are shaped. We work with collective ownership, a habit of collaboration and shared accountability across each other's schools with a focus on developing individuals in every role, who will pioneer leadership and seek the opportunity to inspire transformation.



## Strategic approach to character

Our journey started in Autumn 2020 with the appointment of our new CEO who has led an intentional implementation of character through our holistic C360 curriculum approach. Along with our Director of Education, all leaders across the Trust have sought to grow our settings as schools of character. The commitment of the CEO has been central to this influential work. We also committed to the appointment of a Trust Character Lead, who shaped, connected and embedded our Trust wide character approach which was rooted in the Trust vision of 'Inspiring Changemakers' and based on research from the Jubilee Centre. Our Trust approach uses the layers of character taught, caught and sought as a structure, with core strategies implemented within each school, engaging our very youngest children in Early Years all the way through their educational career.

Our approaches and vision are closely aligned with the Church of England's vision for education, upholding and promoting Christian values.



## Challenges, barriers and solutions

In order to ensure that all schools are aligned and driven by the vision; policies, structures and systems have evolved to enable the impact of distributed leadership securing sustainable approaches at all levels. Alumnis celebrates the unique distinctiveness of each of its schools and its place as an anchor within their community; connecting our family and wider stakeholders cohesively.

We focus on Trust wide intellectual, performance, civic and moral virtues as the thread that weaves through all our work. Developing positive character as a habit is fundamental in nurturing and challenging all learners in the journey to phronesis; doing the right thing at the right time for the right reason and providing children with tools for success in being role models of the future..

We implement a Trust wide celebration of character accomplishment in each of our schools where every individual is recognised for the progress and significant impact they have made. Embedding a shared virtue language in all our teams has developed a core means of communicating a deeper understanding of the value of character development breathing in and through all aspects of school life. This includes our social inclusion team working with our most vulnerable families.

A core emphasis on character sought and the implementation of 'The Changemaker Challenges' has been central in our approach. Teams across each school weave opportunities for these changemaker challenges to take place for all children to engage in; putting virtues into action and developing habits of intrinsic motivation. The challenges are carefully planned and integrated into our Future Ready curriculum outcomes enhancing enrichment and the co curriculum. UN sustainable development goals form the foundations of many of these challenges and engage our children in entrepreneurship, social action, volunteering and motivate learners to become independent, resilient, courageous and reflective changemakers.





## Advice for Trusts looking to develop character

**Shared Vision** - In creating a shared vision Trusts shape their identity, develop purpose and empower action which brings together all stakeholders.

**Understanding the Why** - A clear understanding of the 'why' and the 'what/how' is integral to a successful and meaningful approach. Rooting approaches in research based pedagogy is key as well as exploring theological underpinnings for C of E settings.

**A Characterful Culture** - Developing a culture where you can empower flourishing teams with a dynamic ability to embrace challenge comes from continuing self reflection from all stakeholders. Essentially, Trusts need to continue to invest time and energy into developing a workforce where cultivating a greater sense of meaning and purpose is given value (being part of something bigger), and effective professional relationships further encouraged to promote flourishing for all. Through our people strategy we are continually shaping a culture where flourishing adults are individually effective but collectively transformative.

**A Habit of Collaboration** - Networking with other schools and Trusts has been fundamental in developing our own approaches. Working with ACE and continuing to develop working partnerships with other schools of character in the region and nationally has continued to extend our thinking as we share excellent practice and develop a culture of national collaboration.







# Ark Schools



## About us

Ark Schools is a multi-academy trust operating a network of 39 schools in London, Birmingham, Portsmouth, and Hastings. Ark is committed to ensuring that every child, regardless of background or prior attainment, achieves highly enough to have real choices at age 18. 43% of Ark's students are eligible for free school meals, 16% are SEND and 46% are EAL.

## Strategic approach to character

Over the last 2 years, the importance of Personal Development as a whole has been elevated as a strategic objective across Ark Schools in response to an ever increasing complex social environment. As such, Character development is a substantive component of this work. For Personal Development and character, the Birmingham region of Ark schools have been spearheading the new approach and have shared their practise across the network. However, at Ark, we believe a strong character education needs to be intrinsic to a school's values and ethos, and therefore, one model cannot be transplanted to multiple schools. As such, there is no mandate as a MAT for a specific approach to the development of character, although minimum expectations are now in place.

### Intent:

- In the Birmingham region, we use a Neo-Aristotelean approach to character, informed by the work of the Jubilee Centre, where the overarching aim is to develop practical wisdom within our pupils. As such, Ark schools in Birmingham understand practical wisdom is a platform of thinking where reflection upon the practical application of virtue over time supports the decision-making process staff and pupils face every day in a range of situations in the classroom, on the playground and beyond. Practical wisdom provides the language of thought to inform the best possible decision making in order for one to flourish.

- Fundamental to this approach are virtues, of which there is no definitive list, but all of which are universal (recognised as the same across history, culture, religion and differing societies). Virtues will either be moral, civic, intellectual or performance based
- Virtues are cultivated through 3-step virtue literacy:
  1. Virtue perception: noticing situations in need of virtues
  2. Virtue knowledge and understanding: acquiring a complex language
  3. Virtue reasoning: making reasoned judgements, including the ability to explain differences in moral situation
- Virtues can be:
  - **Caught:** the school community of both staff and students provide the example, culture, and inspirational influence in a positive ethos that motivates and promotes character development.
  - **Taught:** the school provides educational experiences in and out of the classroom that equip students with the language, knowledge, understanding, skills and attributes that enable character development.
  - **Sought:** the school provides varied opportunities that generate the formation of personal habits and character commitments. These help students over time to seek, desire and freely pursue their character development.
- To define what this work looks like for Ark, PD leads come together across the Birmingham Region to strategically define the curriculum intent for Personal Development, including Character and work together on plans of implementation. This work is led by the Regional Director, who is also doing an MA in Character.

### Implementation: Spotlight on Ark Tindal Primary Academy

- Ark Tindal started their journey by investing in whole staff training and were intentional in not starting any character developing with students until the whole staff body had a good understanding of character. The leadership team started this work by asking staff to complete the VIA character survey, and then asked them to consider the implications of their results in different moral dilemmas
- As virtue literacy strengthened within the staff body the school aimed to ensure this work was intrinsic to school values and ethos. In consultation with children & staff, the school named classes after virtues, introduced virtue assemblies and considered how virtue development can be explicit in enrichment and more. It was built into life at school wherever possible and suitable.
- For staff, virtues were also built into the Performance Management Policy. Staff considered how their strengths and lesser strengths might impact their daily work and what this might look like if a virtue was in deficit or excess.
- For pupils, virtues have been mapped in to the academic and personal development curriculum. For example, science and humanities lessons have been mapped to virtues of significant individuals (e.g curiosity and determination when studying 'The Wright Brothers'). In reading, pupils explore virtue development through key texts. For example:
  - Reception: We're going on a Bear Hunt - gives platform to mention courage, curiosity
  - Year 2: Jack and the Beanstalk - gives context to talk about kindness, curiosity and honesty.
  - Year 4: Charlie and the Chocolate Factory - children use the idea of the 'Golden Mean' to explore how some characters met their end in the story because of virtue vices
- Pupils also develop their character through practise, reflection and given moral dilemmas.

### Impact:

- Although this work is still in its infancy, virtue literacy is now a strength within the school and has had a positive impact on behaviour and attitudes.
- Pupils use the language of virtue within conversations, in lessons, on the playground and through conversations about their behaviour. This was particularly evident in a recent pupil survey.
- School values are deeply rooted into the fabric of the school; these are articulated well by pupils and staff.



- A positive impact can also be seen within the school staff with professionalism, relationships, team work and candour is a strength within the school.
- This work has been presented to Ofsted in different forms during school inspections and received very positive feedback. This is happening alongside a renewed network level 'Connections Passport' for enrichment.

## Challenges, barriers and solutions

- Still in its infancy and therefore unanticipated issues expected and gaps in subject knowledge. *However, regional leads' support one another and share best practise.*
- This work requires a huge amount of time investment which is a risk from leaders as they are not going to see an overnight return or immediate impact. This can be difficult in a high stakes environment where there are many competing priorities. *By having schools or a group of schools leading this work first, other schools within the MAT are able to see the impact and benefits it can bring and understand that this is not a 'package', but a process.*
- Maintaining a minimum standard of great practice whilst giving schools autonomy over direction. *Ark has a strategic lead to bring the work together and direct the foundational expectations.*
- Acknowledging the broad contexts of different schools in the network and building strategies for support. *A robust resource base to cater for the varying needs of all schools in the trust.*
- Having a named SLT member responsible for PD/character.
- It takes time and deep learning to do this work well and if rushed, can become meaningless. How do you navigate a school that says they have a strong character system that isn't reflected in the schools' culture and ethos?
- As the virtue literacy of staff is fundamental in moving character education forward, staff turnover is a risk. *Character should be part of staff induction and recruitment.*

## Advice for Trusts looking to develop character

### Invest

- Time in the process
- In people. Ensure training is addressed at a whole-MAT level and becomes part of the MAT ethos.

### Leadership:

Have a named strategic lead in each school to take accountability for character. Make capacity for this to take place and ensure they have the right resources/money to support them. Ensure they are working closely with other leads, particularly in personal development, to pull the work together and create consistency within the approach.

### Lean on experts in the field – such as:

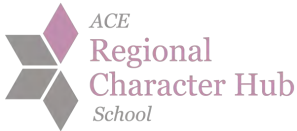
- Jubilee Centre
- Association for Character Education (ACE)
- Wider reading







# Character Education Trust



## About us

The Character Education Trust is a multi-academy trust (MAT) that exists to provide outstanding education in both primary and secondary schools in Kent. The key aim of our Trust is to give young people the tools they need to be well qualified to achieve success and well-being, and to have choices in adult life. To achieve this, we aim to help young people develop good character strengths, reach their academic potential and discover where they excel. We believe in ‘Building Character and Creating Opportunities.’

We are currently a very small multi academy trust with only two secondary schools. We are situated in the local authority of Kent which is a selective authority. Aylesford School and Wrotham School are non- selective secondary schools.

- Our academies are aligned by a commitment to:
- Prioritising academic excellence, high expectations and the development of character;
  - Being inclusive; developing the highest quality of teaching and learning;
  - Providing valuable progression routes that will give young people choices in adult life and allow them to be well qualified to achieve success and well-being.

## Strategic approach to character

As a very small trust of just 2 schools the context was very important. In 2016 following a Local Authority review, it was clear Aylesford school was inadequate in all areas and an academy order was issued. Aylesford school was using a punitive system for tackling behaviour which disempowered staff and was not having an impact on improving behaviour. The CEO of the trust came across character education in late 2016 at the ACE conference and was inspired and passionate about the vision of developing good character in our students. The Headteacher and Senior Assistant Headteacher were sold on the



idea of developing good character in our students and together we introduced Character Education as a vehicle for rapidly changing the culture of the school. All stakeholders were on board – it is quite difficult to argue that students shouldn’t have good character and it was clear for all to see that something needed to change rapidly. We delivered training sessions on what Character Education is and involved all stake holders in the decision making process about what core Character values/ strengths are most important for our students. Twelve strengths were identified and chosen with ‘Respect’ being top of the charts with all stakeholders.

Character Education at Wrotham School had a very different starting point. Wrotham School had a very clear, and long established culture with a track record of good results and was regarded across the county as one of the highest achieving non selective schools.

At various points between 2017 and 2021 we thought about the introduction of Character Education at Wrotham School but were always challenged by the fact, that at the time the timing never seemed right to introduce character education at Wrotham and the CEO didn’t want to impose a new culture on a school that didn’t need it.

However, as time went on and as Aylesford begun to see direct improvements in key performance indicators across the full spectrum of the school (Reduced Suspensions, Increased Attendance, Better outcomes etc) it was felt that the introduction of character education across the trust would be the next logical step in the development of the ‘Character Education Trust’

Wrotham appointed a character lead in 2021 and met soon after with the character lead at Aylesford. After lots of discussion and dialogue across the trust, and with leaders at both schools we decided that the starting point should be the same for Character Education at Wrotham should be the same as Aylesford, and that a similar model of behaviour linked to character should be introduced.

The first thing that Wrotham did was to identify a core set of character strengths or values for the school. The model for doing this was identical to Aylesford with all stakeholders having a say about which values they feel is important. This led Wrotham to 10 character strengths, that although different to Aylesford would underpin the future work around Character Education that Wrotham would go onto do. The decision was made to keep the branding and house style the same across the trust and for both schools.

### Wrotham School’s Character Values/Strengths:

**RESPECT SELF-DISCIPLINE COURAGE**  
**OPEN-MINDEDNESS MOTIVATION**  
**RESILIENCE CONFIDENCE INTEGRITY**  
**COMPASSION CURIOSITY**

### Aylesford School’s Character Values/Strengths:

**RESPECT INTEGRITY CONFIDENCE**  
**OPEN-MINDEDNESS MOTIVATION**  
**COMMUNICATION TEAMWORK**  
**CREATIVITY RESILIENCE COMPASSION**

The focus is on recognising good character and behaviours in school rather than focussing on the negative and celebrating the development of good character. It is about students taking responsibility for their own character, behaviour and actions. Every learning and behaviour conversation centres around the language of Character.

When students show adverse character they have to be reflective and attend a repair and rebuild meetings and we do not have detentions but we do have lesson catch ups to make up the time lost. The important element is the reflection on their own character and the learning conversations between students staff and parents to find a way forward.





## Challenges, barriers and solutions

One of the biggest challenges for was how a clear vision and intention could be shared and adopted by schools whilst at the same time allowing Wrotham school the autonomy and independence to adapt in a way that suited their own context. It is vital to remember that what works for one school will not always work for others. Character Education is not a package of resources

Disseminating Character Education across the trust with schools in very difficult circumstances - we knew what worked at Aylesford and the benefits, but would this work at Wrotham? Should we just drop the current model into a new school or should we start from scratch and to what extent should Wrotham school put their own stamp on Character Education. The Aylesford staff really needed to try hard to avoid the pitfalls of 'at our school we do this'.

You have to build a critical mass who are aligned with Character Education – This can be more difficult with staff who have a fixed traditional mindset about behaviour. People at the top have to really believe in it and be passionate (CEO, Headteacher, Character Lead), Staff buy in to drive it forward, students – involve stakeholders in some of the decision making.

## Advice for Trusts looking to develop character

- Visit a Regional Character Hub School to see it in action.
- Ensure the CEO and Wider Leadership are fully on board and are prepared to spearhead and drive character
- Ensure the Trust vision and intent is clear – but recognise your context and the context of schools that you are working with. Character Education is not a one size fits all model

Our vision is to grow a family of schools in both primary and secondary phases, that work together to provide an education that builds character. We share a mission to develop confident young people who can make a positive difference to the world around them.







# Nishkam School Trust

## About us

The first Nishkam educational institute opened in 2006 as a community funded Christian ethos vocational college in Kericho, East Kenya. Since then, the Nishkam Schools Trust has continued to grow in the UK and is now comprised of three primary schools, one secondary school, one all through school and three nurseries with approximately 3,000 pupils and 280 staff across 6 very different locations. So there are Nishkam schools and nurseries in Birmingham, Wolverhampton, West London, Derby, Leeds and Kenya.

## Strategic approach to character

The Nishkam Schools Trust shared vision and group wide approach to virtues-led education is to empower children with faith-inspired virtues that enable them to excel academically and spiritually, inspiring them to serve humanity selflessly (Nishkam) with an abundance of love, compassion and forgiveness. Our virtues-led holistic approach is based on the belief that every human has the potential to be good and all staff work hard to foster that innate goodness by respecting the human dignity of every child and adult. We do this through our vision of being faith inspired, virtues-led and aspiring for excellence.

**Faith inspired** because we learn about but also learn from the wisdom of religions and we do this within an environment that is welcoming, inclusive and harmonious. We celebrate the diversity in our schools and come together regularly for Trust wide events to reflect on our core purpose and vision and share good practice.

**Our virtues-led education** approach helps to provide guidance to enable our children to understand their choices in order to help lead better lives. Our virtues underpin everything we do and are lived out day by day by our staff, pupils and in turn our parents. All staff aim to be role models and focus on human dignity by using a shared 'language of virtues' and we avoid shouting, using blame or shame. We use positive language that aims to encourage and build self-esteem and we focus on restorative justice in our approach to behaviour by hearing our students and listening to them with kindness and compassion. By acting or behaving to model virtues we are helping our pupils to have humility and recognise and learn from their own mistakes.

**At Nishkam we aspire for excellence**, and we are uncompromising in our ambition for all of our pupils regardless of their starting point. We have a proven track record of success and have achieved outcomes significantly above national and local averages for the last four years. Crucial to this success is our shared curriculum, our Nishkam Passport and the investment in our staff to ensure that they have the appropriate skills, knowledge and support for our virtues-led approach in order that they can fulfil the aims of the curriculum and the ethos of the Trust.

## Challenges, barriers and solutions

**The Nishkam Curriculum** – Our curriculum narrative is built around our golden threads through an understanding of what we learn about collaboration, peace, forgiveness and love through each subject and unit of work. It is constructed to ensure the disciplinary knowledge and substantive concepts of each subject is carefully mapped out to allow synergy and cohesion. It is delivered by passionate teachers and subject leaders who meet regularly through Trust wide subject hubs and is underpinned by our language of virtues. The role modelling and use of the language of virtues is a key component in securing achievement and in helping to develop successful but also confident global citizens.

**The Nishkam Passport** is the most important curriculum resource we use that forms the basis of our curriculum intent and is a unique document given to every child and member of staff when they join any of our schools. It allows them to build self-responsibility and self-reflection. We use it to support all kinds of lessons and with all age groups and it is not unusual to hear our children in EYFS talk about their virtue of cleanliness when tidying up, their virtue of kindness when they are turn-taking and Year 2 children as young as 6, tell me all about their signs of success for that week. This forms an incredible foundation for our children and becomes a tool for life for all our pupils regardless of their background. It helps to shape their attitudes to learning and is woven through all areas of the curriculum. For an example of the use of the Nishkam Passport in action, please see the following clip of a Year 4 pupil writing a poem on the war in Ukraine on peace and conflict.

Learning about Peace and Conflict, Nishkam Primary School - [youtu.be/nl0G6oWs3ac](https://youtu.be/nl0G6oWs3ac)

## Advice for Trusts looking to develop character

**Visit** other schools to see it in action and speak to staff who teach this way every day. The value of this approach can never be underestimated. Behaviour is exemplary in our schools and relationships are really special as a result of the role modelling and use of the language of virtues by everyone in school. Make sure your virtues or values are displayed everywhere and information about this is in all key documentation for recruitment. For example, we ask a question related to virtues in our reference request for referees. Make sure your website is explicit about your intentional focus on character and virtues-led education. Staff CPD is also vital, so everyone understands the purpose but also has the tools to deliver high quality curriculum provision.

**Invest in your staff** – We have very high expectations of all staff at Nishkam in their role as educators of character and virtue, so we invest quality time in a comprehensive induction and training package for all staff new to the Nishkam family. All staff have the opportunity to spend time in school before they begin their journey with us to see our virtues-led approach in action. Dedicated time is then given to all staff to meet with a senior leader to go through all key policies and documentation which always starts with the NST vision and language of virtues approach. Every new member of staff will also have a mentor who they will meet every 2-3 weeks throughout their probation period to review their induction and offer any support required.

**Revisit your vision regularly** – every school in the Trust revisits the language of virtues approach and NST vision at the start of each new school year as part of the CPD offer. This helps to remind us of our Patron's vision of why virtues-led education is so important.





# Severn Academies Education Trust



## About us

Severn Academies Trust (SAET) is based around the Wyre Forest, Worcestershire. Formed in 2016 by a group of like-minded Governors and Headteachers, comprising of 8 schools; 6 Primary and 2 Secondary, educating young people from age 3 -18. Further adding to the diversity of our schools, 4 of the Primaries are faith schools, of a Church of England denomination.

At SAET, we believe developing the good character of our young people is the fundamental aim for education. Our Mission is to provide the nurturing conditions for 'Growing Brilliance' in all our learners. Our Vision places personal growth, community and excellence at the heart of everything we aspire towards and do. Our Mission and Vision permeate all aspects of our work and allow our self-determined schools to ensure a broad and enriching experience where young people are proud of their achievements, are empowered and aspirational.

## Strategic approach to character

To facilitate our mission of 'Growing Brilliance', we have created 'The Pledge'. The Pledge is a framework for our children and young people to identify and draw out the brilliance they each have within them. The Pledge has 4 areas that we use as the framework to do this:

**Personal Development** – nurturing the Intellectual Virtues (eg curiosity, critical thinking)

**Leadership** – nurturing the Moral Virtues (eg courage, empathy, integrity)

**Community and Diversity** – nurturing the Civic Virtues (eg volunteering, civility)

**Enrichment** – nurturing the Performance Virtues (eg confidence, perseverance)

Through the Pledge we create multiple 'entitlements' for our children to be curious learners, think critically from an early age, and foster civic engagement in our local communities. There are 16 entitlements that we have agreed through discussion



and collaboration with young people, parents, staff, school leaders and trustees that every child will experience during their time in one of our schools. However, we recognise the uniqueness of all our schools and the communities they serve. Each school is free to individualise their Pledge to suit their age, stage, needs and context. This is co-constructed with the Director of Personal Development, Wellbeing and Belonging who acts as a critical friend to ensure that the trust framework is adhered to, whilst facilitating sharing of best practice.

## Challenges, barriers and solutions

From the inception of the Trust, there has always been a strong 'why' around the importance of character education, without initially clearly understanding 'how' we would deliver it. We found clarity around this when appointing a Trust Lead to drive Character Education and the personal development element of our provision. Through clear vision and collaboration they have drawn together all of the elements with leaders in each school, providing a roadmap for success.

Our trust core values of Growth, Excellence, Ambition and Respect, overarch and compliment those of our eight individual schools, enabling them to connect deeply with the communities they serve. This really matters to us, and has been a gift and a curse in the creation of our strategic approach to character. Getting that balance between consistency for all with empowerment of individual schools has been a challenge; one which has had a number of trial iterations. Initially, a key barrier was incorporating the SAET values alongside those of each individual school. Through discussion, debate and pilot programs we came to the design of the framework outlined above, empowering each school to drive character development in the most suitable way in their context. For example, under the Leadership banner, each school can tailor this to expand on their own values and for young people to reflect on their development. This will also be really powerful for schools joining us on the journey.

## Advice for Trusts looking to develop character

- 1. Know what character means to you and your context.** Have a clear narrative about the communities you serve and how everything aligns with how you are supporting your context.
- 2. Have a named strategic lead to take accountability for character.** Make capacity for this to take place and ensure the leader has the right resource to support them in delivering. Ensure they are able to work closely with other key leaders in each school, particularly in personal development, to pull the work together and create consistency in application.
- 3. Invest time in the people and training at a MAT level as well as at the whole-school level.** It is important that ALL staff – not just leaders or teaching staff - are involved. This will ensure that character between different staff members – associate, administration, curriculum, behaviour, teaching and learning etc all understand the mission and are able to collaborate coherently.





# Tudor Grange Academies



## About us

*"You don't get harmony if everyone sings the same note".*

Tudor Grange Academies Trust is a family of 13 academies: five secondary, one all through academy and seven primary academies. The core strategic vision of the Trust is to develop a Multi Academy Trust of four self-sufficient geographical hubs: Solihull, Worcestershire, Warwickshire and the East Midlands. Our 521 teachers and 8423 students have a shared ethos, common values and collective goals. We are working together in a model of meaningful, focused collaboration to achieve excellence in our schools. We are driven by four key values:

- Our children will live 'Happy, fulfilling lives'
- Outstanding teaching and learning is our core focus
- Outstanding Governance supports our schools
- Leadership and professionalism drives continuous improvement

## Strategic approach to character

There is an expectation that schools teach Character. We have a shared curriculum constructed around common expectations about the knowledge that students should study supported by four pillars. One of those pillars is Character.

Senior leaders, responsible for personal development, behaviour, teaching and learning etc meet regularly in groups to share good practice and drive innovation across the trust. The personal development steering group has agreed, based on research and best practice within their schools what exemplifies effective character education and developed a self-evaluation tool to provide clear, specific, actionable guidance. This prompts senior leaders to consider how character is developed in every aspect of school life.

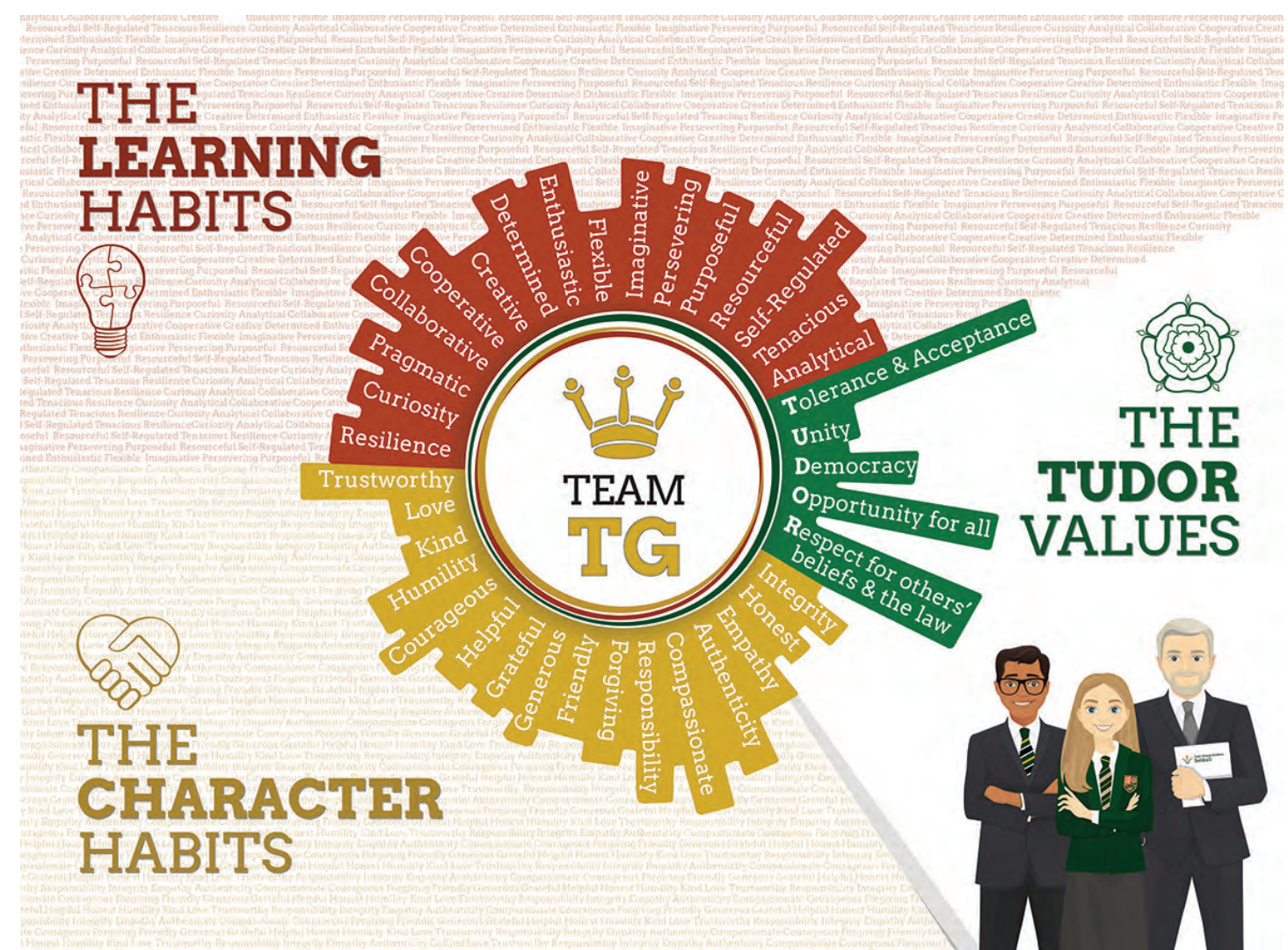
All academies also complete a common curriculum self evaluation tool. This takes language and concepts directly from the personal development self-evaluation tool to ensure that departments consider specific questions about how they develop character within their subject and have a shared understanding and consistent approach. We have regular trust-wide inset days where departments meet to discuss and develop their curriculum. For example, in January departments presented to each other on how they develop character within schemes of work.

The self-evaluation tools are also used to inform conversations between Senior Leaders, Principals and Executive Principals. Executive Principals moderate the audits and identify and develop areas of good practice so that they can be shared trust-wide.

Individual schools can make local decisions about how they approach the curriculum and students' personal development to suit their context. However, some common practice has developed across the Trust:

- The use of the language of habits (character dispositions/virtues) and values to describe good character
- Reporting to parents and students about students 'learning habits'
- Praise and reward systems that promote good character. For example, students receive stickers and merits in one of our schools for showing good 'Learning habits', 'Character habits' and 'Tudor Values'

## An example of the character system from one of our schools:





## Challenges, barriers and solutions

**School identity:** Principals understandably want ownership of the culture and ethos of their academies. We have worked hard with leaders to demonstrate that we can have common and shared approaches and routines for character development but also retain distinctive elements to the identity and culture of each academy.

**Silos:** Character education permeates all areas of practice and to work effectively, it needs to sit within a consistent and cohesive vision for the culture of the school. When teams of senior leaders work separately on different strategic areas, such as behaviour or teaching and learning, they can begin to head in off different directions. Our solution is to encourage different steering groups to have joint meetings throughout the year. Additionally, Executive Principals participate in these working groups to ensure their efforts are coordinated.

Leaders and teachers at all levels need a well-grounded understanding of what Character Education means. We have been constantly surprised to see how difficult even expert practitioners find it to identify, draw out and make explicit the links to character that already exist within their work.

## Advice for Trusts looking to develop character

Work with school leaders to ensure that the narrative for their school identity and community closely aligns with your vision for character. Importantly, leaders must understand that students should want to do the right things, not just because they have been told to, but because they identify with the vision of the good life that bonds the school community together.

Leave subject curriculums to last. Make sure that your character culture is well established in the areas of your schools that you have more of a direct influence over: areas such as praise and rewards, assembly and tutor times, reporting etc. When you do start working with departments, be more flexible in your approach to embedding character. Work with the strengths of each subject. Don't restrict subjects to just your banner virtues and values. Let each subject find a set of qualities and dispositions that support them to develop the writers and scientists of the future. Some departments will find they wish to focus more heavily on performance virtues whilst others may find civic or moral virtues align more easily with their curriculum. However, insist on a common approach to codification of character in the curriculum so you can hold leaders to account and share good practice more easily.

It is important that all staff take responsibility for character development rather than leaving it to the person 'in charge' of personal development. To achieve this you must identify all the opportunities throughout every aspect of school life where you can embed expectations and routines that make explicit reference to character. Any self-evaluation tools that you produce as a trust should reflect these areas. Then you can be sure that students, parents and staff in all schools are regularly returning to these messages and concepts.







# United Learning



## About us

United Learning is a Group made up of over 100 primary, secondary, and all-through schools across England. Our Group includes a significant number of schools in both the public and private sectors, working together for mutual benefit.

Our Framework for Excellence sets out the five principles which all our schools work to:

- The Best from Everyone
- Powerful Knowledge
- Education with Character
- Leadership in Every Role
- Continuous Improvement

These represent our agreed view of the distinctive approach to education of our group of schools and the characteristics which lead to excellence when exemplified in the right way. The Framework is the way we set standards for ourselves and assess our progress.



## Strategic approach to character

'Character' has a number of different senses and all of them are important:

Being **'of good character'**: someone is 'of good character' if they have the integrity to do the right thing above pursuing their self-interest, giving in to social pressure or making attractive but poor choices. A person of good character 'does the right thing even when no-one is looking'.

**'Having character'**: someone 'has character' or 'shows character' when they dig deep, show grit, resilience and resourcefulness, persist in the face of adversity and do their best even when it looks like they won't succeed. They help others to do the same, lead, encourage and bring out the best in others. A sports team which collapses and falls apart when losing may be said to 'lack character' in this sense.

Being **'characterful'**: a person who is full of character has interests, is interested and curious, knows who they are, what matters to them, what they stand for and can express those things and themselves. They will have done enough, tried enough and experienced enough to have found their passions and interests.

If young people leave our schools with all of these, they are well set up to live a good and successful life full of interests, contributing as a pillar of their community and our society.

We have a broad view of 'character' and fully recognise that our character is developed in everything we do, not just in co-curricular activities. In school, the culture, climate, values, relationships, messages from curriculum and teaching, and the behaviours of adults and children are all significant in developing character.

Therefore our strategic approach to character includes the following elements:

### Character Curriculum

This curriculum is in development. It will sequence the learning of specific character traits and identify what should be taught to children, where in the school day (academic lessons, co-curricular, hidden curriculum), and when in their school journey.

### Pupil Charter

This is a set of co-curricular opportunities which we think all children should experience at different Key Stages and all schools should deliver. We have also defined what structures need to be in place so that schools can meet the commitments of the Charter and ensure that these experiences are high quality.

### Assessment of character provision in schools across the trust

All schools regularly assess their provision against a framework, co-designed with Northampton Academy and the Jubilee Centre. Schools use the results from this assessment as part of their school improvement plans. We are also developing a more consistent method of tracking participation in extra-curricular activity across the group.

### Network of Character Leads

Each school has a named lead of character education who is responsible for driving the work in their context. There are termly network meetings and excellence visits where character leads across the country share best practice and are consulted on the strategic direction of the group.



## Challenges, barriers and solutions

### Common understanding of 'character'

To achieve a shared vision, it is important that schools have a common understanding of what is meant by character and buy in to the group's strategic ambition. This takes time to develop and must be done in collaboration with schools. We should aim to build on and enhance what is already familiar to schools. It should not necessarily replace existing values, learning skills, and delivery structures (especially where these are very effective).

### School context and resourcing challenges

The main challenges to delivering an ambitious provision for character education are **financial, expertise, staffing** and local **opportunity**. These factors are not independent of each other and often compound the degree of challenge. For example, it is more expensive for schools who have to travel beyond their local area to access inspirational characterful experiences beyond the school gates (visits, performances, fixtures, etc). Equally, schools with smaller staff bodies may have to pay to bring in external partners in to deliver a rich co-curricular provision.

A trust may support with some of the resourcing challenges faced in individual schools by:

- guiding schools on the most impactful experiences, so that they can focus their limited resource
- hosting groupwide events at inspiring venues that an individual school would not be able to put on alone, and supporting wherever possible with travel expenses
- encouraging collaboration between schools (e.g. holding joint events such as career fairs)
- forming partnerships with external organisations to deliver opportunities for students or training for non-specialist teachers (e.g. singing in primaries, or Oxbridge expertise in secondaries)
- creating and sharing best practice, useful contacts, and wider opportunities. Banks of resources should be created and continually updated with individual schools able to add to them themselves.

## Advice for Trusts looking to develop character

### Trust Leadership

For character to permeate the organisation, there have to be drivers and advocates at every level from the CEO to the governors to the staff bodies and the local communities. As a long-term strategic priority, the trust regularly reports on progress and continues to focus on improving the student experience for children across the country.

### Consult with schools and give it time

The team leading the work need to listen to schools and learn from their expertise. They should bring schools on the journey to create a shared vision and ensure that the ambition is aspirational but achievable. It takes time to make character part of everything, not just another thing.

### Collaboration

Use the size of the trust to your advantage: learn from the many experts and the enthusiasts; share resources and opportunities wherever possible; form partnerships with external organisations who themselves want to make an impact at scale.







# Wise Owl Trust



ACE School of  
**CHARACTER**

## About us

Based in East Manchester, Wise Owl Trust is a small but growing Multi Academy Trust, serving some of the most highly deprived areas and facing the challenges of an inner-city catchment.

## Strategic approach to character

Our mission is to wholeheartedly dedicate ourselves to every child, family, and community. We are driven by a powerful ambition to eliminate barriers, ignite soaring aspirations, and shape bright futures. We believe in the magic of inspiring characters and the profound impact this has on transforming lives.

Our passion and provenance has been built on driving swift school improvement in schools requiring support. Our blueprint has been to focus on the culture of the school through character education as the first and most fundamental change. In our experience it has created deep-rooted school improvement to ensure longevity and sustainable change as opposed to quick fixes. The impact has not just been at organisational level but also with individuals of whom have since left their Primary education and returned to share their stories of success. We firmly believe that these are born out of the character skills they have experienced and honed over the years with us as their primary educators and beyond.

Since 2013 our schools have developed their Character Education offer in joint collaboration and therefore have a standardised approach. This includes, for example, our shared values, curriculum, implementation approach and policies etc. However, we are mindful that as a growing Trust, new schools may want to retain some identity and this is very much celebrated within our vision for the future.



Our experience has nevertheless shown that once schools have witnessed the impact on the whole school community, including;

- the reduction in workload for teachers by centrally producing resources and
- improving wellbeing through an enhanced culture with fewer behavioural issues to contend with

The schools discover the benefits and become interdependent upon one another, naturally creating a cohesive positive approach and culture.

## Challenges, barriers and solutions

Our success for the implementation and demonstrable impact of Character Education has been through:

- A collaborative approach with all stakeholders involved in the journey of change, including parents from the outset.
- Priority focus given to the teaching of Character Education by the executive leaders across the Trust to ensure it is given the time and resources required for effective delivery.
- Annual planner disseminated early with termly opportunities to refocus on Character and recalibrate where required. i.e Assemblies, days out, parents evenings staff CPD
- Ensuring that Character Education is central to all decision making and vision, through making it front and centre and not allowing it to be relegated for other priorities as an improvement strategy. For us, as other priorities change and adapt, the focus on Character is an unequivocal constant.
- Each year all schools across the Trust come together to take part in a Character sports day whereby the pupils complete a range of activities to showcase their character traits. This event is open to families to celebrate pupils achievements with us.

## Advice for Trusts looking to develop character

**Consider the longevity and sustainability of the approach.** To ensure that Character remains a priority for all, it needs to be passionately driven from the top. To ensure longevity, carefully consider the amount of time and resource required to plan out the intended approach, building in enough time to reflect, refocus and recalibrate. In the early days, this was our biggest mistake! If given a blank piece of paper we would first consider the wealth of research now available and consult with the vast amount of Trusts in the established stages of Character Education. We would also build in some flex in order to mould and shape our approach in response to the inevitable change of the entity such as size, make-up of schools, varying contexts etc.

**Consider how the delivery and monitoring** will be carried out across the number of schools. One of our biggest successes was the fact that we had an Executive Principal that led on the Character Education approach and who was present in each of our schools weekly to ensure consistent and effective delivery.

**Consider the choice of language** used when delivering the anticipated change to stakeholders. Our experience is that some stakeholders did not understand or take kindly to the use of the word ‘character’ education as they felt it was associated with adapting someone’s fundamental personality.

**Be brave in terms of anticipated impact.** In education we have a need to measure everything! The impact of character education can take time and be shown in so many different ways.





# Summary of Key Considerations

## for MAT leaders developing their approach to Character Education

### What is character?

What does character mean to the trust? What does it mean to different schools? It is helpful to develop a shared understanding and common language to describe character. However, schools may wish to retain their own particular values, virtues, or learning skills which are coherent with the group’s strategy.

### Context

Be clear about the unifying principles and any specifics that should be seen in all schools. Ensure that these are realistic and can be implemented universally. For everything else, allow for contextual difference as schools need to be adaptable to their local area.

### Leadership

Leadership plays a crucial role in driving the focus on character development, starting from the CEO and cascading downwards. In a distributed leadership model colleagues responsible for driving the work at the centre and in schools need the seniority to keep character at the top of the strategic agenda.

### Time

Character education is not a quick fix solution, and trusts should not adopt it solely for the purpose of meeting Ofsted requirements or obtaining recognition through quality marks. Instead, it is essential to understand the transformative impact it can have on young people, developing their phronesis—the ability to make the right decisions at the right time for the right reasons. It takes time to develop an effective strategy before trusts can carefully implement in schools across the group.

### All staff

Role modelling by all staff members is fundamental for character to flourish. The daily interactions that students have with staff will reinforce or undermine the character education in a school. Trusts should make it clear that all staff (senior leaders, teachers, teaching assistants, caterers, wider support staff) are responsible for developing the character of young people. Trusts should provide guidance on recruitment and training to ensure i) new colleagues are aligned with the vision and ii) existing colleagues embody the culture of character education.

### Networks

Trusts are not doing this in isolation and can learn from the experience of other trusts and organisations such as the Jubilee Centre. Equally, schools within a trust can learn from each other. It is important to have networks for colleagues to discuss current priorities, collaborate and problem-solve, and share best practice. Visits to other schools / trusts are effective mechanisms to create and maintain these networks.

### Evaluation

Character is notoriously difficult to evaluate, but it is vital for trusts to establish a means of reflecting on their character journey, identifying where to enhance practice, and continuously improve the character education of the children in their schools. Attendance, academic results, behaviour, and safety metrics provide tangible indicators of impact, but there are also intangible factors to consider, such as the overall atmosphere and cleanliness of schools.

### Consultation

The trust must develop the strategy through genuine consultation with schools. While schools may not have formalised their approach to character education previously, they have long considered their role in development of the whole child. Trusts should capture and learn from this expertise, reflecting it in their strategies.





**United Learning**  
The best in everyone™

UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM



THE JUBILEE CENTRE  
FOR CHARACTER & VIRTUES