

# Paving the way for Ethical Leadership in Education

Pathfinder schools and trusts

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# Foreword

## Citizens of a better world

We all have a duty to behave ethically, but the bar for school and college leaders is particularly high because they are setting the standards for the young people in their care and in turn the sort of society that we become in the future. That is why we embarked on the Ethical Leadership Commission which resulted in the publication of the Framework for Ethical Leadership in Education two years ago.

The year has brought new learning. Leaders as old as me make most decisions in normal time by flicking through the casework in our heads. We had no casework for COVID-19, though, no war stories to recite, no blueprints to unfold, but we had the framework. How has it stood up?

Our **selflessness** has been in exposing ourselves to daily unquantified risk, with precious little recognition. No pan-banging for us, but we did it anyway.

Our **integrity** has been found in our measured and coherent leadership, making our own decisions when everyone has been yelling in our ears: parents, unions, government. Perhaps we're not always right – I made a crass decision myself about doing remote learning walks when everyone was on their knees and had to u-turn – but we do it best when we keep in touch with our inner voice.

We are **objective**, analysing and making judgements for the good of children based on the flimsiest of random fact-releasing and sound-bite policy-making.

We remain **accountable**, not just to these who would judge or measure us, but to the parents and taxpayers

around us. We have patiently explained difficult decisions again and again. In that, we have demonstrated **openness** too. Who expected to write to parents so often?

I hope that we've been **honest** when we've got it wrong, too. My school didn't really get to grips with assessment and feedback in the first lockdown. Parents held us to account, we admitted it and worked tirelessly to get it right this time.

In all this and countless new decisions made every day, in juggling uncertainty while appearing reliable standing in the rain in year 11's bubble because the hall's being used for mocks and there's no other indoor space, in everything we've modelled to our communities, we have shown **leadership**.

We have reliably held **trust** for our young people when we've argued with those who believe there's a simple answer to whether children should be in school or not. And when we've told young people they should follow the rules despite so many bad examples being set.

We've shown **wisdom** when we've worked out what we can realistically do, what is tolerable and what is not. When we decided not to spend Christmas planning for questionable testing. We may have lacked experience, knowledge and insight but we've demonstrated moderation, self-awareness and good sense.

Most of us have encountered more anxiety and anger this year. We have **kindly** demonstrated generosity of spirit, understanding and good temper even with people whose response to the virus is very different from our own, who we might privately think are unreasonable.

We have been stalwart in our campaign for **justice**, for fairness for our struggling students. For laptops, and food.

The centre assessed grades and teacher assessed grades demand **service**. Daily, conscientiously and dutifully we have tried our best to protect high-quality education no matter what.

**Courage** is woven into our daily lives, in carrying on asking and asking for clarity and explanation despite constant criticism mischaracterising us as moaners.

And though our **optimism** is under pressure, we are positive and encouraging, trusting we can learn from these times to build an excellent education to change the world for the better.

Seamus Heaney's poetry is calm and authoritative. His From the Republic of Conscience talks of a metaphorical visit. Returning home, he is warned he'll carry conscience's lesson:

**Their embassies, he said, were everywhere  
But operated independently  
And no ambassador would ever be relived.**

We didn't expect 2020. We faced it as we face most things, collectively and alone. It is our service and our conscience which will bring our schools through these years, and the framework is there to support us. For myself, I am grateful to every citizen of this particular republic.

### Carolyn Roberts

Former chair of the Ethical Leadership Commission

# Framework for Ethical Leadership in Education

## **SELFLESSNESS**

School and college leaders should act solely in the interest of children and young people.

## **INTEGRITY**

School and college leaders must avoid placing themselves under any obligation to people or organisations that might try inappropriately to influence them in their work. Before acting and taking decisions, they must declare and resolve openly any perceived conflict of interest and relationships.

## **OBJECTIVITY**

School and college leaders must act and take decisions impartially and fairly, using the best evidence and without discrimination or bias. Leaders should be dispassionate, exercising judgement and analysis for the good of children and young people.

## **ACCOUNTABILITY**

School and college leaders are accountable to the public for their decisions and actions and must submit themselves to the scrutiny necessary to ensure this.

## **OPENNESS**

School and college leaders should expect to act and take decisions in an open and transparent manner. Information should not be withheld from scrutiny unless there are clear and lawful reasons for so doing.

## **HONESTY**

School and college leaders should be truthful.

## **LEADERSHIP**

School and college leaders should exhibit these principles in their own behaviour. They should actively promote and robustly support the principles and be willing to challenge poor behaviour wherever it occurs. Leaders include both those who are paid to lead schools and colleges and those who volunteer to govern them.

Schools and colleges serve children and young people and help them grow into fulfilled and valued citizens. As role models for the young, how we behave as leaders is as important as what we do.

Leaders should show leadership through the following personal characteristics or virtues:

## **TRUST | leaders are trustworthy and reliable**

We hold trust on behalf of children and should be beyond reproach. We are honest about our motivations.

## **WISDOM | leaders use experience, knowledge and insight**

We demonstrate moderation and self-awareness. We act calmly and rationally. We serve our schools and colleges with propriety and good sense.

## **KINDNESS | leaders demonstrate respect, generosity of spirit understanding and good temper**

We give difficult messages humanely where conflict is unavoidable.

## **JUSTICE | leaders are fair and work for the good of all children**

We seek to enable all young people to lead useful, happy and fulfilling lives

## **SERVICE | leaders are conscientious and dutiful**

We demonstrate humility and self-control, supporting the structures, conventions and rules which safeguard quality. Our actions protect high-quality education.

## **COURAGE | leaders work courageously in the best interests of children and young people**

We protect their safety and their right to a broad, effective and creative education. We hold one another to .

## **OPTIMISM | leaders are positive and encouraging**

Despite difficulties and pressures, we are developing excellent education to change the world for the better.

# Introduction

This report explores how the Framework for Ethical Leadership in Education has been used in practice by schools, trusts and other education providers of different phases and contexts in England, drawing on insights from the pathfinder project run by the National Governance Association (NGA). The project has supported schools and college leaders to use the framework to navigate through ethical thinking and decision-making. This report expands the suite of resources that are available to support school, trust, and college leaders to work with the framework as a component that enables conversations and practice to be shaped by ethical thinking.

## The Ethical Leadership Commission

The Ethical Leadership Commission was set up in 2017 by the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) in recognition that school leaders, including governing boards, are regularly faced with issues that test the moral compass of decision-making and leadership styles. The independent commission of nonpartisan experts was established because of concerns about the lack of guiding principles for ethical leadership in education. Leadership was one of the seven Nolan Principles of Public Life, but there was nothing further at that time on how to put that ethical leadership into practice.

The Commission agreed that the language of values and virtues needed to become a part of everyday decision-making. Every decision and judgement school and college leaders make, sets an example to children and should promote ethical behaviour in succeeding generations: how we do things is as important as what we do.

In a landscape where schools and colleges are so diverse and responsible to many different people, society must be able to rely on thousands of individual decision-making leaders and governing boards to do the right thing, themselves. It is not enough for school leaders and governing boards to have good intentions; there is a need to question 'how do we know that we are doing the right thing?'

After much discussion and debate, the Commission produced the Framework for Ethical Leadership in Education to support and guide the profession and governing boards in their decision-making and their behaviour. The framework provides a set of values and virtues that create a good society and establish a language that makes it easy for school leaders to talk about. The framework was not designed to become a policy, a tick list, a performance indicator, a code of conduct or a quality mark; instead, it was intended to be versatile, adaptable and a flexible set of principles and virtues which would become part of crucial conversations and engrained within leadership roles.

The framework was published at an Ethics Summit in January 2019. As the work of the Commission was ending, it asked organisations which endorsed the framework to commit to three actions:

1. Promote the use of the framework and its language
2. Seek to work with government and other organisations to include the framework in training and development;
3. Establish an ethics forum for tricky issues to be discussed.

## The pathfinder project

NGA, as one of the organisations which endorsed the Framework for Ethical Leadership in Education from the outset, considered the challenge that the Commission gave us to help promote its use. We have integrated the framework into our guidance, publications, and professional development. But NGA also felt that there was a need to consider, record and share how the sector used the framework; its use needed to be tested in practice in different school contexts, phases, and types. The testing of the framework set out to consider how it worked in schools and trusts without creating barriers or creating additional workload for school leaders, whether it was a flexible and as useful as the Commission had hoped and whether it made a positive difference to decision making.

To gain an understanding of the practical application and impact of the framework, NGA set up the pathfinder project. We sought interest from schools and trusts across England. The leaders that contacted NGA to register as a pathfinder included headteachers, chief executives, governors, trustees, governance leads, deputy headteachers and directors of education. They approached the project from a diverse range of angles and ensured the project would test the framework's practicality in different ways in different types of schools with different challenges.

Pathfinders were asked to test out resources that had been made available to them: an ethical audit, board activities, and discussion topics. More fundamentally they were asked to report their experiences, thus creating ideas of practical application for other schools and trusts.

Originally, the pathfinder project was due to last just one year, but as we continued to have interested schools and trusts approaching us, we first extended it for another six months to summer 2020; however, the COVID-19 pandemic has now extended this to the full two years.

As school and college leaders grappled with management of the COVID-19, we adjusted the methodology to be less-demanding of pathfinders since March 2020 and worked with pathfinders who were able to volunteer their time to inform our research.

The work of the Ethical Leadership Commission has sought to provide a level of assurance to those who lead our nation's schools by formally introducing kindness, transparency, wisdom and courage as a leadership standard which can bring about a compassionate, understanding and communicable leadership team. Reflecting on these values also helps to form a focused and evidence-based discussion which dismantles any potential unethical practice.

This report reflects on how nine pathfinders that lead in schools and trusts of different contexts have created different practices with the framework to support ethical thinking, practice and behaviours. These stories demonstrate the flexibility of the framework and identifies the common themes that exist when school leaders and governing boards embed the Framework for Ethical Leadership in Education.



“A strong-values led school, with a wholesome staff ethic, predicated on mutual respect and support. What could the framework add? It was clear, being new to the team, that the values modelled and supported for the children were in every fibre of the school and understood by every adult. It was also clear to me, however, that there was a distance from those values in some areas, and particularly at board level, albeit that the school adults were not uniformly conscious of this.

Pamela Finch, Headteacher and pathfinder

# Findings from the pathfinders

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The practical use of the Framework for Ethical Leadership in Education by the pathfinders has established some common themes on a national scale and across multiple leadership and governance roles.

## **The framework is adaptable to a school's context without creating additional work**

Pathfinders have been able to adapt and embed the framework in a way that works effectively for their school or trust without needing to review their own school or trust ethos or vision. The values and virtues of the framework have underpinned the practice within a school or across a trust and has operated as a formal framework that has shaped leadership discussions and pupil learning.

*"Nobody felt that it would be extra work because it was already fundamental to our school"*

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## **The framework has established a common language to direct governance and leadership discussions and decision-making**

The values and virtues from the framework established a common language between school leaders, governing boards and other stakeholders that are involved with educating children and young people. The framework was useful when governing boards were holding their leader to account and leaders found it helpful to explain their decisions against the framework.

*"It really has brought us down to the basics and it's given us courage and given us a backing for decision making"*

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## **Using the values and virtues of the framework in practice shaped the culture and actions of the pathfinders and cultivated confidence in their leadership approach**

The framework enabled school leaders and governing boards to reflect on their practice and leadership. Using the values and virtues as a sounding board provided school leaders with the conviction that they are 'doing the right thing'. As the framework was used more widely, school and college leaders felt that elements of their leadership style such as 'kindness' which can be considered as weak leadership has been increasingly important when making decisions for the good of pupils, staff and the community.

*"I think that some people think that if you're kind, you're not a good leader and I really feel that's coming out across now as I've developed my leadership skills that actually, you can be kind"*

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## **The framework is a strong pillar within recruitment processes when appointing chief executives, headteachers, senior leaders and teaching staff**

The framework has resonated with many pathfinders during recruitment processes, particularly for the recruitment of senior leaders. Pathfinders expressed that when they were looking at who would be a good fit for their organisation, consistency with the values and virtues from the framework was a fundamental element of assessing applicant's leadership style and values.

The use of the framework has also allowed leaders and governing boards to reflect on their school or trust as an ethical employer. Taking this perspective has developed a positive environment for school staff and have enhanced communication and trust between school leaders and staff.

*"If you are not consistent as a leader in your principles, you will lose most things and this [framework] gives us a clear sense of direction. Recruitment has got much, much easier"*

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**The framework has been influential when considering the school's curriculum offer**

Some pathfinders felt it was integral for the framework to be woven into the curriculum delivery so that teachers were using and embedding ethical language at pupil level. A pathfinder story reflects on how the Black Lives Matter movement encouraged her to consider what her pupils were learning and the value the curriculum placed on important global matters.

“I want our pupils to have the best, curriculum rich experience to draw on things that will shape their voice”

**Discussions between school leaders, governors and trustees, teachers or other stakeholders have been guided by the framework, developing robust conversations and common understanding**

The framework has supported pathfinder schools to conduct robust, open and transparent conversations. When governing boards are challenging their school leader or the school leader is being held to account by their governing board, the framework serves as a sounding board when school leaders are explaining decisions that have been made for the benefit of pupils, staff and the wider community.

“The framework also gave us something to fall back on when it really got difficult and there's a clear occasion where I think the right pathway had become a little bit blurred with the easy pathway; and just taking a step back and saying, ‘let's just think about the ethical framework’ has allowed us to find the right path”

**The framework supports multi academy trusts to provide consistency across multiple schools**

The Framework for Ethical Leadership in Education can provide schools or trusts with a set of values to stand by, regardless of how big the school or trust is. Deep rooting the values and virtues into the centre of a multi academy trust can hold the individual schools in synergy and share the same values as one and other.

“When we started thinking about expansion, we wanted to keep a high level of autonomy for our individual schools”

**The principles and virtues of the framework could be used across the whole school community – pupils, parents and staff – as well as the leaders and the governing board**

Many of the pathfinders reflect on what the use of the framework meant for parents and the community to which their school or trust belongs. Pathfinders explained that to promote the framework to parents, they would explain how values and virtues were used in school to parents. The values and virtues also reinforced decisions that were made to support communities during the partial school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many pathfinders found early on this was not a top-down framework, but one which could be very much used across the whole school community.

“We have printed out the values and virtues of the framework and displayed them across the school as a way to embed an ethical way of thinking to pupils”

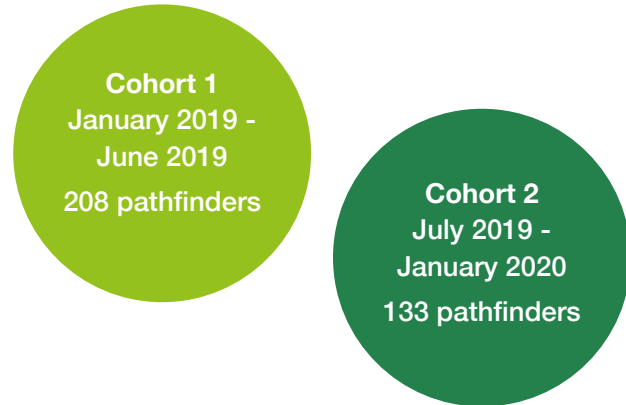
NGA's eight elements of effective governance include aspects that are rooted in ethical practice.

Examples include having good relationships based on trust, the confidence to have courageous conversations in the interests of children and young people, and a commitment to asking challenging questions. There needs to be mutual understanding and support between school leaders and their governing boards to provide strong governance and operational management. The Framework for Ethical Leadership in Education therefore serves as a basis for ensuring that there is a mutual understanding of the values that underpin the decision-making processes by those leading the nation's schools.

“The terms ethics and morals are often used interchangeably: both refer to things which are understood to be right and wrong and both concern behaviours – the ways in which we conduct ourselves relate to others and do our work if some clarification about what is meant by values, morals and ethics is key to understanding differences in view about what is ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ in schooling in England and beyond” (Thomson, 2020)

## The Pathfinders: who are they?

The pathfinder project aimed to reach as many school leaders, governors, and trustees as possible to identify how the framework would work for leaders at different levels in different contexts, phases and school types.



The first cohort consisted of 208 pathfinders that registered their school or trust. This cohort enabled NGA to understand the resources that needed to be developed or improved to better support the pathfinders on their pathfinder journey. The pathfinders completed one survey after three months of using the framework and provided feedback on how they were finding the framework to work in practice. This first cohort formed the first six months of the project and was reported in the 'Ethical Leadership in Practice' report. This interim report found that the resources provided to the pathfinders, in particular the ethical audit, were useful in assessing where schools and trusts needed to enhance their ethical practice. An event for pathfinders to exchange experiences was held in June 2019, and other reported at the second Annual Ethics Summit in January 2020.

Cohort two gained from the learning of the first cohort, with developed and improved resources to use; they were encouraged to undertake the ethical audit when registering. The second cohort had a further 133 pathfinder registrations who benefitted from regular blogs of shared practice, ethical exchanges which enabled shared ethical practice and networking and other updated resources. To support both cohorts through the pathfinder project, NGA continued to work with pathfinders to develop blogs: sharing experiences and the practices that different pathfinders had taken.

Pathfinders came from a range of professional backgrounds and roles and found the Framework for Ethical Leadership in Education through different channels. Since the framework's inception, it had been promoted through networking events, social media platforms and commission members (in particular ASCL, NGA and Carolyn Roberts speaking across the country).

64% of pathfinders in cohort two heard about the Framework for Ethical Leadership in Education through NGA's communication channels and promotion at

events, 32% heard about the framework through ASCL and 22% of respondents in cohort two were inspired by Carolyn Roberts and her promotion of the framework across the country. The framework was also promoted through Chartered College, Twitter, networking and news communications.

A variety of educational organisations engaged with the pathfinder project, allowing us to test whether the framework can work across all school phases and types. The wide engagement across organisation types has enabled NGA to identify any factors that can influence the effective use of the framework. Since the launch in January 2019 until January 2020, there have been 341 pathfinders in total from school types ranging from hospital schools, to independent schools. The 'other' education settings category included institutions such as Pupil Referral Units and post-16 organisations. Some multi academy trusts decided to look at the use of the framework across the whole trust and all its schools while a few nominated a couple of schools to work with it and report back.

Of those who registered

**63%**

of pathfinders were school leaders: CEOs, headteachers, executive headteachers and deputy headteachers (or similar).

**25%**

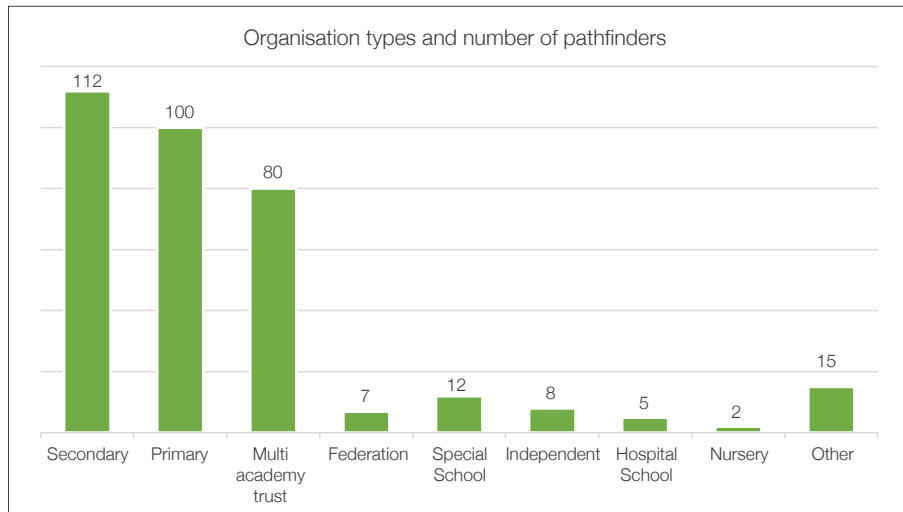
of those who registered pathfinders were responsible for the governance of a school or trust: chair of governors and trustees (or similar).

**12%**

of the pathfinders represented other school leadership roles such as HR directors and business managers.



Figure 1 shows the organisation types that pathfinders belonged to.



“I heard Carolyn Roberts speak and she introduced the framework for ethical leadership to us and it was a light bulb moment. It was like something had articulated all the things that underpinned my style of leadership.”

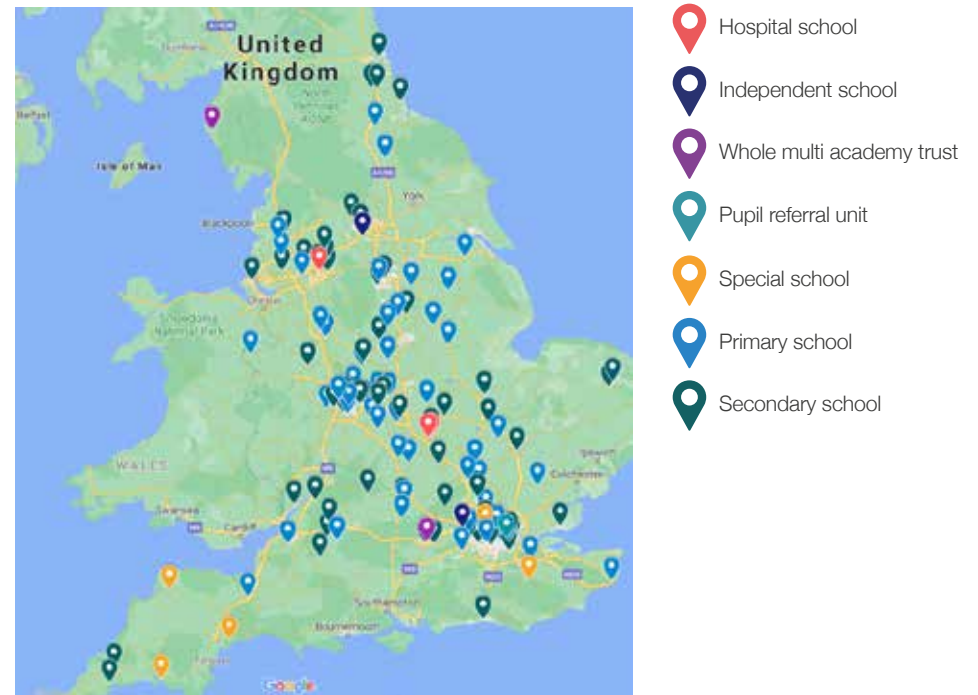
## Location of pathfinders

The geography of pathfinders stretched across England and this national spread adds to the validity of the framework’s practicality.

Although pathfinders were at different stages of embedding the framework, the ethical exchanges and communication between NGA and pathfinders provided a solid understanding of what was happening with pathfinder schools in various contexts. Some pathfinders played a role in spreading the word to other schools in their areas to create a unified perspective at a local level of ethical leadership.

“I tell everyone I come across about this framework because I think it encapsulates the things that make a good leader”

Figure 2 shows the geographical spread of the pathfinders from cohort one and cohort two



## Pathfinder resources

The project provided resources to pathfinders to spark conversations and allow for authentic reflection around ethical practice. When talking to the school leaders that registered to the project, we received feedback that the framework was positive for them to take the time to reflect on practice and focus on improvement which helped schools to promote openness and trust through pupil and parent voice as well as setting values and direction in policies.

The 'Ethical Leadership in Practice' interim report found that 65% of survey respondents on cohort one had started to use the available pathfinder resources, with the discussion topics and the ethical audit being the most utilised by school leadership teams and governing boards.

Throughout the process of the pathfinder project, it was essential to consider how those leading in our schools felt about the impact that the framework could make to their practice on a day-to-day basis. We asked pathfinders that registered in cohort two to comment on why they welcomed the framework.

"I think it's a hugely positive step forward and should become the standard for leadership in the education sector."

"I think this is vital in the current climate when there are so many competing challenges. As a VirtualsSchool head I welcome this framework, as the values underpinning it are key for our pupils to succeed in school and I will be encouraging my school leaders locally to also sign up."

"A framework which places child-centered decision making at the centre of our work is essential and provides a framework for our MAT vision and values to be embedded in practice through a common understanding of terminology and behaviour."

"I am delighted that this has been established and wish most sincerely to link my name to it. This has been the principles by which I have always worked, both personally and professionally and wish to give my support to and work to uphold these ethical values within my sphere of influence."

The ethical audit was a popular resource used by governing boards and their leadership teams. The audit promoted reflective practice during strategy days and served as a useful tool of reference when leadership together reviewed their visions and values. Engaging in reflective practice through the ethical audit developed effective ethical planning for boards and school leaders to use and refer to consistently.

"The values mindset in the school was a strongly held belief, and adults were happy to discuss the ethical framework and instantly bought into the intentions behind it. What came as a surprise to them, however, was that the school did not instantly score green in all areas automatically. This is because the audit reaches around some areas that are often neglected when auditing provisions in school. Notably, one area was how well the language of ethics was visible and used in recruitment procedures, and how visible it was at a policy level."

## Resources for embedding the Framework for Ethical Leadership in Education

- [Navigating the Educational Moral maze: The Final Report of the Ethical Leadership Commission](#)
- Ethical Audit
- Ethical Dilemmas
- Governing Board development activities
- Blogs for Ethical Leadership

A number of pathfinders and others have published blogs about the experience of being a pathfinder:

[Michelle Kilburn-Bond shares how she created CPD opportunities using ethical leadership.](#)

[Amanda Gledhill shares her ethical leadership journey during the COVID-19 pandemic.](#)

[Karen Cornell writes about the experience of using ethical leadership to create inclusive schools.](#)

[Mark Wilson writes about living the values within The Wellspring Trust.](#)

[Ian Courtney MBE writes about how he embedded the framework and how pathfinders might do the same.](#)

[Rosemary Hoyle reflects on how her school used the framework and where they started.](#)

[Jonny Uttley discusses how ethical leadership can be easily identified, but hard to pinpoint.](#)

[Victoria Wells reflects on the Second Annual Ethical Leadership Summit \(January 2020\).](#)



## We asked pathfinders about what they hoped to gain from being a pathfinder

“I would like to build professional capital and a shared understanding and responsibility for the decisions we make as an organisation. I believe that it is vital to improve our core values, build capacity for change, engage in reflective joint professional development and find an opportunity to collaborate with other like-minded organisations”

“We wanted guidance, practical opportunities to embed the framework”

“To gain support and CPD for my practice. Use case studies, networking to help inform decision making and gain additional support/resources for my school to grow and develop in a difficult climate”

“Understand how I can draw on frameworks to provide ethical leadership; being able to model ethical leadership practices; celebration of ethical leadership with pride in my local community”

“To be able to learn from the process and inform our practice, developing to become more ethically focused with our approach”

“To reflect on my own leadership, identifying areas I do well and identify areas to improve on impacting my leadership style and own behaviour”

“To use the language of ethical leadership more and provide opportunities to highlight and promote the ethical characteristics the framework is based on with pupils and teachers”

“Sharing of good practice, awareness raising and working collaboratively with other like-minded organisations”

“For every member of staff at our trust to feel that leadership operates ethically and that decisions are made in accordance with the framework of ethical leadership”

“We would really benefit from being a pathfinder and that our looked after children would have a virtual school that embodied the values that they would most gain from. We see ourselves as their advocates”

# Pathfinder stories

This section of the report identifies how the Framework for Ethical Leadership in Education has been used in practice among leaders and governing boards in different roles and school contexts. We outline nine pathfinder stories to establish how the framework has developed their organisation to create a positive impact on pupils and improve ethical thinking. These stories identify themes of how the framework has influenced and altered working practices through ethically informed way of thinking.

Due to the pathfinder project coming to an end during the COVID-19 pandemic, we altered the methodology to take into account that many of the schools and trusts would not have had time to be able to engage with an impact assessment. However, we did not want the project to finish without capturing the spirit of the pathfinders. Those who volunteered to share their stories are of course their own individual experiences, but they do reinforce other feedback NGA has been receiving over two years of the project.

## A note on methodology

The pathfinder stories are from nine self-selecting pathfinders who engaged with the Framework for Ethical Leadership in Education. The length of time that the pathfinder had engaged with the framework varied so the stories show a varied response to embedding the framework for longer and shorter periods of time. To ensure that the importance of the framework in different school types, geographical locations and professional roles were considered within these stories, the participants belonged to different types of organisations.

The interviews were conducted remotely via Microsoft Teams in September 2020. The interviews were recorded with the participant's permission to ensure engagement between the interviewer and participant and accurate transcription of the interview. To enable an accurate reflection of the pathfinder's views and experiences, the interview was semi-structured, and discussions were largely directed by the pathfinder. The interview was transcribed, and all mention of names and schools have been removed. The interviews have then been analysed to identify themes and key information which has informed the key findings of the pathfinder project.

### The interviews set out to answer three research questions:

1. How have pathfinders adopted the Framework for Ethical Leadership in Education to find practices for ethical decision-making?
2. In what ways has the framework been embedded into the school(s) by the leadership team?
3. Do pathfinders think the framework has helped, or would help, them navigate current or future ethical dilemmas?

We also asked about the advice the participants would give to school leaders and governing boards wanting to embed the Framework for Ethical Leadership in education into their school trust or college.

## Pathfinder story one

### Kindness in leadership is not a weakness

The headteacher of a school within a multi academy trust (MAT) began her ethical leadership journey as a pathfinder in 2019 after learning about the framework from the Diocesan Advisor. She resonated with the characteristic 'kindness' to support her as a school leader. She reflects on her role as a school leader and how her leadership style and her confidence was developed and supported by the ethical framework. This headteacher also describes how she extended the use of the framework to engage pupils as ethical leaders.

The characteristic of kindness in the ethical leadership framework encouraged this headteacher to further engage with the framework, to develop her own leadership skills and further strengthen her school's ethos and vision. The headteacher expressed that ethos is impactful on a wide range of elements, from teaching and learning, to the rapport that she has with parents. She emphasised that the framework provided a clear direction on how these elements would have a positive impact.

The values and virtues of the framework sat succinctly with the school and strengthened the practice of the school's vision. As the headteacher became increasingly conscious of how she was using the framework, she found that kindness as a value was a fundamental element to her leadership style. She felt that placing kindness at the forefront of her leadership style, would be met as a sign of weakness from her leadership team. However, the management of the COVID-19 pandemic found that using

kindness enabled a new way of thinking when making decisions for her staff and pupils. The headteacher reflected on a conversation she had with her leadership team and was met with the response of "you're being too kind". The framework served as a sounding board to respond that being kind is part of the school's ethos and reaffirmed the school's commitment to the ethical leadership framework.

I think that some people think if you're kind, you're not a good leader and I really feel that's coming across now as I've developed my leadership skills as the head, that that you can be kind.

When the headteacher discussed signing up to the pathfinder project to her governing board, it was essential that the framework would not create additional work for the leadership team. As the discussions continued, the governing board identified that the framework itself was already fundamental to the school and what it stood for. Instead, the framework reinforced the core vision of the school and senior leadership team. It provided something for the school and leadership team to work with and refer to throughout their discussions and in practice.

When facing difficult decision-making processes and holding challenging conversations, the framework permitted the headteacher to ask herself and her leadership team, 'is this decision the right decision?'. Asking this question

enabled her to consider the bigger picture and potential implications before moving forward with decisions. The values and virtues from the framework and the explanations of each of these provided as a solid support mechanism to explain how she had reached decisions. This was particularly the case when her governing board was holding her to account. A key role of the governing board is to challenge the headteacher effectively and this pathfinder felt that because the framework was used as an ethical standard, it enabled a well-informed conversation between her and her governing board. The headteacher felt that regardless of the problem or topic matter, the framework was a versatile tool and fit into all aspects of the challenges that she had faced; reflecting on the framework as a primary tool, built her confidence as a leader.

To embed the framework throughout the school, the leadership team transitioned the school council into "ethical leaders". This was a unified decision as it was a step of natural progression for the school. Pupils had been engaged in conversations that related to environmental issues and other ethical aspects concerning society, and the leadership team felt that the introduction of the framework at pupil level enabled the evolution of formally allocating ethical leaders. The pathfinder explained this has created a positive change within the school for example, when considering the selflessness value, the ethical leaders felt that there should be an accessible reading area for all pupils and in order to do this, the ethical leaders raised money for the school.

The headteacher felt that it was important to include parents into the framework so that these values could be considered within their child's home environment. As stakeholders, the headteacher valued her communication

with the parents and felt that for the framework to be embedded properly, the values and virtues would be included in her weekly communications to the parents.

### Advice for school leaders and governing boards

I think it would give any future leader great confidence in their ability as a leader. I think that is the biggest learning for myself and other members of staff who I'm putting through to leadership. It's about being a good role model and I feel that my behaviour as a leader has a domino effect through to pupil level.

I think the thing that's really improved my leadership is having integrity and having the confidence to know that I am doing the right thing. I know I've made the right decision by feeling in myself that I'm quite confident to say why I've done it and be quite strong. If there's consequences of what I have done, I know for a fact I've looked at everything and I definitely do the right thing in this situation.

## Pathfinder story two

### Sharing a strong ethical spine in a multi academy trust

A chief executive of a MAT discusses how the framework for ethical leadership has worked to create autonomy between individual schools, their visions, values and ethos and how the use of the framework has enabled clarity and perspective in developing a school improvement plan.

This second pathfinder story highlights how having a framework as a focal element of a MAT created a common platform across the schools that belong to the trust. The MAT's chief executive (CEO) expressed that it was important to ensure that as schools joined the trust, they are deeply rooted in the belief that the ethical framework serves as a fundamental component in day-to-day practice. When assessing the MAT's visions and strategy, the chief executive wanted to ensure that the values that were important to him, and board of trustees remained central throughout. As the framework became embedded into the small trust, it quickly became part of the ethos and therefore as the MAT was set to expand, the framework would work autonomously throughout individual schools.

This is about like-minded schools that share a strong ethical spine and coming together to work in partnership.

As a way of solidifying the framework into the MAT, the leadership team created a handbook which outlines the way that the trust works. The handbook highlights the framework as one of the first components of the MAT, demonstrating its importance within the MAT. The vision for a MAT encompasses all the schools within it and the schools within a trust benefit greatly from having clarity over the extent to which they can retain a sense of unique character and what the non-negotiables are. The CEO highlighted that as structures and personnel change, the framework is the DNA of the organisation and becomes part of the systems and structures. It was important that the framework and its purpose within the trust did not become misaligned as a result of changes as it expands.

The pathfinder as a trust recognised that each school within the trust has flexibility in the way the framework is embedded but specified "there are no opt outs" from the framework when becoming a part of the MAT. The use of the framework stems from the centre -the trust board and senior executive leadership level – and branches out at school level. The framework has been used at leadership level through discussions between leaders and the trust board; however, the chief executive felt that it was important to feed the framework into the way the schools communicated with parents. Each of the values alternated weekly into the letter that the pathfinder sent to parents and outlined what this meant for the trust.

"It has been important to ask ourselves 'how do we maintain that kind of trust identity?' 'How do we make sure that we actually have coherence as a trust?' So the way that I think we do that is through our values and our ethos. If you are a part of this trust, then you know we're really clear that people buy into this".

The chief executive reflected on the evolution of his small trust that held schools judged as ‘requires improvement’ by Ofsted and discussed how embedding the framework provided him with conviction that he was moving in a positive direction. School improvement can place a large amount of pressure on the role of the CEO, as well as the schools that are part of the MAT. However, the importance of holding the values was integral in the school improvement process which included acts such as providing food to families, supporting pupil physical and mental health, and supporting the wider communities with bereavements during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While discussing the context of the trust, the chief executive highlighted the existence of competition between well-established large MATs and his growing MAT. The framework not only served as a unique aspect of the trust as an ethical employer, also places the best interests of pupils at the heart of decision making, placing a focus on ‘what is right’ for all involved. While this pathfinder felt the pressures of the inspection system, the framework supported him and his leadership team to stand firm on the importance of developing children and young people into valued citizens.

The ethical framework will continue to be instilled as a component of the trust as it continues to expand. In particular, the CEO emphasised his commitment to the framework, thinking ethically and continuing robust discussions and embedding ethical practice into the DNA structure of the trust.

### Advice for school leaders and governing boards

The values that you have should be constant, and I think vision is really important, even more important than the values that underpin that because your vision will change depending on the context.

## Pathfinder story three

### Conducting a robust conversation

**The chair of governors at a primary school that predominantly supports pupils with special educational needs enter mainstream school, discusses how conversations with his headteacher have become robust and allowed for an effective level of challenge through reflection of the ethical framework.**

The chair of governors relayed how he has been able to develop robust and supportive conversations with his headteacher, whether these conversations relate to safeguarding issues, parental complaints or deciding on the best way to return pupils back to schools following partial school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This pathfinder story emphasises the idea that the framework does not serve as enabler for easy conversations. Instead, it aids complex and difficult discussions and draws on key values that these decision-making conversations should be centred on, regardless of the issues that the leadership team and school governors have faced.

The pathfinder school is a UNICEF Rights Respecting School which focuses on the rights and wellbeing of children both inside and outside of school. The framework was designed to work cohesively with other frameworks and awards that schools also wanted to adopt and be a part of. Upon registration, the pathfinder school found that the framework ran in the same tone with the Rights Respecting Schools award and therefore found that the leadership team could effectively co-habit the two together in practice.

As a school that supports pupils that display mild to slightly severe signs of special educational needs, high level communication has been integral to the operation of the school in addition to closely working with the parents and carers of pupils. By the time they leave year six, pupils should be fully integrated into a mainstream classroom which entails a high standard of teaching, curriculum, and support. The overall vision for this school is deep rooted into considering the ethical responsibilities that teachers and school leaders have, to develop and support their pupils into mainstream education.

“Had they not had access to that resource, they would have ended up in a special school and that probably wouldn’t have been the best place for them”.

The chair of governors underlined that the resources that were available were beneficial to identify the dilemmas that were being faced in other schools. The use of the framework extended beyond enabling reflective practice; it enabled staff and school leaders to question “what is the best thing for the child? How do we balance that with the wishes of the parents?”.

The school leader reflected on a particular incident that involved miscommunication between the school and the parents of a pupil with a poor attendance record. Following a meeting with the parents and reaching a resolution, the chair of governors and his headteacher reflected on the issue, using the framework to ask, “what does this tell us about how the school could have operated differently?”.

The framework enabled solid pillars for conversations and informed an evidence-based discussion. Shaping the conversations in this way provided a common language for both the chair of governors and the

headteacher to engage in. The values and virtues provided as a common denominator for the basis of the conversations that the senior leadership were having.

It was important for the leadership team to think about practical ways of inserting the framework into everyday development of teaching staff in a way that encouraged professional development and enabled enthusiasm between teaching staff. An element of professional development and professional behaviour refers to the need for school leaders and teachers to be model professionals and good role models. As a way to filter the framework through teaching staff down to pupils, the senior leadership team agreed that the best method was to weave the framework into the curriculum. This route enabled teachers to teach the values and virtues to their pupils so that, teachers and pupils were engaging in what it meant to think ethically and explore the meanings behind each value and virtue.

Although the pathfinder school already engaged in an award as a Rights Respecting School, the leadership team felt that including the ethical framework into leadership practice would further reinforce the impact that decisions can have on their pupils and more prominently, develop their pupils in readiness for the next stage in education.

### Advice for school leaders and governing boards

Use the framework to challenge the core dilemmas in education. Use it to challenge some of the core tenants in our education system and it will put you at odds with other settings and other educationalists and again, use the framework to help you through that, it's very much about being child focused. It's about having the courage to do what's right, not what is easy; you don't go with what's popular or what's expected.

## Pathfinder story four

### The framework for ethical leadership at a strategic level

**A chair of the governing board at a multi academy company (MAC) discusses how the framework was used in practice at a strategic level. The MAC is centred in Catholicism and its Catholic values run throughout leadership practice and curriculum.**

Embedding the ethical framework into the MAC provided a sounding board for the governing board and the senior leadership team when holding decision-making conversations. Becoming a pathfinder also presented the opportunity to network and collaborate with schools and trusts alike. It was important that the company's Catholic values were not diluted by the ethical framework and as the use of the framework developed, the leadership team found that the values in the framework worked in synergy with the Catholic values of the trust. As a concept, the framework was simple for the chair of governors and questioned, "why haven't we been structuring some of our conversations around this framework before?".

The leadership team was determined that the framework would exist as a tool and guidance rather than something that would create additional work or overbear the trust at pupil level. The framework currently sits mainly with senior strategic level conversations as the development of the next steps of the framework has been slightly impacted by COVID-19. However, these delays have not derailed the boards plan to embed the values and virtues of the framework into their recruitment processes and a become threaded through trust's business plan.

The board decided that it was essential that if they wanted to sustain the value of the framework to the MAC, the values and virtues of the framework needed to be threaded through their recruitment process. Following the engagement with the framework, the MAC leadership team wanted to make it essential that the values of the framework needed to be engrained into the working style of the applicant.

To proactively begin using the framework within the senior leadership team, the framework gradually became instilled in key topical conversations such as exclusions and safeguarding. As reference to the framework gradually progressed, the chair of the board found themselves making sure that as trustees and governors, they felt quite robust in the process and that it had been followed, "ensuring it's been an ethical journey for the benefit of young people".

As people across the board made their contributions, others were able to ask the question of 'how is this going to meet the best interest of our pupils and staff?'. Not only did this provoke thought on how decisions tie in with the visions and values of the school, but it enables evidence-based responses that would sit firmly if things were challenged or questioned in the future. The pathfinder expressed that positioning discussion points around real ethical dilemmas helped her as a chair to articulate her points more succinctly around the challenges that were being faced.

The pathfinder stated that the resources that were available to her and her leadership team through the pathfinder project, were helpful to be able to navigate discussions in a meaningful way. In particular, the ethics exchange she had attended and the ethical



dilemmas that were provided created ideas and sparked conversations among her governing board and headteacher to identify how the framework would be used to support pupils and staff.

### Advice for school leaders and governing boards

Build it in, don't bolt on, because that's where it's worked for us. Don't see this as something yet again, that you've got to do on top of everything else you are trying to do. Look at how it can work to add value to what you already doing and that whole range of reasons why that would be useful.

As a senior leadership team, we asked one key question: 'what are the ethical dilemmas that are keeping our heads and our staff up at night?' That is such a powerful question that is so clearly articulated; it suddenly sparked this whole conversation.

## Pathfinder story five

### Forming an ethical leadership team

The chair of the governing board of a three-form entry primary school highlights the initial perceptions of the framework from the leadership team and outlines the importance of training, resources, and networking to engage her governors and school leadership team to think ethically and use the framework to base decisions on.

When the chair of governors proposed this framework to her governing board and headteacher, she was first met with aversion. Bringing a new framework to their attention was met with the response of something else to work against or adding to the workload of people who do not have the capacity. The chair of governors felt passionate about embedding the framework into everyday practice stating that "adding an ethical dimension would bring reflective practice into our school".

As a driver for the framework within her senior leadership team, the chair of governors stated that she felt that there was conflict around the way framework would influence and direct conversations. It is important that when setting out a new framework, senior leaders and governing boards envision how the framework will engage with the vision and direction of the school.

To continue to share learning around the framework, training around the framework was introduced to her leadership team using the resources provided by NGA. The leadership team became engaged in the framework and had more clarity on the direction that conversations

would take. As the leadership team began to grapple with the framework within the school's context, the management on the impact of COVID-19 took precedent, but the chair of governors felt that the framework would further strengthen decision-making and asking the key question: 'how do we know we are doing the right thing?'.  
There was need for robust resources to put forward to the governing board and headteacher to further demonstrate that the framework was easy to merge into the everyday practice of the school. To support her further, NGA reached out to a school leader who was also part of the pathfinder project and had mentioned that she had produced training materials for her leadership team. The pathfinder shared this training material with the pathfinder from this story to put forward to her headteacher and other senior leaders.

The training materials were invaluable as it resonated with her school governors and headteacher. It enabled them to understand how the framework could be shaped to fit the practices of the school, vision of the school and how conversations could be directed by the framework. It is important to recognise that the complexities of school leadership can become overwhelmed by policies and codes of conducts, however this framework works as an agile model and discussion prompt that offers a moment for reflection and ethical thinking when enduring some of the most difficult decisions. As the governing board and leadership team are still in their early phases of establishing what ethical leadership will look like in practice within their setting, the pathfinder continues to engage with the resources and values networking with others who have adopted the framework.

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### Advice for school leaders and governing boards

From a governance perspective it is about holding people to account. It's about if your head is making a decision, ask, 'how am I going to hold you to account?'. It is easy to say this doesn't fit in with our vision or values and this doesn't sit in with this policy, but really it is saying "let's see how that fits in with everything as a whole, and is this the best decision for pupils or staff?" I think the framework embodies everything that as the education sector should be about.

I'm really excited about it because I think anything that encourages reflective, thoughtful practice,

## Pathfinder story six

### A shared language

A headteacher of a hospital school shares how the framework has enabled a shared language between her and her governing board and reflects on how sharing the same language has guided the decisions made to support children and young people with mental health issues.

This story outlines how the framework has impacted the headteacher, reflecting on the value of the framework to her practice in a hospital school, navigating through the complex layer of school leadership and supporting children and young people with mental health issues. The school leader looked to the National Association for Hospital Education (NAHE) for support, who agreed that the framework "expressed all the values and that as a group of headteachers working with the most vulnerable children, and felt it completely enshrined the values and moral standards".

After the headteacher shared the intentions behind the ethical framework with her senior leadership team and her governing board, they engaged in ideas of how the framework would sit prominently on a day-to-day basis. Once the school leaders established how the framework sat with the values that already existed within the school, training was delivered across the school staff, sharing work that had already been done through the pathfinder project and setting out how the framework would work cohesively to support their pupils.

The headteacher felt that often her ideas and vision for the way that she wanted to run the school lacked the evidence to demonstrate how they would benefit

her staff and pupils. Her desire to instil these principles and virtues from the framework were reinforced by the knowledge that these were being espoused as part of something bigger.

"These are values that are shared across a lot of sectors... so use them as evidence of a bigger movement than just ourselves."

As the framework started to become integrated into the pathfinder school's operation, the headteacher centered a lot of decision-making with her board in the framework. Where the leadership team had to make difficult decisions, for example, ending contracts or something potentially unpopular, they checked that they were considering values such as 'kindness' and 'integrity'. Using the framework as a moment of reflection enabled the leadership team to share a common language to ensure that they were considering the same aspects and wanted to travel in the same direction. As these conversations have developed and expanded, the values and virtues quickly became integrated into daily conversations as evidence of feeding into the question of "are we acting in the best interests of children". As well as incorporating the values of the framework into job applications and person specifications, the headteacher launched surveys to ensure that the school's staff felt the framework was being proactively used to support their development, wellbeing, and everyday practice.

"We took the time to be transparent and I think sometimes being transparent got a negative term as you're trying to tell people about something that otherwise you would've wished to hide. We've just been very, very explicit about why things were happening because of the virtues around justice and courage"

## Pathfinder story seven

### Being an ethical employer

In this pathfinder story, the director of governance in a MAT highlights the importance of being an ethical employer, ensuring that the principles and virtues outlined in the framework are deep rooted in the MAT as an employer.

In previous pathfinder stories, the use of the framework throughout recruitment, maintaining a level of trust with staff and ensuring staff wellbeing has been highlighted however, this pathfinder story outlines how the director of governance uses the framework as a standard for employment and staff wellbeing. When the pathfinder introduced the framework to the chief executive of a MAT, discussions led to considering how the MAT as a whole worked as an ethical employer.

The pathfinder worked with her chief executive and the senior team to gather a rounded view of the MAT and the following key questions to establish the employers 'why'.

- Why do we work here?
- Why are we attracted to work here?
- What gets us up in the morning?

The pathfinder explained that when thinking about what made the MAT a good employer, the 'why' naturally gravitated to the principles and virtues that existed in the ethical framework. While understanding how the trust could develop as an employer, the leadership team used an internal trust document known as 'the workload charter' to identify how the framework worked in synergy with not only the trust's values, but the purpose and practice of other frameworks that sought to improve the policies

and practice of the trust as an employer. The director of governance along with senior leaders considered how they wanted their day-to-day objectives to align with key competences and behaviours. This planning spanned into a document that outlined how the trust aimed to deliver the values and virtues through everyday practice.

Examples included:

- "justice: doing what's right rather than what's popular or easy"
- "kindness: demonstrating respect, generosity of spirit, understanding and good temper and the behaviours are things like being humble, bringing your authentic self to work, and having the courage to be genuine, leading with compassion, empathy and kindness"

The framework served a key purpose beyond directing the way for educating children, it also served as a commitment as an employer. Working the framework and the workload charter in conjunction with each other allowed the pathfinder to be able to monitor staff's job satisfaction and improve staff retention.

When embedding a framework across multiple schools in a MAT, it is important to monitor, assess and reflect on how the framework is working cohesively across all schools. The director stated that the ultimate focus is "believing in the people that we work with and the students we support" and with this focus in mind, leadership teams from across the trust got involved and mapped out what schools were doing well, what could be done better and what the framework meant on an individual school basis.

To ensure that those teaching our pupils understand the importance of ethical behaviours, they should understand how ethical practice influences the communication between

teachers and their leadership team. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has heightened the need for clear communication and understanding between those leading the school and those teaching. Demonstrating a level of trust, transparency and honesty have been key for this trust as an employer.

### Advice for school leaders and governing boards

I would definitely look at your value, vision and mission. Whatever you have got in place, what does that say and how does that align with the framework? Challenge each other as a senior team to ensure that whatever you agree is a behaviour as a competency and you're doing it.

## Pathfinder story eight

### Developing pupils into valued citizens

A chief executive of a small MAT discusses how ambiguity about doing the right thing, between the expectations of the Department for Education and the school inspection system, was tackled. This story outlines how the ethical framework has facilitated this pathfinder navigate through the “complexity of contradictions that are inherent in the different organisations to which we’re accountable”. The school leader also reflects on how the ethical framework has resonated with her vision to develop pupils into good, moral citizens through the trust’s curriculum offer.

With a core focus on how the school was modelling ethical leadership, it was important for this chief executive to embed the values and virtues of ethical leadership into the school curriculum so that the aims of the framework were enshrined in everyday practice and learning. This approach meant that the framework was not solely held at top level; it was placed directly into discussions about the curriculum offer and served as a point of reference for the trust to consider what their pupils are learning.

The spotlight that had been placed on the Black Lives Matter movement during 2020 caused the school leader to assess how her trust’s curriculum offer educated her pupils. There are often key drivers that dictate how the curriculum within a school is determined, this includes accountability and funding pressures. The chief executive was passionate about educating her pupils about things that they would not be exposed to within their own communities or homes. Therefore, the framework was a strong pillar in helping

them uncover what pupils should be learning to become exposed to global, national, and local issues to which they could have a positive impact. The framework was beneficial in focusing on why pupils would be learning particular things, how they would be taught and provided clarity for the senior leadership team to establish whether they are meeting the visions for the trust.

I think every human being has an opportunity in their life at some point to have a really big impact on the world and when they get to that point, I want our kids to have the best, curriculum rich experience to draw on things.

The chief executive believed passionately that it was important to model ethical behaviour herself whether she was being held to account by her board of trustees or needed to explain her actions to staff. In doing so, the practice of ethical leadership was seen from the very top as a catalyst effect for her leadership team, headteachers across the MAT and the staff within it. Modelling this behaviour also set out a level of expectation for the teaching staff across the trust.

A core function of the governing board is to hold their head or executive leader to account, and in reference to the framework, to exist as an ethical leader, there is a need for transparency. This pathfinder highlighted how important it was for her to be held accountable and work as transparently as possible which served as a key component to shaping her overall leadership style. The use of the

framework as a chief executive has ‘rooted’ her as a leader and forced her to have discussions with leadership teams about what they stand for and the ‘why’. Although the framework largely influences the curriculum within this trust, the chief executive ensured that meetings with her board of trustees started with reflecting on the Nolan principles and the values and virtues of the framework. As conversations began to develop, the framework became a strong support mechanism for both, herself and her board of trustees.

The framework has been placed on two main aspects of the trust so that two main questions were being answered: ‘how are we being good role models to those in our care?’; ‘how are we developing our pupils into valued citizens?’. For this pathfinder there were two crucial strands to adopting the framework, through the curriculum and modelling ethical behaviour as a senior leader. This pathfinder story shows how the framework can be directed in particular areas of education and leadership leading to an impactful school curriculum and pupil development. The chief executive expressed that despite the complexity that leaders can face, an ethical approach to learning, leadership and everyday practice can provide leaders with the conviction that they are serving as educators meeting the needs of their pupils.

#### Advice for school leaders and governing boards

If you went into it specifically to have a positive impact on the world, then it’s very, very useful to cleave it to something because it gets very, very conflicted. It can be very tough out there to continue to do the right thing and the framework helps you to navigate and it helps you to articulate what you do and why you are doing it.

## Pathfinder story nine

### Reflecting and improving ethical leadership practice

This school leader registered her interest in the Framework for Ethical Leadership in Education with the two hats that she wears within the education sector. As a headteacher for an alternative provision academy and the chief executive for the academy trust she used the ethical framework as a mould for her leadership skills and moral compass.

The academy trust of which the pathfinder is a chief executive of, includes multiple hospital schools, teaching centres for children in care homes and in schools. An integral part of the school leader's position is ensuring that children with special educational needs and disabilities are provided with opportunity and ensuring that her trust maintain a consistently child-centred approach. The proposal of the framework was put forward to the chair of governors who welcomed the embedment of such a framework.

From the outset, the school leader consistently used the framework as her starting point within her senior leadership meetings. The senior leadership team would reflect on the Nolan principles and virtues of the framework, followed by a case study of a pupil. The case study would present issues which required decisions and how the decision was underpinned by the values and virtues of the ethical framework. This practice began the trust's ethical journey, enabling reflection on the ethical framework and the use of it in the context of the trust as a whole. The resources that were provided to the pathfinder school upon registering for the pathfinder project were particularly helpful to make reference to when participating in conversations with her staff or governing board.

Schools leaders are faced with a multitude of complex issues at both pupil level and teacher level. One example in this case was in reference to free school meals. As a leadership team that is child-centered, this includes knowing the families and contexts of these children to understand potential issues that may arise as part of their development, learning and time at school. The pathfinder trust was aware that families would be struggling to feed their children during the school half term breaks.

The senior leader discusses how the ethical framework formed decision making during the management of the COVID-19 pandemic throughout the school holidays.

*"All of the trustees agreed that we would provide free school meals, vouchers for all the families that needed it, whether they were registered or not, and wouldn't provide £12.50. We would provide £25. The children are at home all day and our families are struggling and that's some practical examples of how we've used it at trust board level".*

The chief executive and her trust board proactively developed their passion for the framework by developing a 'values-based education'. The leadership team took an approach of rather than teaching the values and virtues, the trust would have discussions on whether actions and decisions fit within their values and what the trust stood for. The ethical leadership framework leads the trust at board level and these values are set to local governing board level which has then underpinned the work that has been done with pupils and among the community.

Embedding the framework throughout the practice of the trust has facilitated difficult, complex conversations with the framework at the forefront. One example related to the handling staff redundancies. Referring to the framework raised questions such as 'is there another way?' and provided a reason as to why these decisions were reached.

The school leader that worked at two levels outlined the importance of how the framework can not only shape the leadership skills that can be drip fed to staff and pupils, but also the importance on modelling this behaviour regardless of the environment in which you are a part of.

She also reflected on more recent events and the way modelling ethical leadership provided smooth communication and trust with her leadership team, staff, and parents. As a result of the partial closures of schools due to the COVID-19 outbreak, the framework was critical for her to instill a level of trust, understanding and certainty across her trust and external stakeholders.

As this school leader continues her role as a chief executive of the trust but reaches her final months as a headteacher. She stated that "the framework is about leaving a legacy of the way that is so firmly embedded in an organisation". The leadership team of the school intends to continue holding ethical leadership as a pillar of the school.

### Advice for school leaders and governing boards

It doesn't matter if it's me, it doesn't matter if it's a person from the street. Whoever comes in to this role, this is the way of working, and if you don't buy into it then you won't survive. Embedding the framework with the trustees and staff, can create a school environment where the leadership and staff feel that their own values align with ours and how that would shape their leadership style for the future.

# Afterword

So rare are good news stories at present, that I want to shout this one from the rooftops. It is wonderful that 341 pathfinders – schools and trusts – of all sorts of shapes and sizes from all over England volunteered to be the early adopters and test how this new Framework for Ethical Leadership in Education could be used. Thank you to those pathfinders who to explore and invest in ethical leadership. For some it provided more structure or a language for work they were already doing. For others it was the first time they had considered what they were doing through this ethical lens.

The pathfinders reported that the framework provided a common language and shared focus for conversations about ethical dilemmas, and complex issues that leaders and governing boards have to get their heads round at all times and in all contexts. Doing the best for pupils could be interrogated against the framework without relying on untested assumptions. It gave people confidence that they were doing the right things for the right reasons. It helped leaders to articulate that, first when making decisions and then when communicating the decisions well to a range of people, including parents. It helped boards and senior leaders make decisions that previously might have seemed tricky to defend.

The framework did not create more work for hard pressed staff. It informed decision-making that would have had to happen anyway. As the Ethical Leadership Commission had hoped, pathfinders were able to embed it in a way that worked for their school and trust. As the stories and blogs illustrate, it was used in all sorts of ways, including helping to bring schools into one multi academy

trust together with one set of values, and in one county secondary schools working together to ensure places for the most challenging pupils. Having a commonly held set of principles and virtues gave a solid basis for collaboration and innovation.

As well as shaping or reinforcing the culture of whole institutions, the framework proved valuable when reviewing the curriculum. Teachers reported embedding the values into classroom practice, so that pupils were using them in discussion and testing arguments against them.

A significant area for pathfinders was in managing human resources (HR), ensuring that they are an ethical employer. There were examples where HR processes were improved by considerations of the framework, including when having to restructure or make redundancies. It played a positive part in recruitment, especially of senior leaders, and in developing a real emphasis on staff continuing professional development.

How well have we collectively responded to the commission's requests of the sector and in particular the organisations that adopted the framework?

- To use and embed the language of the principles and virtues of the framework;
- To use the framework in training and development;
- To establish a forum where ethical dilemmas can be discussed.

At a meeting of the ethics committee of the Chartered College of Teaching there were many examples of the framework being used in training and development. At

NGA we have integrated the framework into our guidance and professional development, and will continue to do so.

The pathfinders have played an important part in embedding the language. It was rewarding to hear the passion shining through from pathfinders who absolutely took the framework to their school's and trust's heart. Ethics and professional conduct are at the centre of the Headteacher Standards published by the Department for Education last October, but the framework takes that additional step to unpack ethical virtues relevant to education. Furthermore, it has not been handed down to the sector, right from the beginning it was determined by leaders of sector organisations and consulted widely by the commission and the Association of School and College Leaders.

Kindness, courage and optimism were three of the virtues frequently mentioned, and this piece of work leaves me feeling optimistic for the future of the framework, but more importantly for ethics and their discussion within school life. One of the early and often repeated comments was that the framework didn't just apply to leaders: pathfinders had used them with everyone. Perhaps it should be renamed more simply as the framework for ethics in education.

It is therefore appropriate that shortly the baton of custodianship of the framework will be handed to the Chartered College of Teachers.

## **Emma Knights**

Chief Executive, National Governance Association

# Resources for the Framework for Ethical Leadership in Education

## Publications and resources

### **Navigating the educational moral maze**

This report is the final report of the Ethical Leadership Commission reflecting on the work that has been done between 2017 and 2019.

### **Ethical audit**

This audit tool seeks to help leaders think about the ethical underpinnings of their work. It encourages the use of the framework language to formulate a statement of intent to which governing boards and school leaders may hold themselves.

### **Ethical dilemmas**

These dilemmas help you to think about how you would behave ethically in a variety of scenarios.

### **Board development activities**

These activities could be undertaken as a range of exercises during a facilitated away day for leaders and their governing board, or as short exercises pre and post the board meetings

### **A year on, the Framework for Ethical Leadership in Education**

In this blog, former Ethical Leadership Commission chair discusses the initial reactions to the ethical framework and its development over the year.

### **Ethical leadership planning tool**

To further support our work on Ethical Leadership, NGA is adding to the collection of Learning link Bitesize modules with an Ethical Leadership planning tool which will enable governing boards to establish how their school or trust embeds ethical leadership principles in practice – Coming Spring 2021.

We remain keen to hear from any schools and trusts making use of the framework and the related resources:  
[ethicalschoools@nga.org.uk](mailto:ethicalschoools@nga.org.uk)

## References

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# Endorsements for the Framework for Ethical Leadership in Education

