

## Challenges

When Chris Tolson took the helm of The Academy at St James, the school was grappling with the fallout of being in a special measures category. This tumultuous period was marked by instability and a concerning trend of more staff departing than arriving. Amidst these challenges, the urgent need to elevate the quality of teaching and learning stood out starkly.

Confronted with these realities, Chris and his team were propelled to find solutions to critical questions: How could the school attract and retain high-quality teachers? What strategies could be implemented to enhance the expertise of the existing teaching staff? And importantly, how could the school support and enrich the career trajectories of its teachers?

## Solutions

Drawing on his rich background in initial teacher training (ITT), including co-founding Bradford Birth to 19 SCITT and serving on its Strategic Board, Chris was well-prepared to integrate ITT into the school's improvement strategy. His commitment to providing aspiring teachers with a robust foundation, and thereby ensuring sustained teaching quality, shaped the school's approach to ITT engagement.

The Academy at James's strategy to high impact engagement with ITT:

- **Timing and capacity are key to success**

Acknowledging the importance of readiness, Chris and his leadership team opted to engage with ITT only when they were confident in the school's capacity to offer meaningful placements. For seven consecutive years, the school has welcomed trainees on long and short placements, embedding ITT into its annual calendar.

- **Leverage your school's specialisms**

The school has capitalised on its strengths, such as behaviour for learning, to contribute to SCITT sessions. This not only showcases the school's expertise but also facilitates self-evaluation, practice, and development by the team. In addition, it allows leadership to identify talent within the SCITT for future recruitment.

- **Select the right ITT Provider for your school**

Choosing the right ITT provider was a carefully considered process and is regularly reviewed. The Academy at St James sought a provider that aligned with its needs, particularly in terms of mentor workload and wellbeing. It required the provider to supply a high standard of trainee via a rigorous selection process, and the guarantee of support if needed during the placement. The provider's systems and processes needed to be both rigorous and streamlined.

- **Empower your Mentors**

Mentors at the Academy St James are given the necessary tools and support to ensure effective mentorship. This includes blocked-out meeting times and shared PPA time, which enables trainees to see high-quality planning modelled. This fosters high expectations, strong collaboration and also gives trainees the skills to plan independently. Mentor training time is ring-fenced. Additionally, the deputy headteacher plays a pivotal role in overseeing statutory signoffs and ensuring mentors receive timely updates and support. Mentors are encouraged to bring progress updates to SLT meetings, where achievements are celebrated and any support for the trainee or Mentor needed can be arranged. Additional expertise is utilised to support trainees, for example the maths lead may attend a meeting where their specialism is needed.

***“As a mentor I was able to meet with my trainee in PPA and also in our mentor meeting which meant we could spend quality time together and I could model and coach at the same time. This was overseen by the DHT but the planned programme and organisation of the support definitely helped the development of the trainee”.***

- **Match Mentors and Trainees with care**

Thorough planning is given to pairing Mentors with trainees, taking into account the Mentor’s expertise, career aspirations, leadership potential, and trainees' specific needs, to foster a supportive and enriching mentor-mentee relationship. For example, a mentor completing the NPQEYL was the perfect match for an Early Years trainee.

***“We wanted to match our trainee with the right mentor to support not only the trainee development but also provide professional development opportunities for the identified member of staff. Growing leaders is a pivotal part of system leadership and this has enabled us to develop people at all levels. For example, a member of staff who was an ECT has gone onto mentor and coach others and led a subject which is a testament to not only getting the match right but also to the success of ECT and their development afterwards”.***

## **Benefits**

### **1. Access to ITT Providers**

Collaborating with ITT providers has been mutually beneficial. St The Academy at St James, it has brought a wealth of resources and expertise into the school, benefiting both mentors and the wider school community. Tutors from the provider have contributed to improvements in teaching and learning through sharing evidence-based approaches to teaching and learning.

### **2. Recruitment of high-quality teachers**

The strategy has been a resounding success. Currently, three ECT1s at the school were recruited from the SCITT and a considerable proportion of the teaching staff were historically recruited from the SCITT.

*“In 2017 the school was in a very challenging period and had 4 Headteachers in 9 months. Rather than shy away from using ITT and ECT we did the exact opposite and used this as an opportunity to grow and develop our staff, investing heavily in early career development. We recruited 4 ECTs in 2 years and through a successful mentoring and coaching programme we were able to give our ECTs the CPD and professional development they needed to become expert teachers. Recruiting and retaining excellent staff is a key part of system wide leadership. I can honestly say our development of these staff has contributed significantly to the success of the school, which is now stable, providing an excellent curriculum for all and securing a Good from OFSTED in 2022 with Outstanding for Leadership and Management. Growing good teachers, supporting them in the classroom and providing them with great CPD to improve their practice is a moral imperative for all school leaders. We want and the children deserve the best teachers in front of children striving for excellence. By putting ITT and ECT development high on our priority list we have grown leaders of the future”.*

### **3. Supports succession planning**

The ITT engagement has proven instrumental in succession planning. Two former ECTs have progressed to middle leadership roles, highlighting a clear pathway for career advancement within the school. This approach has not only enabled staff development but has also underscored the school's commitment to nurturing its talent pool. 9 staff members have been promoted this year; mentoring trainees has contributed to their skill development and given them the tools they need to develop their leadership profiles.

The Academy at St James has adeptly navigated the challenges posed by its initial circumstances, transforming obstacles into opportunities through strategic engagement with ITT. The benefits of this approach are evident not only in the recruitment and development of high-quality teachers but also in the enriched educational experiences of its students. This case study serves as a testament to the transformative power of thoughtful, strategic ITT engagement in driving school improvement and fostering a vibrant teaching community.