



St Francis of Assisi
CATHOLIC ACADEMY TRUST

The Difference of Belonging

Trust Impact Report

2026

The very best Catholic education now and for generations to come

Executive Summary

St Francis of Assisi Catholic Academy Trust exists to deliver the very best Catholic education now and for generations to come.

This report sets out, through the testimony of our headteachers and the evidence of our schools, what belonging to the Trust genuinely means for the children, staff, and communities we serve. Rooted in the past year – and, where the story demands it, in the whole journey since our first schools converted in 2021 – it answers directly the question at the heart of everything we do: what difference does being part of this Trust make to pupils, to parents, to staff and to the wider communities our schools call home.

The answer is consistently: more expertise within reach, more capacity for leaders carrying heavy loads, more financial resilience, and more support – all leading to improved outcomes for pupils, excellence for all, the best quality Catholic education now and into the future, better experiences for staff and a stronger sense of belonging to a wider Catholic family.

Pupil performance is rising across the Trust because we work together. For example, our secondary school now sits among the top few per cent in the country for the progress its pupils make, and Ofsted inspectors have credited the Trust and the school with the tenacity and determination needed to secure this effective and sustained improvement.

Our schools are financially stronger through our central finance team returning £2.31 in savings for every £1 paid in membership fees, generating £4.57 million across the first four years including securing more than £2.6 million of academy-only capital funding for essential building works.

When our headteachers were last surveyed, they rated their satisfaction with joining the Trust at 9.0 out of 10, and their preference for being inside the Trust rather than outside it as a Voluntary Aided school at 9.3. As one of our schools put it, echoing the words of Pope Leo XIV on education: Trust schools are not lone stars but part of a beautiful constellation.

The pages that follow are organised around the five recognised pillars of trust quality – high-quality and inclusive education, school improvement, workforce, finance and operations, and governance and leadership – and draw throughout on the lived experience of our schools.



Andrew Celano,
Chief Executive Officer



Impact on Pupil Achievement and Outcomes



Grade 5 and above
in English and
mathematics
improved to

65.9%

National average 45%

Pupil Progress
improved

significantly

from 2023 to 2025

The clearest measure of our impact is what children achieve. At St Mary's, our secondary school, results have risen sharply over the last three years with support from the Trust. The proportion of pupils achieving grade 5 and above in English and Mathematics reached 65.9% in 2025 – well above the Hertfordshire average of 53% and the national average of 45% – having improved steadily from 59.1% in 2024.

The school's Attainment 8 score now stands at 57.6, against a local-authority average of 50 and a national average of 46, having risen steadily from 54.6 in 2023 and 54.3 in 2024. Most strikingly, its Progress scores have climbed from above average to 'significantly above average' from 2023 to 2025, placing the school among the top few per cent in the country for the progress its pupils can make.

The same trajectory is visible across our primary schools. At Key Stage 1, the proportion of pupils reaching greater depth in writing – once at or below the national average in most of our schools – is now above it in the majority. At Key Stage 2, 75% of our primary schools improved their reading outcomes between 2023 and 2025, and writing

“The energy, determination and tenacity of school leaders and the trust are bringing about effective and sustained improvements for pupils.”

OFSTED, 2024/25

outcomes that once sat broadly at the local-authority average now exceed it in most schools. These are the cumulative gains of shared moderation, collaborative curriculum work and the relentless focus on standards that membership of the Trust makes possible.

This progress has been recognised externally. Eight of our schools have now been inspected by Ofsted, six of them in the autumn term of 2024, and each report acknowledges the contribution of the Trust. In one report inspectors wrote: *“The energy, determination and tenacity of school leaders and the trust are bringing about effective and sustained improvements for pupils.”*

Trust Executive SEN Support for our Schools

Schools receive an enhanced resource bank, specialist interventions and a sustained programme of bespoke training for teachers and teaching assistants



High-Quality and Inclusive Education

At the heart of everything we do is the spiritual life our schools share. Chaplaincy teams once working in isolation are now connected across the Trust, united by a common Trust prayer, Trust-wide liturgy and the pupil-designed St Francis chaplaincy badge.

A pupil-designed Stations of the Cross booklet has been shared with every family, and the cross-phase Franciscan Values Award, running from the Early Years to Year 13, gives children of every age a way to live out the values that define us. Pupils come together for the Trust Carol Concert, Chaplaincy Retreats and Sacramental Gatherings, and for Mass – most recently a Chaplaincy Mass at St Mary's led by the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal. The roll-out of the new Religious Education Directory, supported by shared planning, training and assessment, has raised the quality of RE across every phase, a significant benefit for schools with only a small number of Catholic teachers.

The Trust's investment in inclusion is felt most keenly by the children who need it most. Under our Trust SEND Executive Lead, Emma Overett, schools share a resource bank, specialist interventions and a sustained programme of teacher and teaching-assistant training – including CPD

on supporting children who have experienced trauma – far beyond what we were able to do as single schools.

SENCo clusters, provision audits and a common SEND register and assessment framework have brought greater consistency and quality to provision for children with Education, Health and Care Plans. Even when facing the most complex and challenging circumstances, such as possible permanent exclusions, the Trust's relationships with external agencies and legal advisers has given its leaders expert, steadying support through a very difficult time. The result has been significantly improved outcomes for some of the most vulnerable pupils in our schools.

Belonging also widens children's horizons. Pupils take part in shared sporting competitions, the Voice21 oracy programme, a Trust-wide science day at St Mary's, maths challenges, eco work and a 'speak out' challenge – often free of charge and with transport provided, which matters a great deal to families. For our smallest and most rural schools, these shared experiences offer a breadth and scale that would be impossible to provide alone. After one such event, a pupil said simply, *"I am so proud of myself for speaking in front of all those people."*

School Improvement

Improvement in our Trust is built on a termly cycle of support and challenge. School Effectiveness Advisers and members of the executive team work alongside leaders to interrogate each school's self-evaluation, sharpen the development plan and prepare for inspection under the new framework. These conversations are deliberately both supportive and challenging: they hold a mirror up to practice, while ensuring that no school is left to face difficulty alone.

The impact is measurable. Where our internal mechanisms have flagged a dip – such as a fall in Key Stage 2 writing – the Trust has responded with additional moderation and targeted support, and outcomes have recovered strongly, ensuring a single year's dip does not harden into a trend.

At St Joseph's Hertford, early access to the Herts for Learning writing scheme as a pilot school – with tailored CPD and Trust-wide writing competitions – strengthened teaching and lifted pupils' engagement and pride, a gain recognised in external evaluations of school performance.

Cross-school collaboration accelerates this work. Joint moderation led by experienced Year 2 and Year 6 assessors, with assessment expertise from the Trust's external advisers (Herts for Learning), gives leaders genuine assurance that teacher judgements are secure. Subject-leader clusters and reciprocal school visits – a small rural school observing an embedded science curriculum in a larger school before investing in its own – mean that no leader must solve a problem from scratch.

These are cumulative gains of collaborative work and a relentless focus on standards



75%

**At Key Stage 2
75% of primary
schools improved
reading outcomes**

Workforce

A trust of our size can offer staff opportunities that a single school cannot. The Executive Headteacher model has repeatedly provided stability when it is most needed – securing leadership, systems and the confidence in schools navigating the departure or retirement of a headteacher. Trust-funded responsibility posts, leadership secondments, associate positions, NPQ pathways from middle leadership through to headship, and a structured programme for early-career teachers allow us to develop and retain our staff to benefit the pupils, rather than have our schools exposed to the harsh realities of the teacher recruitment crisis.

Support is practical and immediate. School leaders draw on an internal HR team and external legal advisers for the high-stakes matters – absence reviews, complaints and recruitment – that would otherwise rest on their shoulders alone. As one new headteacher reflected, this has “*removed the pressure and sole responsibility of high-stakes decision-making.*”

Wellbeing is taken seriously, through a headteacher resilience programme and a flexible-working policy that has, for example, improved office managers’ productivity and efficiency by cutting out commuting and non-essential tasks through working from home one day a week. Shared INSET days bring staff together for high-quality training from expert providers; at our January 2026 conferences, teachers and support staff from across the Trust benefitted from outstanding expert guest educational speakers as well as leading sessions for one another, building productive and beneficial professional relationships and delivering training that staff say improves their practice.

9/10 Headteachers’ average evaluation score of the decision to join the Trust



£4.57m

saved by our central
finance team across
the first four years

£2.31

returned in savings
for every £1 paid in
membership fees

£2.6m

capital funding
secured for essential
building works



Finance and Operations

The financial case for belonging is substantial, and we are transparent about it. Across the first four years since conversion, our central finance team turned collective purchasing, shared expertise and Trust-wide oversight into £4.57 million of savings, offsetting £1.98 million in membership fees – a return of £2.31 for every £1 paid.

We are equally clear that joining a trust is a long-term strategic decision: the broader value of membership lies in the quality of school improvement that pupils and staff experience, arising from the support and services the Trust provides; the financial returns are in addition to this and build over time rather than arriving all at once.

The savings are real and varied: economies of scale on catering, cleaning, energy and software, from CPOMs and IDL to Kapow and TenTen; rates relief secured through Department for Education guidance; and the end of local-authority de-delegation, which returns funding directly to schools.

Above all, conversion unlocks capital. As academies, our schools can bid for Condition Improvement Fund grants that were unavailable to them as Voluntary Aided schools – we have won more than £2.6 million to date for major schemes that improve the facilities, safety and experience for pupils and staff.

£100,000s

saved on joint
purchasing and
contracting

£2.6m

academy-only premises
improvement projects
won by Trust

£174,450

saved recruitment costs
courtesy of Trust service
provision model

In every case membership returns considerably more than it costs, and for some schools that return runs to several times the value of the contribution. The benefits take many forms: substantial savings on staffing through central finance provision, alongside rates relief, lower energy costs and successful Condition Improvement Fund bids. At one school, the Trust's challenge and support helped to overturn the assumption that a falling national birth rate made a declining roll unavoidable, backing leaders to deliver a recruitment strategy that has since brought in some £420,000 of additional pupil income.

Governance and Leadership

Strong governance underpins everything else. Local governing bodies are supported through termly meetings with directors, executive visits, comprehensive induction for new governors, a clear scheme of delegation and a shared schedule of business that allows governors to focus on strategy rather than operational detail. The board and executive anchor the Trust's work in the needs of its schools and the communities they serve, and in the ethical standards of the Seven Principles of Public Life.

The clearest proof of this is what happens when things are hard. In one primary school, several governor terms of appointment came to an end at the same time. The Trust rebuilt an effective board through targeted and timely recruitment, CEO support and the loan of an experienced chair and governors from another Trust school for a fixed term whilst new governors were readied.

In another school, facing significant financial pressure and the retirement of a long-serving headteacher, the Trust was able to support by providing executive and director support and a carefully managed interim leadership structure. The lesson our schools draw is the one expressed best by one of our Chairs: Trust schools are not an isolated island; they are well supported when issues arise.

What Does Belonging Mean?

For our current pupils, parents, governors, staff and school communities this of course means belonging to an organisation that works collaboratively to strengthen every school in our Trust, raising outcomes and attainment for children, investing in our facilities, and supporting and securing educational excellence in every area for everyone.

For any school weighing the journey to conversion, the evidence in this report is offered as reassurance. Schools join our Trust from many different starting points – confident and thriving, or facing leadership change, financial pressure or governance difficulty – and in every case the experience has been one of being better supported, not less autonomous, and of benefitting from the Trust's careful, collaborative and collegiate style. The local distinctiveness of each school is protected and strengthened rather than diluted, and the benefits of membership compound over time so that no school is ever left to face its challenges alone.

Trust schools are not lone stars but part of a beautiful constellation

A Final Word

Conversion is a journey, and like any worthwhile journey it asks for trust and good faith on both sides. What our schools tell us, consistently and in their own words, is that the decision to belong has made them stronger – educationally, financially and spiritually – and better able to give the children in their care the very best Catholic education, now and for generations to come.



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