

Collaboration That Counts: Upward Convergence in Practice

Collaboration is the lifeblood of system improvement. It turns individual effort into collective momentum. Challenge Partners' model of *Upward Convergence* is one powerful example of this in practice showing how schools, by working together, can lift outcomes for all, not just a few.

In an education system still shaped by competition for pupils, results and resources, it can be tempting for schools to look inward. But if we are serious about improving outcomes for every child, especially the most disadvantaged, collaboration cannot be optional. It must be the engine of progress.

Why Upward Convergence Matters

Upward Convergence is the belief that improvement is accelerated when schools share openly, learn deeply, and apply purposefully. It shows us that:

- Working in isolation narrows innovation and slows progress.
- Collective effort multiplies capacity and sparks new solutions.
- Raising outcomes for one group of schools raises the system for all.

As one leader reflected: *What makes more difference — repeating what we always do, or opening ourselves to the chance of change?*

Beyond Sharing: Towards Using

Collaboration is often reduced to “sharing good practice.” But sharing alone changes little. What matters is using what has been shared. Stepping into other schools. Seeing provision in context, asking questions, and adapting approaches.

That is when collaboration shifts from exchange to transformation. One school in Stoke, struggling with behaviour, radically improved its culture after leaders witnessed what was possible in another setting. Seeing change in action, not just hearing about it, unlocked belief.

What Makes Collaboration Work

Upward Convergence requires more than goodwill. It rests on:

- **Trust.** Leaders must feel safe enough to be honest and open.
- **Dialogue.** The richest learning comes through reflection, not judgement.
- **Humility.** Collaboration works when curiosity replaces superiority.

- **Follow-through.** Returning, deepening, and embedding ensures change lasts.

When these conditions align, collaboration strengthens not just provision but the belief that improvement is possible.

Collaboration Across the System

Trust-based networks create valuable opportunities, but there is a danger of becoming too insular — where “the trust view” becomes the only perspective. The public pound funds all schools, so its impact must multiply across the whole system. *Upward Convergence* reminds us that true system improvement depends on schools crossing boundaries and learning from one another.

The Impact We See

At its best, collaborative working leads to:

- Leaders benchmarking against real examples, not assumptions.
- Teachers returning from visits energised by new strategies.
- Conversations that centre on life chances, not just compliance.

The result is not just improved outcomes, but renewed confidence and momentum.

A Call to Leaders

Collaboration is not a distraction from improvement — it is the route to it. In a sector where disadvantage is real and relentless, *Upward Convergence* gives us a model for collective ambition.

Ask yourself:

- Are my leaders learning beyond our immediate context?
- Are we both giving and receiving value?
- Do we build chances for our staff to see, reflect, and adapt from others?

Because when collaboration works, everyone moves forward.