



# Data Strategy Guide for Trusts

## Build, Buy, or Education Intelligence?


Trust leaders are not short of data; they are short of clarity, consistency, and the time to act. Across many trusts, we see similar things:




Schools tell different stories using the same data.



Leaders spend hours pulling reports together, but are not always confident in what they're seeing.



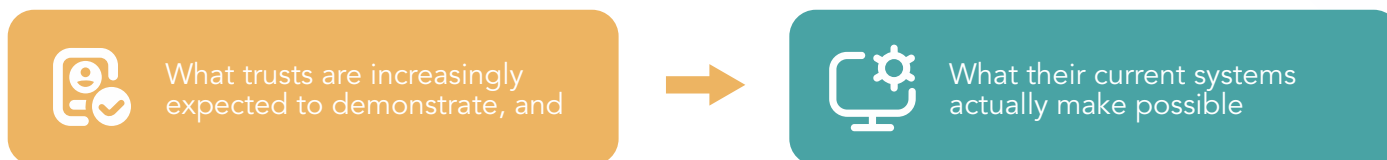
By the time issues are identified and understood, the moment for early intervention has already passed.




And when it comes to inspection or reporting to the board, evidencing impact is still often manual and time-consuming.

The problem isn't effort. Leaders and staff work hard to make sense of the data they have. The problem is that the data needed to lead effectively is fragmented across systems and documents — not connected in a way that supports fast, confident decision-making.


At BETT 2026, the Education Secretary set out a vision for a more data-driven school system, where insights are no longer “trapped in closed systems.” This direction of travel matters because it highlights a growing gap between:




**With trust inspections on the horizon, the expectation is not just to hold data but to be able to show clearly:**



How issues are identified



What actions are taken as a result, and



The measurable impact of those actions over time

**For many trusts, this remains harder, slower, and less consistent than it needs to be.**

### Why this matters now

For trust leaders, this is not about data. It is about three things:

**1. Inspection confidence**

Being able to clearly evidence what is working, where improvement is needed, and the impact of actions across every school.

**2. Financial efficiency**

Ensuring time, resources and funding are focused where they will make the biggest impact. Particularly important with the falling roll and likely impact on budgets.

**3. Consistency at scale**

Knowing that every school is working from the same understanding, priorities and evidence.

## Without this, trusts risk:

Inconsistent performance across schools

Slower or reactive improvement rather than proactive or preventative action

Increased pressure on leadership teams and staff

Difficulty evidencing impact for inspection

## What disconnected data is really costing your trust

Fragmented data doesn't just slow things down. It changes the quality of decisions.

### Missed or delayed interventions

When attendance, behaviour, assessment, inclusion, wellbeing and feedback sit in different places, patterns are harder to see. By the time concerns are identified and validated, time has passed, and opportunities to intervene early are lost.

### Inconsistent decision-making across schools

Without a shared intelligence layer, each school interprets data in its own way. This creates variation in response, uneven outcomes and makes it harder for trust leaders to know what is genuinely working.

### Reduced leadership capacity

Highly skilled leaders are spending time acting as data analysts, pulling reports, cross-referencing spreadsheets, and trying to build a coherent picture. This is time taken away from driving improvement.

### Inefficient use of resource

Without clear visibility of impact, trusts can continue investing time and budget into initiatives that are not delivering meaningful outcomes.

### Limited confidence in evidence of impact

Trusts are increasingly expected to demonstrate not just what they are doing, but whether it is working. When data and strategy sit separately, building that narrative becomes manual, time-intensive, and difficult to sustain.

While trust leaders recognise these challenges, the question is how to solve them in a way that improves outcomes quickly, without creating a new layer of management and complexity.

## A quick sense check

The question isn't, are trusts using data? They are. But in practice:

- ⊙ Insight often depends on a small number of individuals
- ⊙ Different schools interpret the same data in different ways
- ⊙ Moving from issue to understanding to action still takes time
- ⊙ Evidencing impact remains a manual and time-intensive process

# The real question

*"How do you move from data to confident, consistent action across every school — quickly and without creating a new burden to manage?"*

## Three approaches to data strategy

There are broadly three routes trusts take. Each has strengths and trade-offs.

### 1. Build your own data infrastructure

This approach focuses on creating your own central data architecture, typically a data warehouse or lakehouse, with pipelines feeding data from different systems.

For some trusts, this may be the right long-term investment.

It offers:

- ⊗ Full control over your data architecture
- ⊗ Flexibility to build bespoke reporting
- ⊗ A foundation for advanced analytics

But it comes with significant costs and considerations.

You will need:

- ⊗ Dedicated data engineering capability
- ⊗ Ongoing management of integrations and APIs
- ⊗ Cloud infrastructure and maintenance
- ⊗ Additional layers to enable analysis, interpretation and access
- ⊗ The financial resilience to manage harder to predict costs of growing infrastructure and usage

A data platform alone does not deliver insight. It creates the foundation, but the analysis and action layer will still need to be built on top.

#### Who this may suit

Large trusts with an existing data engineering team, a multi-year technology roadmap, and the budget for sustained development, integration management and the resilience to manage growing and unpredictable costs. If you already have data engineers on staff and want maximum architectural control, this may be the route for you.

### 2. Buy dashboards

This is the most common route, using tools such as PowerBI, ThoughtSpot, and Tableau. You can connect these, requiring internal expertise and resources, or use third-party providers.

Dashboards provide a clearer, more accessible view of existing data.

They can:

- ⊗ Reduce time spent gathering information
- ⊗ Provide shared visibility across schools
- ⊗ Improve accessibility of key metrics

But they still rely heavily on human interpretation. Dashboards show you what has happened.

They do not:

- ⊗ Explain why it is happening
- ⊗ Identify relationships across multiple data sources
- ⊗ Suggest what to do next

Leaders and staff still need to interpret and analyse the data and decide on what to do with it.

### Who this may suit

Trusts that want a cleaner view of existing data and have leaders confident in interpreting charts and filtering reports. A stepping stone, but not a long-term strategy if the goal is to reduce the analytical burden on leadership and to speed up effective decision-making.

## 3. Fully Managed Education Intelligence

This approach treats intelligence as a capability, not a project. It is delivered as a fully managed service, without the need to build infrastructure or rely on dashboards alone.

Trusts connect their existing data and documents to a platform that:

- ⊗ Brings their data together and maintains it in real time in a data lakehouse
- ⊗ Analyses it in context
- ⊗ Explains what is happening and why
- ⊗ Recommends what to do next
- ⊗ Tracks impact over time

**Edu Intelligence** is the leading platform that delivers this.

It connects MIS, attendance, behaviour, attainment, wellbeing, stakeholder voice, SEND and inclusion data, alongside strategic documents and policies.

It uses education-specific AI to identify patterns, highlight priorities, and recommend evidence-informed actions, allowing leaders to ask questions and receive immediate, evidence-based answers.

It works for trust, school, cohort and individual student analysis. This means, for example, it can identify specific areas of a subject where an individual student or cohort needs further support, and create a plan to address this.

This is not a reporting tool. It is a different way of understanding and acting on your data across the whole trust.

Edu Intelligence is designed to work with your existing systems, not replace them.

- ⊗ Data is securely connected
- ⊗ Each trust's data is stored separately in its own lakehouse
- ⊗ Our secure AI does not see identifiable student, parent or staff data
- ⊗ Your data is not used to train external models
- ⊗ The platform is designed exclusively for education contexts

This allows trusts to maintain control, avoid complexity, and enable access to insight without specialist expertise.

**Edu Intelligence** is already supporting over 550 schools and 40 trusts, helping leaders move from data to action faster and with greater confidence.

### Who this may suit

Any trust that wants to reduce analysis time and workload, improve outcomes, and evidence impact without building or maintaining their own data infrastructure and wants predictable future costs. Particularly well-suited to any trust without dedicated data engineers or significant budget for this area. It is also valuable for trusts of any size looking for education-specific AI-powered insight on top of their existing data.

# Comparing the approaches



## Build

Requires time, technical resource and ongoing effort.



## Dashboards

Improve visibility but rely on interpretation.



## Education Intelligence

Provides immediate insight, explains why, and provides evidence-backed recommendations consistently across the trust and its schools.

| Build Your Own           |  | Buy Dashboards                   | Ready-Made Intelligence               |
|--------------------------|--|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Technical staff needed   | Data engineers + analysts                  | Minimal (for setup)              | None                                  |
| Time to first insight    | Months to a year+                          | Weeks to months                  | Days to weeks                         |
| Integration management   | You manage all APIs and pipelines          | Vendor-dependent; may be limited | Fully managed, real-time sync         |
| AI-powered analysis      | Must be built or added as a separate layer | Not included                     | Included                              |
| Natural language queries | Must be built                              | No                               | Yes                                   |
| Recommended actions      | Must be built                              | No                               | Yes, with progress tracking           |
| Document analysis        | Complex to integrate                       | No                               | Built in (policies, Ofsted, SEF etc)  |
| Per-school access to AI  | Requires custom build                      | Dashboard views only             | Every school gets own                 |
| Ongoing maintenance      | Significant (staff + hosting costs)        | Provider-dependent               | Fully managed                         |
| Cost model               | High and variable                          | Variable                         | Predictable, trust per-school pricing |

## What this means for pupils, staff, parents and the trust

When trusts can connect, understand, and act on their data more effectively, the impact is not just operational. It is reflected in the experience and outcomes across the whole organisation.

### For pupils

Leaders can identify issues earlier and respond more quickly. When reviewing assessment, attendance, behaviour, progress or wellbeing, patterns become clear. This provides personalised learning to meet needs identified, enables early intervention and supports consistent progress, reducing the risk of issues escalating.

### For vulnerable groups

Differences between groups, including SEND and pupil premium, are easier and quicker to see and understand. This enables more targeted support, more effective deployment of resources, and stronger evidence of what is working and how gaps are being addressed.

### For staff

Reducing time spent analysing and reporting data allows leaders, teachers and all staff to focus on teaching, support and improvement. Clearer priorities reduce duplication and create greater confidence in what matters most, ensuring the right professional training and development and improving retention.

### For parents

Differences between perceptions and engagement for parents of children that are in different groups, such as SEND, pupil premium and more. Easier to see relationships across data sets and to take early action to avoid disengagement and complaints.

### For the trust

Leaders have a clearer and more consistent view across all schools. This quickly improves self-evaluation, enables more confident conversations with trustees, governors, and inspectors, and provides real-time evidence of impact.

## The goal isn't better data. It's better, faster decisions.

When your data works in the right way:

- ⊙ You see the full picture quickly
- ⊙ You understand what is driving performance
- ⊙ You act earlier and with more confidence
- ⊙ You create consistency across your trust
- ⊙ You evidence impact clearly
- ⊙ You make better use of time and budget
- ⊙ You are better prepared for future challenges, such as the falling roll
- ⊙ You release leadership capacity

The trusts that move fastest will not be those with the most data. They will be the ones that have made it easiest to connect, understand, and act on it.

## Final thought

Data strategy is no longer about systems. It is about how effectively your trust can understand what is happening, act on it, and demonstrate impact.

The question is not whether to act. It is how quickly you can move from fragmented data to confident, consistent decision-making.



*About the Author Tim Handley, CPTO, Edu-Intelligence. A former teacher, data lead, and primary school headteacher and now a certified Google AI practitioner and industry-recognised expert. He developed Edu Intelligence's sector-leading data connectivity and secure 22 specialist agent education-specific AI.*



### Would you like to explore your approach or talk through your trust's data strategy?

*We offer a free consultation to help trust leaders sense-check where they are now, identify gaps and choose the best option, without creating more work for you and your team.*

*Email: [timhandley@edu-intelligence.ai](mailto:timhandley@edu-intelligence.ai) to book yours.*