



How Athena sees the world

How can schools best work together? A question on the minds of the best school and trust leaders I know. And it's part of the reason we started Athena.

Athena is a learning trust, a family of schools, that we started to grow and named in 2022.

We want to bring schools both sky-high support and sky-high ownership.

Why Athena?

Athena is the goddess of wisdom, knowledge, learning, strategy, conflict, freedom, endeavour and the arts. She is guide, champion and encourager of the brave*. She is the muse to some of the world's great achievements, begun in Athens, like the subjects of philosophy and history, and of uplifting and enduring architecture, like the Parthenon. Athena, according to the ancient legends she appears in, is supportive, creative, appreciative, thoughtful, combative and determined. Athena inspired the world's first-ever democracy, the Athenian democracy of 2,500 years ago, that still to this day inspires the world.

We chose Athena for our name because we champion knowledge, strategy, endeavour, creativity, generosity, determination and wisdom. Because we champion teachers, headteachers, school leaders and school support staff as our heroes. Because we believe knowledge and education bring us freedom: freedom from disempowerment, freedom to contribute, create, challenge and change the world.

What do we as the Athena Learning Trust stand for?

We are always learning together. We learn from the world's best thinkers and school leaders. We set out to be a leading trust for knowledge-building.

We aim to be super-supportive. We want to be the best home, the best family, for our schools and our staff. Our top priorities are to bring world-class education support and world-class people support to our schools.

We want to see a world where all our children get to go to a great school. Where all trusts work together for all children. Where we all share our ideas and resources freely and open-heartedly.

We set out to create:



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- leading school improvement strategy
- world-class support for school leaders
- CPD curricula for all staff in all our schools
- 7-year character curricula
- 7-year reading programs
- 7-year subject curricula
- focused subject thinking all lesson
- clear subject teaching every lesson
- reading every day

Who are Athena's heroes?

Our heroes are teachers, headteachers, school leaders, school support staff, students! The beekeepers and the butterfly catchers, adventurers, explorers, pioneers and trailblazers, Writers, authors, podcasters, sharers, and bloggers. Brave headteacher-writers like Matthew Evans, Claire Stoneman, Nick Hart, Carly Waterman, Mouhssin Ismail, Katherine Birbalsingh, Amit Hathi, Matt Jones, Cathie Lock and Tom Rees. Bold education thinkers like Viviane Robinson, Christine Counsell, Becky Allen, Daisy Christodoulou, Dan Willingham, Doug Lemov, Tom Bennett, Ruth Ashbee, Pritesh Raichura and Kat Howard.

What are we against? Athena's great adversaries

We stand against things that drag teachers, schools and kids back and damage their lives: bad ideas and bad practices.

- Hornets
- Overstretch
- Disruption
- Distractions
- Overload
- Forgetting
- Confusion
- Demotivation
- Bullying
- Dogma (like: put kids first! culture eats strategy!)
- Entitlement

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Athena's struggles and inner demons

Like other families of schools, we at Athena still struggle as yet to achieve crystal clarity on all aspects of what we do in schools, for all staff and kids. We struggle with doing less, better. It's a battle in schools not to take on too much and bite off more than we can chew: the overstretch temptation is our inner demon. We struggle to anticipate and preempt all of the many pitfalls, blind spots, unintended consequences and adverse side-effects of our approaches. We struggle with walking the simplicity-complexity tightrope, with neither falling into overcomplicating nor oversimplifying. With balancing alignment with autonomy.

Athena's beliefs

We believe:

Knowledge-building is vital for us as school leaders and teachers: learning, asking, listening.

We believe the greatest investment we can make in our students is investing in our staff teams teaching and leading them.

Priorities are vital. We are prone to overstretch. Time is scarce: impact vs effort is key.

We believe that the most important priority for schools is the learning of our people: the learning of our children, teachers, staff and leaders.

Clarity is vital. Confusion impedes improvement.

We believe that the most important role of school leaders is to make it as easy as possible for teachers and staff to teach and lead well.

Encouragement is vital. Schools are very emotionally demanding places.

Heart is vital. What comes from the heart, reaches the heart.

Honesty is vital. All leaders have blind spots. Truth doesn't flow well to the top.

Feedback is vital. Depriving people of feedback deprives them of the chance to improve.

Involvement helps commitment. Encouraging staff to speak their minds, wins hearts.

Great leaders create leaders. School leaders can empower staff and students to learn to lead.

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Athena's favourite maxims

Our maxims reconnect us with our central aim: great learning for staff and students. And with some of our heroes!

'School improvement is knowledge-building.' Steve Rollett

'Schools thrive when there is certainty, consistency, simplicity.'" Mouhssin Ismail

'Time in schools is like water in a desert.' Doug Lemov

'Fewer things, greater depth.' Mary Myatt

'Do less better.' Kat Howard

'Far too many teachers endure far too much disruption'. Tom Bennett.

'You learn the best when you work with the best.' Ben Parnell

'Curricula empower students to participate, challenge, contribute and change things.' Ruth Ashbee

'Subject communities are central to the long-term, lasting and fundamental transformation of curriculum and teaching quality.' Christine Counsell

What staff say about being a part of Athena

'My class are an absolute dream now. Last year, this would have only ever been a wild dream of mine. True, hard evidence that this system works.'

"The girls were all but mute last year due to the dominance and poor behaviour of the boys, and this term, for the first time ever, the girls are speaking, contributing, putting their hands up, responding to cold calling, verbalising questions and concerns and generally have had the opportunity to flourish."

"I'm really enjoying teaching this year, more than ever before. In other schools I've taught in there was no behaviour system at all, and no support! Now and here I feel really supported, and the system gives me the head space to actually teach my subject rather than worrying about what to do about misbehaviour."



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"I never would have thought of sending my kids to this school but now, with the direction it's moving in, I would."

"I think all the changes that you guys have made are the most beneficial to have been put in place in my 18 years of doing this."

"Our students feel safer, bolder, like they can have a go, it's more equal now."

"I'm exhausted but usually at this time of year I'm despairing, not wanting to come out of the door. The difference the routines have made is huge. I didn't realise how much difference it would make. That feeling of despair in school can be SO consuming. What a massive difference!"

"Can't get over how well-behaved the kids were in their classes. You could hear a pin drop on nearly every corridor!"

"It's come on leaps and bounds since last year, the consistency. I used to have disruption thirty minutes a lesson last year. Now I can just get on and teach."

'I've never felt so inspired as by Athena to improve education for children.'

'Game changer! The impact Athena have had is tangible. Classrooms have become calm, quiet learning environments meaning that everyone has the best opportunity to learn. Workload has been reduced so that teachers are able to spend their time planning really effective lessons. Children are able to listen to their teachers and practice what they have learnt due to the calm and quiet classrooms without disruption and interruptions. In a very short time the school improvement team has had a massive impact on everyone at Atlantic Academy, something that will have life long positive implications for a large number of our children where opportunities are few and far between. When I left in December I could only hope that more schools take on Athena's approach to education!'

Why teachers, staff and school leaders tend to like being a part of Athena

1. People: Athena leaders are good people with good hearts, who love learning
2. No nonsense, no burnout: we cut low-impact workload and champion staff wellbeing
3. Backing: we back our headteachers and staff 100% - especially when it's tough
4. Learning: we love learning together; we devote 10 insets a year to all-staff CPD
5. Disruption-free: we help bring about disruption-free learning, aiming for distraction-free
6. Life-changing: we champion and celebrate subjects and what we teach as life-changing
7. Togetherness: we're all on a mission together to create great schools together

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8. Impact: we help improve pupils' reading, revision and results
9. Leaders: we see every staff member and student as a school leader
10. Time: we value staff time really highly and try our utmost to always invest it well

No Nonsense

no disruption in lessons

no marking in books

no 'edutainment' expected

no resourcing entirely alone from scratch

no year 7 to 9 subject data drops

no written reports

no distractions

no pointless bureaucracy

No Burnout

no 'evidencing' scrutinies

no overburdening pressures

no overstretch: just core purpose

no distractions from our top priorities

no need to work nights, weekends & holidays

no sacrifice of wellbeing, family or loved ones

no reason not to love being in education!

We want our staff to do what they do best and enjoy most: teaching, learning, leading!

Beyond the autonomy-vs-alignment impasse: high ownership, high support

Who wants the school they're at to be standardised? No one. Teachers, staff and families want their school to have its own identity and community pride.

A tale of two trusts. One trust that a headteacher I know worked with was very controlling. The head wasn't allowed to spend or manage their finances themselves, or recruit at all without the CEO.

Another trust they worked with was very vacant. They never visited the school, and didn't see any of the lessons or learning happening at all.

Trusts tend to struggle not to fall into these twin traps: the trap of mistrust and the trap of neglect. But traps like these snap painfully shut, and definitely don't help.

What are the advantages and limitations of autonomy and alignment, and the way out of the dilemma between them?

The potential advantages of autonomy are adaptation and space for innovation.

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The potential disadvantages of autonomy are workload duplication, suboptimal choices and inexperienced weak spots.

The potential advantages of alignment are time-saving workload reduction, better consistency, shared learning, peer support and paired review.

The potential disadvantages of alignment are less adaptive responsiveness, less involvement and ownership, and the risk of wasting time on ineffective cross-school groupwork without much airtime for anyone.

	Autonomy	Alignment
Advantages	Adaptation Innovation	Time-saving workload reduction Consistency, shared learning, peer support and paired review
Disadvantages	Workload duplication Inexperienced weak spots	Less responsiveness Less involvement and ownership

Some trusts combine the disadvantages of misguided standardisation with the disadvantages of anarchic free-for-alls. They standardise what shouldn't be standardised and miss out on aligning what could well be aligned.

What's the way out of the autonomy-alignment impasse? How could we combine the advantages of autonomy with the advantages of alignment, whilst mitigating their disadvantages?

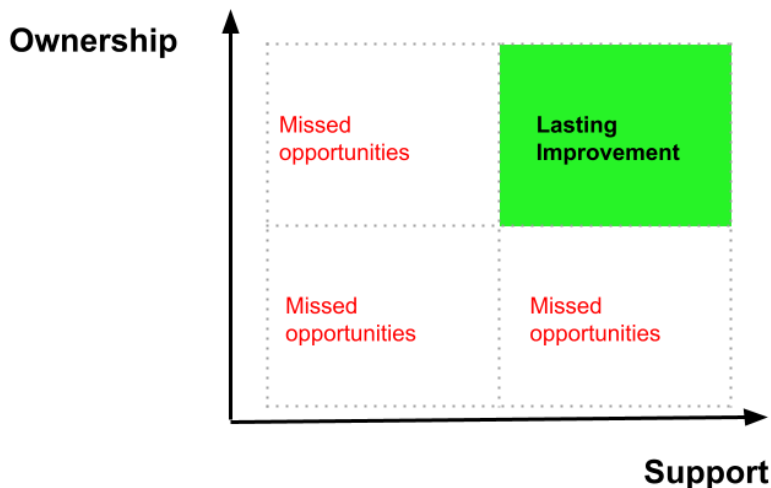
High Ownership, High Support

The Athena approach is high ownership, high support.

We encourage high levels of ownership, initiative, preemption and innovation.

We bring high levels of support, backing and championing to our heads, teachers and staff.

To achieve lasting improvement, schools benefit from both high support and high ownership.



For example, we don't have any non-negotiables. Instead, we share what we won't ask for - what we'll never ask for. We don't have any Y7, Y8 or Y9 trust-wide summative assessments, marking frequencies or data drop deadlines. Instead, we much prefer to trust and develop our subject leaders and teachers to focus on constant, formative, responsive, two-way feedback every lesson from teachers to students and from students to teachers: the two most vital audiences in teaching and learning.

Instead of non-negotiables, we share our best bets, based on the best schools, the best research, the best experts and thinkers, the best educationalists. We rank order the best bets in order of certainty of positive impact for staff and students' learning, knowledge, thinking, trust-building and time. This helps us share the priority order of initiatives, and what to let go of, given limited time, headspace and capacity.

World-class Support and Timesavers

We support and back our headteachers full-heartedly. We think together with them lots about what world-class support for them looks like - how exactly is it better than excellent, better even than nationally-leading support?

We back headteachers fully in their greatest battles: with high-stakes inspections, with developing all staff (including support staff), with examinations, complaints, budgeting, forecasting, challenging underperformance, misconduct, recruitment, induction,



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probation, succession, progression, staff absence and cover, suspensions, exclusions, appeals, vitriol, and pillorying social media mob pile-ons.

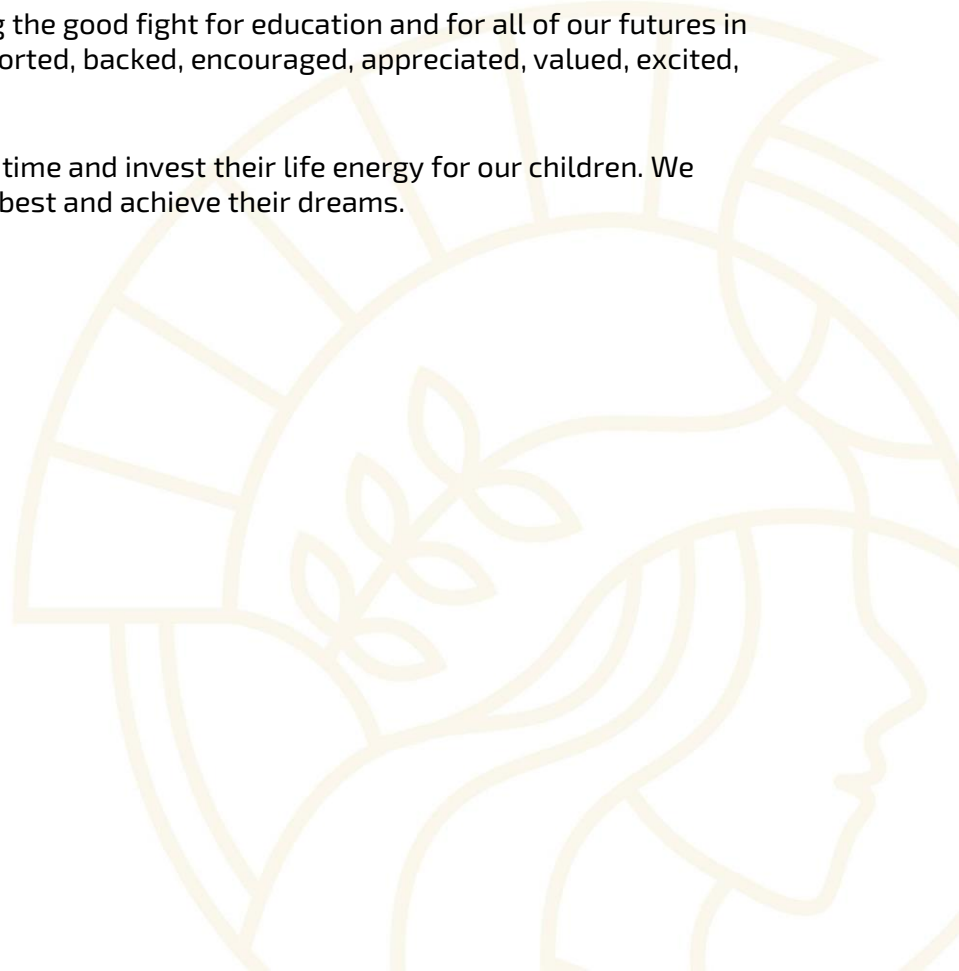
We back headteachers fully against their hate-fulled adversaries: haters, shamers, crusaders, witchhunters and pitchfork mobs. We surround heads and staff facing flak and fire with love, affirmation, encouragement, bolstering, support, self-belief, positivity and resolve.

Supportive, time-saving collaboration: here is our [two-page strategy](#) on how schools can best work together as a trust. Autonomy, but not alone.

We want our schools' staff and leaders to enjoy being a part of Athena, being a part of a family of schools, being a part of a trust with a shared mission together, and feel part of something amazing.

We want all school staff, fighting the good fight for education and for all of our futures in the frontlines, to feel clear, supported, backed, encouraged, appreciated, valued, excited, proud and fired up.

Our staff in schools give up their time and invest their life energy for our children. We want to back them to bring their best and achieve their dreams.



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