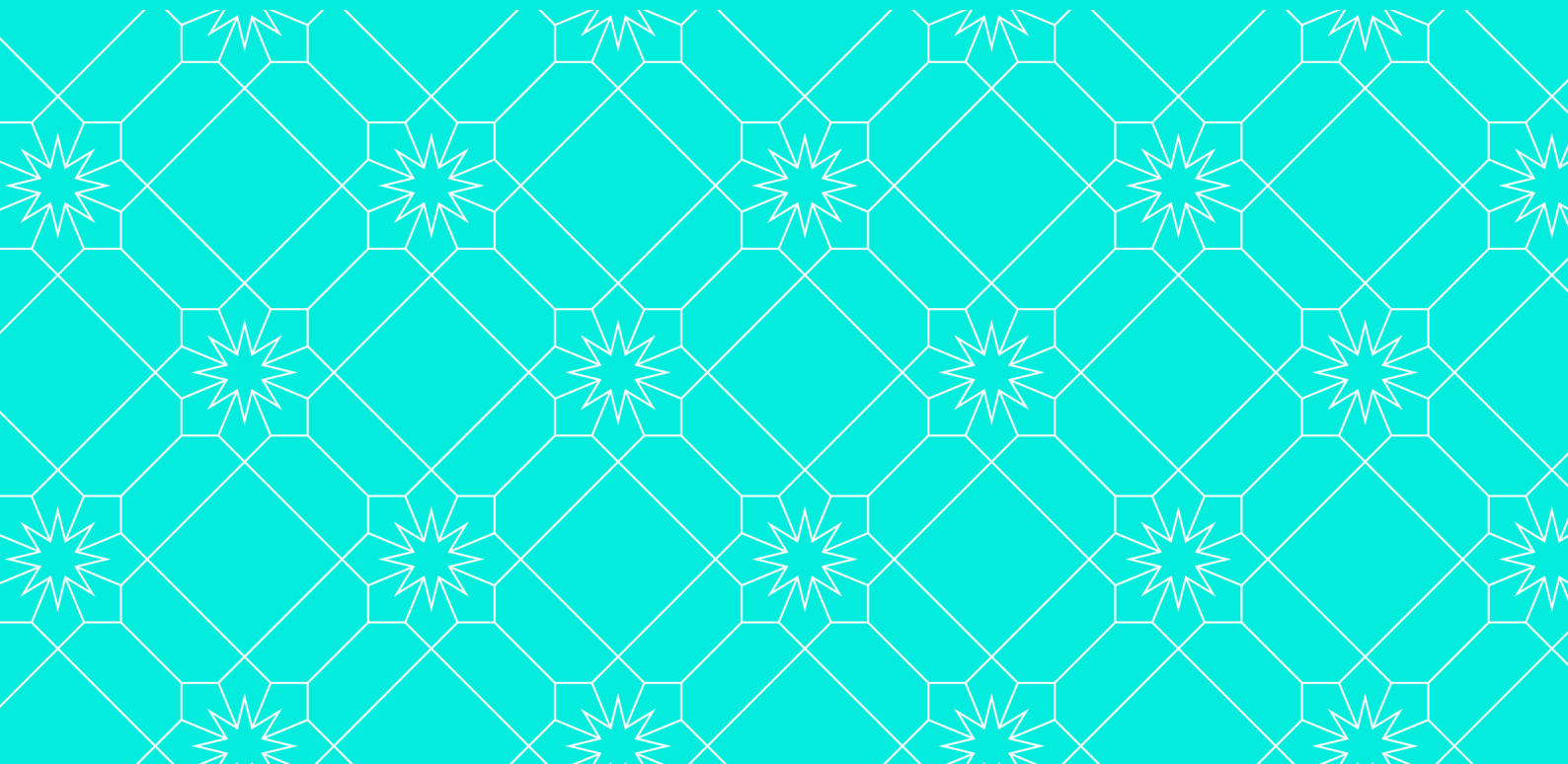




# **RSA Academies**

## **Vision and distinctiveness**

Colin Hopkins April 2022



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Academies (2019-21)**

**I**n May 2020, the board of the RSA took the considered decision not to renew its Memorandum of Understanding with RSA Academies (RSAA) when this expired on 31 March 2022. This would bring RSAA's role as an academy sponsor to an end. The reasons for this difficult decision relate to complexities in relation to finance, governance, and the lack of continued support for 'umbrella' sponsorship from the DfE which ultimately led to the RSAA project becoming unsustainable in the longer term.

After RSA Academies brought its school-based activities to a close at the end of the 2020-21 academic year, RSAA's board asked me to review various aspects of the project. This paper therefore sets out to examine the distinctive features of the RSA Academies project. It does not pretend to offer a comprehensive history and is necessarily selective. Whilst there is inevitably a degree of subjectivity in my analysis, I have tried to give a balanced and objective view of the project's achievements and complexities.

My approach is primarily qualitative since it relies heavily on the official record as set out in RSAA board papers and minutes and other published documents. Where possible, I have tried to animate an issue by bringing voices from within the RSAA community to the fore. It is the human perspectives that provide colour and reveal underlying assumptions and values. The overall approach seeks to achieve 'grounded theory' by using qualitative data 'to form explanations and theories that are grounded in the details, evidence and examples of such data'.<sup>1</sup>

What emerges from the story are fascinating insights into how organisations evolve and behave and into the interplay of power relations between participating organisations and players. The concluding section aims to bring insights and learning from the story and to offer a balanced view of the RSA Academies project over time.

<sup>1</sup> Basit, TN, rev Glover, DC (2001) *Research Methods in Education*, RM01, p66. Keele Distance Learning Publications. [Unpublished internal company document].



**W**e are the RSA. The royal society for arts, manufactures and commerce. We're committed to a future that works for everyone. A future where we can all participate in its creation.

The RSA has been at the forefront of significant social impact for over 250 years. Our proven change process, rigorous research, innovative ideas platforms and diverse global community of over 30,000 problem solvers, deliver solutions for lasting change.

We invite you to be part of this change. Join our community. Together, we'll unite people and ideas to resolve the challenges of our time.

Find out more at [thersa.org](https://thersa.org)

**We define our ambitions as:**

## **Our vision**

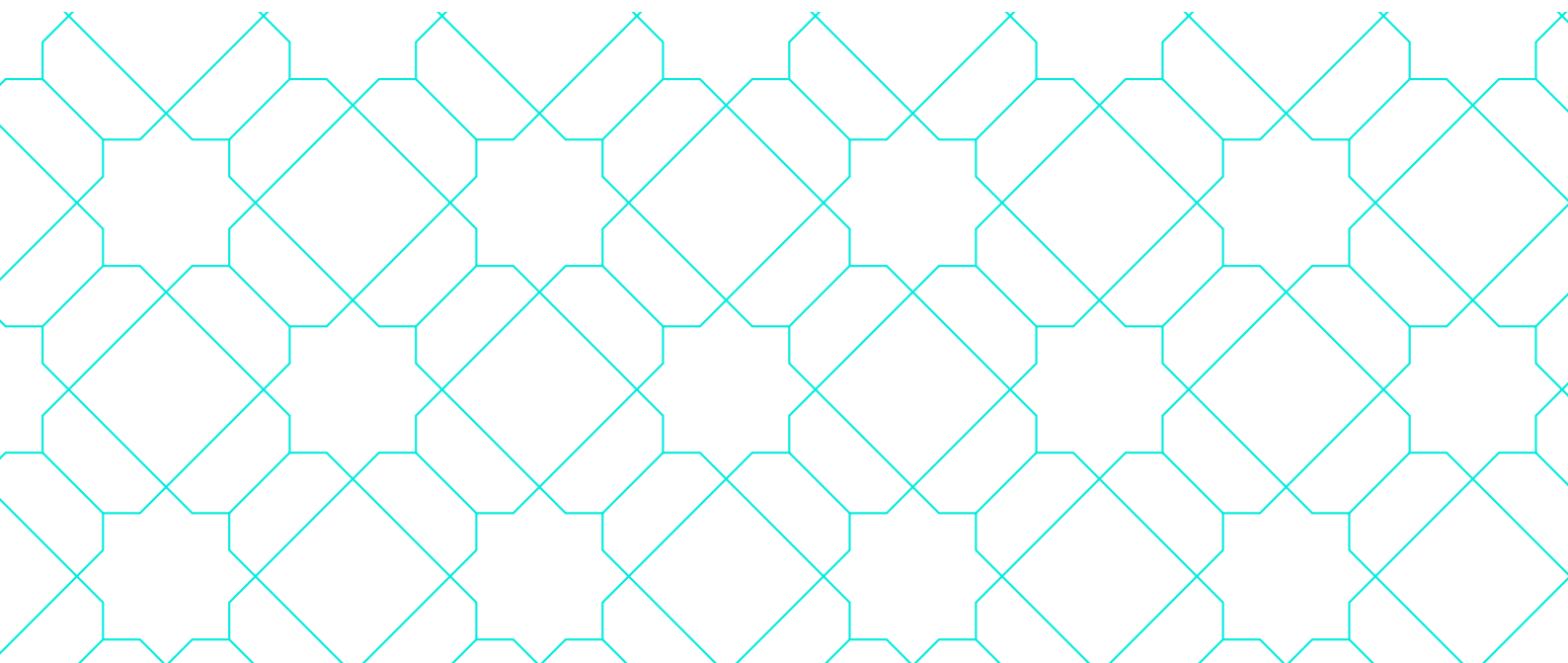
**A world where everyone is able to participate in creating a better future.**

## **Our purpose**

**Uniting people and ideas to resolve the challenges of our time.**

## **We are**

**A global community of proactive problem solvers.**



**O**n the walls of the Great Room at RSA House in London, the historical and symbolic paintings by the early romantic artist James Barry depict *The Progress of Human Knowledge and Culture*. Right from its inception, the RSA committed itself to improving society. An engagement with education has therefore always been a central aspect of the RSA's mission to change the world for the better.

Over time, the RSA has been involved in all kinds of educational initiatives. In the 19th century, shortly after the Great Exhibition, the Society of Arts was the first organisation to introduce examinations, from 1856, in technical and commercial subjects and so it extended its work with mechanics institutes (for the working classes). Huddersfield Mechanics' Institute, for example, became the northern examinations centre for the Society and gained national recognition for offering the Society's qualifications. The Warrington Mechanics' Institute, in decline by 1850, had its life extended up to 1891 with the opportunity for students to sit the Society's examinations in technical subjects.

In 1870 (the year of the Elementary Education Act that established non-denominational 'board' schools), the Society launched inquiries into the state of education, the findings of which were published in the *RSA Journal*. In 1872, recognising the need to improve girls' education, the Society was instrumental in establishing the Girls' Public Day Schools Trust. Four years later (1876), the Society established a National Training School for Music, which later became the Royal College of Music.

More recently, the programme Education for Capability (initiated in 1978) recognised the value of practical skills as a counterbalance to a contemporaneous focus on academic subjects. Reflecting William Shipley's interest in practical subjects – he was himself an inventor – there has therefore been a long history of practical engagement in education and in addressing neglected areas: 'Merely by existing, the Society challenged the way that the British state was organised. To begin with, by taking on certain tasks, they underlined just how much the state left undone.'<sup>2</sup>

It was a natural progression, when the opportunity arose, for the RSA to become involved in the academies programme established by Tony Blair as a high-profile aspect of New Labour's commitment to 'Education, Education, Education'.

Sponsoring the RSA Academy, Tipton, in 2008 embodied the RSA's commitment to working with schools in an area of challenge and historic low aspiration.

There followed, in 2011, the establishment of RSA Academies – in the wake of the 2010 Academies Act, the coalition government's plan to encourage more schools to cede from local authority control.

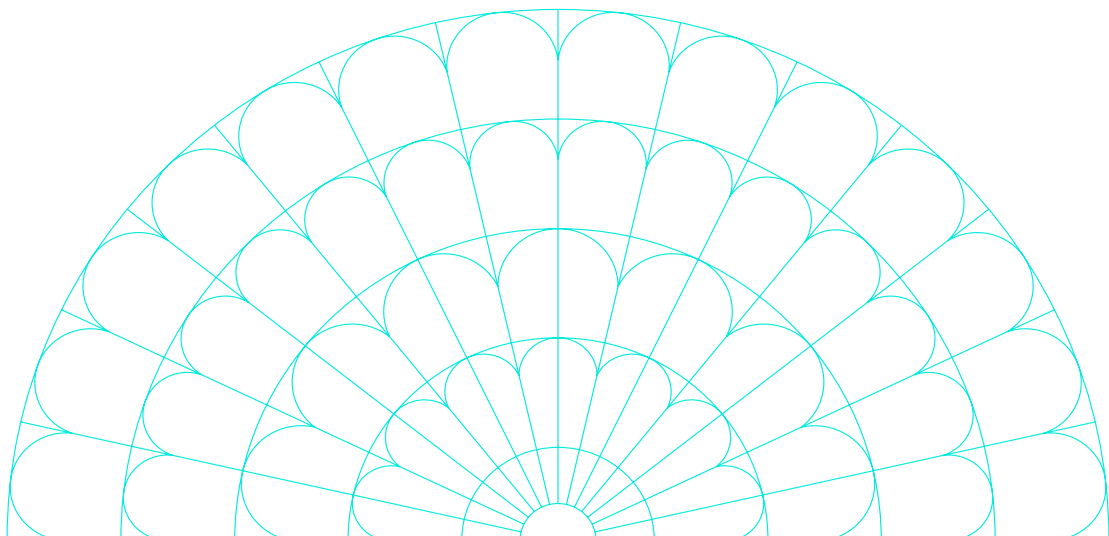
2 Colley, L (2009) *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837*. p185 New Haven and London, Yale University Press

Much has been achieved since 2011, and a perusal of RSAA's annual report and accounts for each of the supervening years will give a sense of the range and quality of the projects undertaken, especially in relation to the three areas of focus that evolved into the Commitments – **arts, culture and creativity; world beyond school;** and **wellbeing and mental health.**

Schools in challenging areas will always struggle to meet national expectations because they reflect the communities they serve. This does not imply accepting a culture of low expectations or defeatism. It is simply a recognition of the fact that it is more difficult in areas of deprivation to close the attainment gap because of the social and economic context. Schools in such areas often find it difficult to recruit the best staff, compounding their difficulties. They need values-based organisations to support them.

RSA Academies chose to implement a democratic modus operandi, in which there was a genuine commitment to working in partnership and where the notion of being part of a 'family' of schools was a potent source of the schools' identity.

Establishing RSA Academies as an umbrella trust was, at inception, an innovative approach to facilitating collaboration between autonomous institutions. This model of collaboration, not uncommon after the 2010 Academies Act, was however rapidly superseded by the multi-academy trust model in which a group of academies form a single legal entity. If the umbrella model later became anachronistic, the philosophy of inclusion it reflected now lives on in the Central Region Schools Trust's (CRST) continuing commitment to 'social justice through exceptional schools'. It is a powerful legacy of which the RSA can be proud.



# The distinctiveness of RSA Academies: early visions

**T**he delivery of a distinctive educational experience for students – through both the formal curriculum and a range of enrichment activities – is the golden thread running through the whole of the story of RSA Academies. RSAA's aim was always to support schools with a distinctive ethos, derived from the vision and values of the RSA, as places of innovation and in which new educational ideas could be tested.

Over RSAA's 10-year lifespan, thousands of pupils, staff, families, and stakeholders became party to the RSA's mission to improve society through ideas and action. The aspiration was to build cultural capital in the students and communities served by extending their experience into new dimensions. The RSA's own commitment to the arts, manufacturing and commerce became the scaffolding upon which RSA Academies built its programme of activities. Over time, these coalesced into the three Commitments (**arts, culture and creativity; world beyond school; wellbeing and mental health**), underpinned by a clear endorsement to creativity in the classroom.

The planning for the work to establish RSA Academies was led by Becky Francis, then the RSA's director of education, working closely with Robert Hill (education consultant and former government advisor) and the principal of Whitley Academy, an Opening Minds lead school, which converted to Academy status in July 2011.

Part of Hill's report (January 2011) reads:



From discussions within the RSA the purpose and mission that underpin this project seem to fall into two categories. First, they reflect the RSA's historic role in leading education innovation and promoting social justice. An RSA family of academies takes advantage of the coalition government's agenda around promoting greater diversity of school providers to:

- Link progressive thinking with active social entrepreneurship to create innovative models of schooling.
- Support the RSA's emerging thinking on promoting and supporting social ownership and provision of public services.
- Further social justice by contributing to improving schools and the life chances of hundreds of young people.<sup>3</sup>



3 Hill, R (2011) Report to RSA Trustees on developing an RSA family of academies, paragraph 2.2 (January 2011). [Unpublished internal company document].

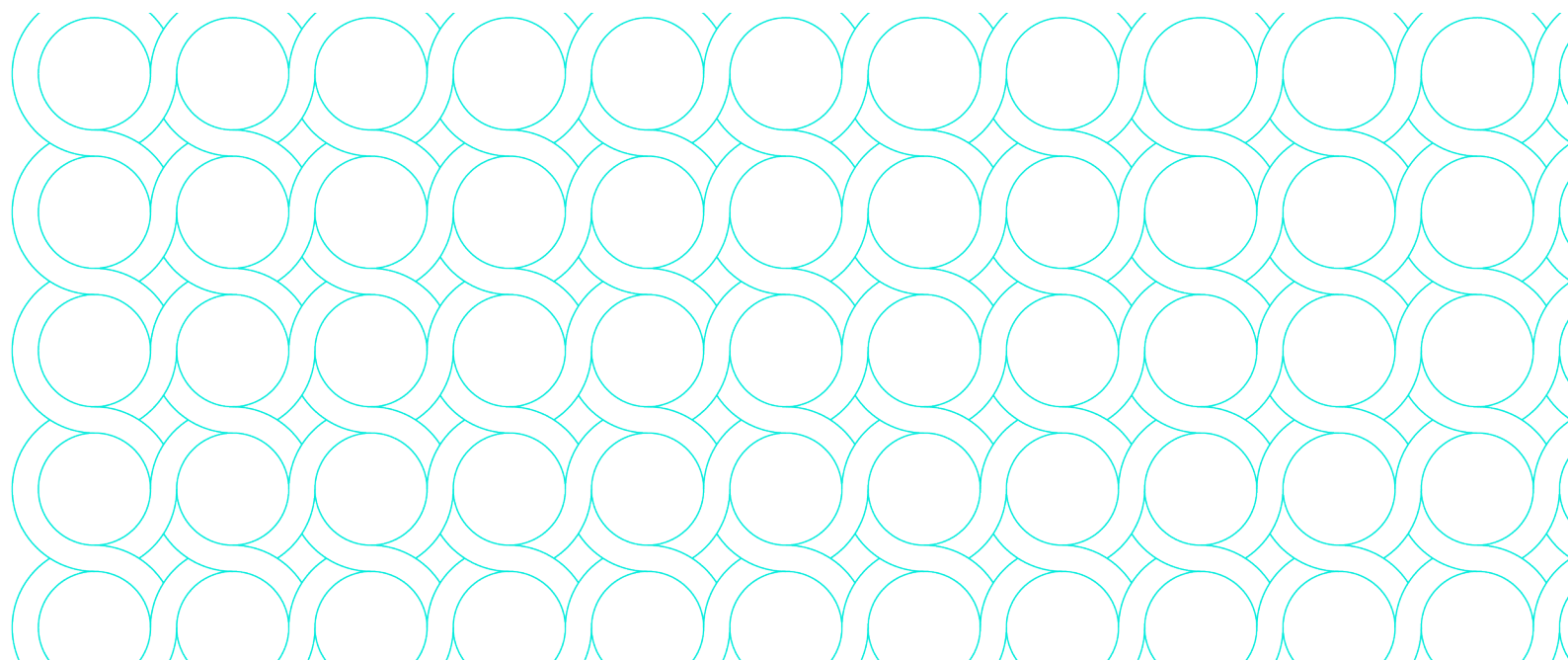
A document, *RSA Academies: Mission, Values and Model*, from autumn 2011, included more detail about the proposed vision for the academies. The key aspects of the vision were a commitment to social justice; inclusion; a holistic view of community; a collegial approach to teaching and learning; creativity; and transparency and ethics.

A further paper dated March 2012 outlined the distinguishing features of RSA Academies, including



collaboration, shared commitment to social justice and innovation, school-to-school improvement, and peer review... embracing elements of both autonomy and accountability':

- 'A commitment to school improvement, within individual schools, across the family, and beyond.
- Association with the RSA's historic brand; and opportunities for innovative linkages, enrichment, and contributions to governance through RSA projects and the RSA's 30,000 Fellows.
- The commitment to social justice and inclusion, and working to the advantage of all children in a locality.
- The emphasis on student and community voice, encouraging distinctiveness rather than homogeneity in schools within the family.
- The lack of any particular religious emphasis.
- The commitment to collegiate ways of working.





Apart from the many references to Opening Minds in the Mission, Values and Model document, it is remarkable how much of what was originally envisaged has been carried through to the present day.

## Unique experiences

Appendix I contains a chronology of the various RSAA-sponsored activities and projects from the early days to the cessation of activities in August 2021. Considered as a whole, these represent a substantial corpus of experience and intellectual capital that has been of benefit to hundreds of students.

The activities and projects can be categorised into six main groupings, although the groups are not mutually exclusive:

- i** The 'set-pieces' such as Arts Day (later Artsfest) and Takeover Day, showcasing the RSA, offering inspiring moments, and often taking place at RSA House.
- ii** Externally-funded large-scale projects, often spanning several terms, such as the Manual of Modern Making (2014-16), Performing Arts Hub (2016-18), A Whole School Approach to Mental Health (2017-18), RSA4 (2019-21) and the Contemporary Arts Space Project (2019-21).
- iii** Perennial RSAA-led projects, such as the Pupil Design Awards, RSA Cup (quiz), RSA8.
- iv** School-based projects led by Fellows/Royal Designers for Industry (RDIs), such as Catalytic Teaching and Learning, Secret Gardens, Mental Pictures.
- v** Partnerships, such as those with Warwick University and Opening Doors (linking schools to businesses in Redditch/Black Country).
- vi** The day-to-day work with teachers structured around the Commitments, and which also includes the work with the RSAA's Teaching School Alliance.

The RSA's family of schools became a community of practice in which the RSA's distinctive ethos and values provided the context and opportunity to connect (and network) with like-minded schools. Events such as Artsfest, Takeover Day, and access to the Pupil Design Awards etc, all provided pupils with an experience of being part of the RSA community, raising awareness of the RSA's mission in society and fostering a sense of belonging.

The number of pupils brought into a relationship with the RSA through projects has been significant.

To illustrate:

**Artsfest** – 100 pupils per annum.

**Takeover Day** – 100 pupils per annum.

**RSA4** – c. 520 pupils have an engagement (including pupils at some non-RSA schools).

**RSA8** – 50 pupils per annum.

**Contemporary Art Space project** – 60 pupils directly with whole-school engagement and impact.

**Whole School Approach Mental Health project** – several hundred teachers received three training sessions with impact on pupils in every school.

Many more students have been touched by the projects listed in Appendix I. Over time, RSAA's aspiration was to seek engagement with an increasing number of students, although the constraints of resources and the RSAA's small team were limiting factors in achieving a broader impact.

## The beginnings of distinctiveness

Hill envisaged that the schools joining the RSA family of academies would adopt a version of the competency-based Opening Minds curriculum with its entitlement to six hours of enrichment per week. This is the background against which RSAA began to build its distinctive offer.

A paper for an RSAA board meeting in September 2012 (Developing the identity of RSA Academies) sought to recognise 'a distinctive set of features which schools within the RSA Family would all share' without being overly prescriptive. These included:

- i Connecting learners to people, places and issues** – to the world beyond the school gates ... a broad curriculum which includes high quality arts provision, opportunities for practical learning, and experiences of social and commercial enterprise, reflecting and utilising the RSA's historic focus on arts, manufacturing and commerce.
- ii Achieving the full potential of every child across a broad range of outcomes.**
- iii Distributing leadership and power, within and beyond the school.**
- iv Developing collegiate, innovative models of school improvement** by challenging the orthodoxy of 'outstanding school to struggling school' support, with each school both offering and receiving support, and sharing good practice.
- v Enabling practitioners to innovate and reflect.**

The discussion, summarised by the board minutes, wanted to avoid 'motherhood and apple pie statements' that would apply to any school. Instead, the aim was to forge more explicit links to the RSA 'reflecting the RSA's emphasis on social mission and justice'. The board approved the emphasis on innovation and mutual support, recognised the need for Fellow engagement, and avowed a curriculum offer that would help students 'to secure jobs' through competency-based learning. The board also wanted the 'core identity' of the schools to be explicitly linked to Opening Minds.

Priorities for the family's early joiners were to strengthen their arts provision through Artsmark accreditation (incidentally, a standard originally promulgated by the RSA) and the introduction of an Arts Day (latterly Artsfest) with an Arts Prize, and to develop a Student Enrichment Guarantee (such as theatre visits, work experience, field trips etc) distinctively connected to the RSA's own mission. A student leadership conference at RSA House (which later morphed into Take Over Day) was inaugurated in November 2013, and a Year 8 leadership programme (RSA8) began in September 2014. The Bus Ride Away project took disaffected students to places of interest, whilst RSAA established a partnership with Warwick University with a view to raising student aspirations. The Pupil Design Awards were originally a project devised for RSA Academies (initiated in 2013-14) and have become an important feature of the RSA's work with young people nationally.

These early projects are important because they set the tone for RSAA's engagement with students and provided a platform on which to build later projects which coalesced into the Commitments. RSAA's annual report and accounts for 2013 outlined four priority areas: (i) improving teaching and learning through purposeful partnerships; (ii) enabling learners to achieve a broad range of qualifications, skills and competencies; (iii) supporting innovation in teaching and learning; and (iv) connecting teachers and learners to people, places and issue beyond the school gate.

By 2015, these priorities had evolved into five broad strategic objectives, which guided RSAA's engagement with students and teachers up to the closure of activities:

- Excellence in learning.
- Pupils are creative and turn their ideas into action.
- The development of skills and networks for the future.
- Creative, resourceful teachers.
- Increased impact, locally and nationally.

As RSAA's activities developed (see Appendix 1), the themes outlined in these strategic objectives began to clarify themselves into the areas of work associated with **arts, culture and creativity** and **world beyond school**. The third area (creative teachers) was never formally adopted as a commitment but its importance can be seen in the establishment of the RSAA's Teaching School Alliance (see below).

## **Reflection, consolidation and renewal**

In the summer term 2015, RSAA staff carried out a series of distinctiveness audits in each of the schools, comprising half-day visits with a view to identifying good practice and the next steps. The immediate impetus for these visits was a concern (relating to the effect of government policy) that, nationally, fewer students were taking up arts subjects and that not enough students were accessing good information, advice and guidance (IAG) relating to careers. The latter concern would lead to RSA Academies adopting the Gatsby benchmarks for careers guidance long before they became mandatory.

The results of the audits are contained in a 50-page report that detailed RSAA-related activities in each of the five schools (at that time). The report contains interesting insights into the views of principals about the importance and efficacy of the RSA brand and its importance to their school communities.

The principal of Whitley observed the 'value of being involved in wider students/arts-related activities, such as RDI events, the student leadership programme and other opportunities, to bring students together to events at the RSA in London'. The principal of Ipsley stated that the RSA dimension was 'something special ... a really big pull to parents' who 'appreciated the values of the RSA, especially the concentration on creativity'. The principal of the RSA Academy, Tipton, saw 'volunteering, engagement with industry and higher education, continuous professional development (CPD), student leadership' as important features of the RSAA offer, together with the emphasis on teacher creativity. The principal of Holyhead saw 'music and the performing arts as key strengths' at his school.

The principal of Arrow Vale observed that the partnership with the RSA had 'strengthened inclusiveness ... there is a greater sense and awareness of social justice issues in the school'. It had also helped to raise aspirations. In addition:



The RSA gives a solidity to the school community. The school gives stability to students with chaotic lives and opportunities to go to London ... shows them a wider world and sparks possible life-changing interests that are hard for the families themselves to generate and yet which young people should have a right to be exposed to.



However, essentially exploring the case to renew the RSA/RSAA Memorandum of Understanding, a paper from the RSA's director of education to the RSAA board (November 2015) noted that 'RSA Academies schools, whilst committed to RSA's overall mission and values, have variable levels of provision and commitment to the arts and design and technology'. He observed that connections with Fellows had been sporadic and that RSA nominated governors had not exerted their influence strategically. Moreover, there was an important 'area of tension':

Whilst RSAA has reflected the 'power to create' in its strategic objectives, it has not yet articulated a distinctive vision about how the RSA Academies are different from other schools, in terms of purpose, methods or ethos, based on evidence-rich but contestable beliefs. It has not replaced Opening Minds with a single alternative 'signature tune'. Instead, like many other academy chains, it has built a programme of work around some pragmatic objectives that go beyond pure attainment goals.

Following on from summer distinctiveness audits, and no doubt attempting to address the RSA's concerns, in December 2015 the board of RSAA approved several recommendations relating to the distinctive strands from its strategic plan:

#### **Pupils are creative and turn their ideas into action**

- To develop an RSAA entitlement to the arts.
- To develop the RSAA Teaching School Alliance (TSA) to strengthen creativity, CPD and Special Leaders of Education (SLEs) in this area.
- To retain a focus on the arts, design and creativity through the Arts Day and Prize, the Pupil Design Awards and working with RDIs.
- To develop the Performing Arts Hub<sup>4</sup> (launched in July 2015), supporting curriculum development and enrichment activities in this area on a funded three-year programme.
- To monitor progress in all these areas.

#### **The development of skills and networks for the future**

- To increase collaboration relating to IAG and workplace/university visits.
- To develop opportunities to engage with HE and the world of work.
- To ensure all pupils have the opportunity to participate in work experience.
- To encourage greater Fellows' engagement in this area.
- To develop an RSAA alumni scheme to support these initiatives.

4 The Performing Arts Hub was a partnership between the academies (and specifically RSAA TSA) and cultural organisations with aims to enhance teaching, learning and research in arts-based education by (i) developing teachers of music, drama and dance; (ii) closing the attainment gap for disadvantaged students by building their cultural capital; and (iii) supporting students considering careers in the arts.

The impetus to achieve greater coherence and bring greater discipline into these strands of work was strengthened through an RSA report, *Giving Schools the Power to Create*<sup>5</sup> which featured RSA Academies as exemplars of 'the design principles in action'. Six principles were identified to underpin creativity in the classroom: (i) develop a whole-school strategy; (ii) understand and address the creativity gaps; (iii) ensure that progression matters; (iv) give your staff creative professional development; (v) stay level-headed about technology; and (vi) love your subjects and foster powerful knowledge.

In March 2016, the board of RSA Academies approved draft 'distinctiveness guarantees' relating to **world beyond school**, and 'pupils are creative and turn their ideas into action' (**arts, culture and creativity**). These two Commitments were officially launched in the autumn term 2016 followed by workshops for all teachers. These were encouraged to build cross-curricular links, develop their creative teaching practice and engage with local arts initiatives as well as being asked to explore how links to careers could be incorporated into subject teaching and extended into Years 7 and 8. An academy-based coordinator for **world beyond school** commitment was also appointed at this time.

The Commitment documents each set out a statement of principle (why the commitment was important) together with the expectations for governors, school leadership teams, middle leaders, teachers and students and RSAA in promoting the commitment. The documents included a short statement about how success in implementing the commitment was to be evaluated. Each academy was to have a lead practitioner for each Commitment area, with one of the governors also being allocated responsibility to oversee its implementation.

During the academic year 2016-17, reflecting the long-standing commitment to holistic education, RSAA began to focus on 'inclusive schools that meet the needs of the whole child', and this in turn led to the Pears-funded project, *A Whole School Approach to Mental Health*,<sup>6</sup> which took place through the whole of the 2017-18 academic year. Most teaching staff attended a training session on recognising mental health issues in young people. Like the early adherence to the Gatsby benchmarks, RSAA pioneered a concern for children's mental health which has now become institutionalised in schools. This area of focus, in turn, became the third recognised Commitment – **wellbeing and mental health** - although this was not formalised as a document until 2019.

5 Hallgarten, J and Roisin E (2016). *Giving Schools the Power to Create: Developing creative capacities in learners and teachers* [PDF] Available at: [www.thersa.org/globalassets/pdfs/reports/giving-schools-the-power-to-create.pdf](http://www.thersa.org/globalassets/pdfs/reports/giving-schools-the-power-to-create.pdf)

6 For more information see: [www.rsaacademies.org.uk/comprehensive-approach-mental-health-schools/](http://www.rsaacademies.org.uk/comprehensive-approach-mental-health-schools/)

## The impact on students and practitioners

The first two Commitments were updated in 2018-19 following RSAA team visits to schools in 2018 to discuss how they were to be embedded in the life of the school. **World beyond school** commitment was also reconfigured to be more reflective of RSAA's emphasis on personal development, character education and active citizenship (social action).

The 2018 reviews confirmed that the schools devoted much energy to promoting creativity (although links to local cultural organisations and practitioners were underdeveloped) and to developing skills and knowledge relevant to **world beyond school** (although external links were again underdeveloped). A report to the RSAA board stated:



Abbeywood and Ipsley CE RSA Academy are the two schools where there seemed to be the strongest level of agreement that aspects of both Commitments were important. Holyhead was strong on world beyond school commitment. Arrow Vale and Church Hill were in the middle, whilst Whitley and the RSA Academy, Tipton, were the two schools with the lowest proportions of staff agreeing that the Commitments were relevant and important to their schools.



Generally, the process for evaluating impact comprised obtaining information about (and from) RAG-ratings by the commitment lead(s); feedback from students and staff (including questionnaires); the existence of whole-school INSET sessions; the quality of resource packs; staff surveys; workshops for commitment leads and a 'tracking proforma' held by RSAA including data and metrics about activities (participation rates and achievement). The system was designed to be light-touch, annual, and to inform a discussion with the principal, commitment leads and other staff as appropriate.

The RSAA board received regular evaluation reports from its team about RSAA-based activity and the responses of students and staff. There can be no doubt of the generally positive impact on participants, with many of their comments being uplifting to read.

To illustrate just some of these:

### **Takeover Day**

- 'Workshops gave us the opportunity to understand how to portray ourselves in front of an audience' (student, 2014).
- 'All our ideas were appreciated, and we got to expand on them' (student, 2014).
- 'Fabulous and very fun' (student, 2014).
- 'Expectations of the students were excellent. Never underestimate pupil power!' (teacher, 2014).
- 'We are all connected, have a community and are one family' (student, 2016).
- 'All of the academies come together and communicate with all ages and ethnicities' (student, 2016).
- 'I was inspired to make a change and not sit back' (student, 2017).

### **Arts day (Artsfest)**

- 'I found a different way of writing poetry, spoken poetry expresses your feelings, poetry doesn't have to rhyme to sound effective' (student, 2015).
- 97 percent of students felt confident about trying new things; 83 percent felt creative; 80 percent learnt something new (2016).
- Students used the following words to sum up the day: proud, amazing, fun, interesting, new, tiring, crafty, weird (good-weird!), energetic, happy, revealing, musical, creative, difficult, outgoing, passionate, nervous, belonging (2018).
- 'I enjoyed stepping out of my comfort zone and performing to a crowd. I was worried but the RSA made it feel like a safe place' (student, 2019).
- 'I enjoyed meeting new people and being able to socialise better' (student, 2019).

### **Catalytic teaching and learning**

- 'Uniting schools to solve a problem' and 'putting our ideas into action' (students, 2015).
- 'It was about collaboration and sharing best practice across the RSA' (teacher, 2015).



### **Football beyond borders**

- 75 percent (up from 40 percent) of participants believed they would now be a good influence in class (2015).
- 100 percent (up from 40 percent) of participants felt proud to attend school (2015).

### **Secret gardeners**

- 'Secret gardeners has revealed unexpected and powerful impacts on staff, school environment and students, both catalyst and metaphor for so much more than is normally unseen, beautifully emotional and glorious' (RDI, Helen Storey Foundation, 2016).

### **RSA8**

- 97 percent of students felt more confident; 89 percent felt better about teamwork; 71 percent improved their public speaking; 86 percent felt better at communicating; 82 percent said they had developed their leadership skills (2016-17).

In addition to the regular process of capturing the views of participants in various activities, there have also been much larger-scale evaluations, sometimes by external partners. For example, the RSA's report on A Whole School Approach to Mental Health following evaluation by the Anna Freud Centre (October 2018) recognised a 52 percent increase in 'supportive behaviours' by staff (building student relationships and referring them where necessary to the relevant services). Another example is the initial evaluation of RSA4 by the Behavioural Insights Team. There has recently been a further evaluation of the RSA4 project and an assessment of the Contemporary Arts Space project, both of which have highlighted the positive benefits for students and the school communities, notwithstanding the constraints caused by the Covid-19 pandemic which limited school-based activities at a critical time.

## **RSA Academies' Teaching School Alliance (TSA)**

Promoting creativity and innovation in the classroom (excellence in learning) were key facets of the initial vision for RSA Academies, and these foundational principles found their fullest expression in the development of the TSA. RSAA led the work to bid for the TSA in summer 2014. The vision was for 'creative, resourceful teachers providing challenging and stimulating teaching'. The language relating to purpose is significant: the TSA was to promote 'research, design and enquiry' rather than the more usual 'research and development'. An unusual feature of this alliance was that it was led by three designated teaching schools (Arrow Vale, Holyhead and Whitley). This joint arrangement may have limited the funding (there was one budget rather than three) but it brought great strength to the partnership between the academies. Abbeywood First School was also designated as a national teaching school in 2018 with its own budget.

The TSA was officially launched in September 2015, which also marked the start of a partnership with Birmingham City University and recruitment to the initial teacher education (PGCE) programme. The programme offered support to dozens of trainees (primary and secondary) as well as providing a full continuing professional learning and development (CPLD) programme for teachers in RSAA schools and others locally, conferences, and school to school support.

A questionnaire for all teachers in the RSAA family in December 2015 was completed by approximately 30 percent of teachers (a statistically high sample rate) and revealed that 99 percent of teachers were passionate about their jobs; 78 percent felt empowered to try new pedagogies; and 39 percent were engaged in a research project.

One newly qualified teacher from the first cohort of teacher training remarked:



Completing my teacher training through the school direct route was the best decision I could have made for my career in education. The support I received was excellent ... it helped me to grow into a confident teacher.



Despite some early tensions mainly around funding, the TSA was a success for RSA Academies, and acted as a cohesive force for meaningful and real collaboration between the family of schools. The TSA also had an important role in promoting distinctiveness. For example, the TSA worked with the Performing Arts Hub to develop teachers' skills in creative subjects and generally to improve arts provision in the schools. The TSA's main conference in June 2017 was on mental health, and the RSA's approach to design thinking was embedded within a module (research and reflective practice) for both initial teacher education and the work with recently qualified teachers.

A review of the RSAA TSA by the Teaching Schools Council and the director of Arthur Terry National Teaching School Alliance in January 2019 found that it offered excellent provision with many strengths. For example:



- The ITT School Direct provision is well managed and thoroughly quality assured, going above and beyond the standard required of a lead school. Outcomes are strong with all trainees gaining QTS [qualified teacher status] at a good or outstanding level.
- A comprehensive and wide ranging CPLD offer is well presented and marketed and provides training for teachers at all stages of their careers.
- The CPD programme feedback document evidences overwhelmingly positive feedback from the programmes that have been delivered.



The review offered various 'areas for further investigation' to build on this excellent practice. The national network of Teaching Schools was replaced in September 2019 by the so-called Teaching School Hubs. However, the RSAA TSA, renamed as Teach Central, has continued to offer high quality professional development opportunities to teachers at all stages in their careers in schools across the West Midlands.

## **Working with Royal Designers for Industry and RSA Fellows**

Working with RDIs was a particularly fruitful area of collaboration and a means of connecting the work and profile of the RSA with the schools. The aim of introducing professional designers to students and teachers was to nurture creative thinking and multi-disciplinary approaches to problem-solving.

The chronology at Appendix 1 lists the various RDI-led projects, which have principally been the work with the Helen Storey Foundation such as Catalytic Teaching and Learning; A Dress for our Time; Secret Gardeners; and the Mental Pictures project. Most recently, two RDIs worked on the Key Stage 3 curriculum for design and technology in one of the academies, and discussed how creative design principles could be introduced into the whole curriculum.

Working with Fellows has also been fruitful and often successful, but this aspect of the partnership perhaps remained underdeveloped and, in some respects, problematic. RSA Academies developed publicity material and booklets to raise the profile of the academies generally with the Fellowship (a significant and continuing challenge) and to encourage Fellows to engage with the schools. The attempts to extend interest included the introduction of reduced Fellowship fees (a 75 percent discount) for governors and staff at the academies who were encouraged to become FRSAs, although this scheme did not achieve the desired take-up. A proposed alumni network for RSAA students also never gained traction.

Whilst Fellows were generally willing to engage, and schools were keen to connect their pupils to **world beyond school**, their interests did not always fully align. Suggested areas for Fellows to engage were leading assemblies, planning, supporting, and delivering classroom and extracurricular activity, trips, and experiences. There were issues over sustaining engagement and interest, but also, crucially, of meeting expectations. Some suggested projects proved inappropriate or infeasible for volunteers who generally worked full-time, with competing commitments, and who may have had little experience of working with young people. Successful events tended to be one-offs where Fellows gave talks to students on interesting aspects of their own careers or experience, and which extended students' horizons. Where longer term engagement was sustained by some individual Fellows, such as through the Broadening Horizons mentoring scheme (although overall this initiative had limited impact), there was clear double benefit as the following comments illustrate:

### **Broadening Horizons**

- 'I try to keep her focused on obtaining good GCSEs and empower her by explain that success is a choice and within her grasp' (Fellow, 2015).
- 'It has been an immensely rewarding experience to date. I am so pleased to work with such a hard-working and capable person' (Fellow, 2017).

## **Partnership with the University of Warwick**

The partnership with the University of Warwick was established at the suggestion of a former chair of the RSA, who was also on the board of the university. She introduced RSAA to the university's pro-vice chancellor, whose responsibilities included widening participation, and who subsequently joined the RSA Academies board.

The partnership generally focused on increasing opportunities for students at schools in the RSA family of academies to access existing Warwick programmes and to develop bespoke activity for younger students. An annual RSA Academies/ University of Warwick lecture was inaugurated at the British Library in November 2014 and generally included university and/or RSA Academies' speakers on the panel, and to which RSA Academies' students were invited. The lectures covered widening participation (2014), the teacher shortage (2015), teaching tomorrow's citizens (2017), and how can we make universities more inclusive? (2018). There was a hiatus in 2019 when RSAA's leadership was in transition and plans for a further lecture in 2020 were curtailed by the pandemic.

Another aspect of the partnership was a jointly supported PhD studentship. One of Warwick's postgraduate students researched the relationships between friendships and aspirations for higher education, carrying out fieldwork at Holyhead School.

The partnership in respect of governance has continued up to the present day, with the current registrar of the university serving on the RSAA board.

## **The relationship to the RSA**

RSA Academies' 'liminal' status as an intermediary institution gave it the means to mediate the vision and values of the RSA into the schools. The academies were badged through the RSA's licensing agreements as RSA schools, and there is no doubt from the official record that the RSA was urging the schools, through RSAA, to become authentic expressions of the RSA in action in disadvantaged communities.

A casual observer might have assumed that RSA Academies was the action research arm of the RSA's creative learning and development (CLD) function, but this was never the case. Priorities were not always aligned. For example, the academies did not feature in CLD's Ideal School Exhibition report (November 2017), although the importance of schools being 'mission-oriented', 'inclusive' and 'networked' (as recommended by this report) later found expression through the nascent work on 'mission-led' schools that heavily influenced RSAA's vision statement: 'What does it mean to be an RSA school?'

There were sometimes feelings of dislocation, especially from the perspective of the academies. They occasionally felt that some RSAA activities did not line up with their own curriculum intent; whilst conversely RSAA staff found themselves negotiating participation with already hard-pressed teachers. There are of course inevitable tensions between providing enrichment opportunities and the challenge of educating young

people within the current culture of accountability and compliance.

## **Systematised distinctiveness**

The 2018 distinctiveness reviews included an online survey of staff who were asked about the meaning of being part of the RSA family of schools. The responses exposed important variations between and within individual schools and revealed that a significant number of staff were not familiar with the Commitments. In the associated workshops, teachers talked about relatively high staff turnover and the need for regular communication and induction for new staff. Subsequently, RSAA determined that the annual academy peer reviews scheduled for the autumn of 2018 would focus on the two Commitments, and that new benchmarks should be introduced to assess distinctiveness (such as all schools being encouraged to achieve Artsmark Gold or Platinum accreditation by July 2019).

During 2018, RSAA had been considering the key elements of what it means to be an RSA school. Much of the thinking was influenced by the characteristics of a 'power to create' school, described as 'networked, inclusive, creative, holistic and empowering'. A paper from the RSA's director of creative learning and development (who was at this stage acting as RSAA's interim CEO) to the RSA board in December 2018 outlined 12 key features. These are derived from his work on mission-led schools and included 'thinking about the substance of education (and not assessment, standard measures, performance)', the 'feel' of the school, 'ethics and setting ourselves against the aggressive gaming that goes on', 'ethical and visionary leadership', recognition of teaching as 'an honourable calling ... a highly layered craft', and – reflecting the RSA's foundational values – 'people power, agency, sovereignty, intellectual heritage and the ideas of the enlightenment'.

The director of CLD concluded that the extant light-touch approach of assessing adherence to the Commitments was 'not capturing the real spirit of the RSA nature of the relationship' and that a more systematic approach (perhaps based on the Church of England's denominational inspection template (SIAMS<sup>7</sup>)) could be helpful.

## **Vision, mission and values**

This led to the high-level vision statement, 'What does it mean to be an RSA school?' adopted in 2019. The document was written in inspirational terms and was intended to be uplifting and to win hearts and minds. The statement sets out the RSA's commitment to 'a complete and generous education' embracing academic, creative, and ethical dimensions ('head, hand and heart') and describes the characteristics of an RSA school as (i) inclusive; (ii) networked; (iii) 'green' (environmentally-minded) and (iv) mission-led (that is, values-led with a commitment to holistic child development).

“ [Our] mission is what gives our schools their identity, our teachers their motivation and our students their sense of belonging. Because, as an expression of shared aims, that mission provides us with a constant point on the horizon to aim for – that prevents us being blown off course by external forces and pressures. And because, as an articulation of our educational philosophy and approach, that mission provides us with a set of design principles that shapes everything we do – our schools' culture and curriculum, protocols and practices, rituals and routines. ”

This source of inspiration had to be translated into a practical framework for action. The vision statement was therefore supplemented by the Partnership Framework, which provided a detailed articulation of how RSAA and the academies were to join forces in institutionalising the distinctive RSA ethos within the schools. The aim was to give students ‘an extraordinary experience of school as members of the RSA community’.

The framework was subdivided into six sections:

- 1 Strategic leadership, vision, and distinctiveness.
- 2 Excellence in learning.
- 3 Commitment: **arts, culture and creativity.**
- 4 Commitment: **world beyond school.**
- 5 Commitment: **wellbeing and mental health.**
- 6 Creative teachers.

A further document – the Evaluation Schedule – offered a detailed exemplification of the distinctive aspects of RSA education in relation to the six sections of the Partnership Framework and categorised these (with illustrations) as being ‘unformed’, ‘emergent’, ‘secure’ or ‘exemplary’. Taken together, the Partnership Framework and the Evaluation Schedule acted as a quasi-inspection framework, although this was cast as developmental (encouraging greater distinctiveness) and avoided quantitative judgements.

Following consultation, the distinctiveness documents were issued to all RSAA schools during 2019 and officially launched at a governors’ conference in October 2019. The whole suite of documents was to be animated by a following series of official distinctiveness reviews, in which RSAA staff, accompanied by staff from another school, would visit each of the schools and interview sample groups from the whole school community – students, teachers, support staff, leaders, governors and parents. The reviews were to be structured around a key question, ‘what makes your school unique, and how does its RSA character contribute to this?’ The intention was to capture the lived experience of the school community and to offer recommendations for further improvement as an RSA school.

The first official distinctiveness review took place at one of the primary-phase academies on 11 March 2020, but another scheduled review at a

secondary school was cancelled because of the national lockdown. If RSAA had been able to complete reviews at all the academies, there would have been much detailed information to inform future strategic planning to turn them into exemplars of what it means to be an RSA school.

## **The legacy**

Notwithstanding the complexity of the enterprise, and some questions about the extent to which the RSA ethos had permeated the schools, the whole narrative reveals a continual striving to achieve an authentic expression of 'being RSA'.

Capturing ethos is not easy. It has been observed that it took some time for the early aspirations about distinctiveness – promoting social justice, inclusion, creativity, and community – to achieve fruition by evolving into the Commitments and then the suite of distinctiveness documents. There is little doubt that the RSA brought 'a little bit of magic to marginalised communities' (as one colleague has put it). Taken as a whole, the cumulative impact of RSAA's activities over the last decade has brought the best of the RSA to the schools and given them an authentically different experience and identity that has marked them out from many other schools. It is an identity that is perhaps fragile and could easily be lost. Leadership is fundamental to sustaining all that has been gained.

In February 2020, just as the programme of formal distinctiveness reviews was being devised, the Central RSA Academies Trust (CRSAAT) held an away day for principals to consider the distinctive aspects of being RSA schools. There was a clear commitment to the RSA as a unifying factor in the schools' ethos. The following points are an attempt to summarise what the principals considered to be essential features in securing the ethos and connectivity:

- Building a whole-school approach to understanding distinctiveness.
- Achieving sustainability – not just one-off activities and projects, but a golden thread that links all aspects together on a continuing basis over several years.
- 'Humanising the thinktank' (building positive relationships with the RSA).
- Clarifying key messages and signposting information.
- Noting the importance of artefacts/symbols in schools that reference the distinctiveness, and tell the story, perhaps in a way that challenges assumptions (talking points).
- Scaling up young people's engagement so that everyone can have a unique experience of distinctiveness (in effect revisiting the enrichment guarantee).
- Growing concrete links between schools and Fellows/RDIs concentrating on creativity.
- Working with the RSA on research projects.
- Building better links with Fellows who are headteachers – the development of a community of practice.



- Building links with other organisations who have corporate responsibility programmes.

Later in 2020, the principals summarised their experience as part of the family of RSA academies and outlined their aspirations for the proposed new network of RSA-linked schools, of which they hoped to become 'founder members'.

The principals described their schools as 'subscribing not to a vision, but to something even deeper; a purpose: social justice and fair education'. They gave a strong emphasis to 'a sense of belonging to an organisation with such a rich history and wide-reaching impact' and the perception of shared purpose. The RSA offered all kinds of opportunities to link learning in the classroom to RSA Fellows (such as Charles Dickens, Stephen Hawking, Judi Dench). This created for students 'a sense of association with something bigger than themselves' and a recognition of how individuals can 'spur innovation, enterprise and systemic change'. The RSA gave 'world-opening opportunities' and extraordinary experiences to students through the programme of activities and projects.

In addition, the principals acknowledged the importance of the RSA in shaping the values of their schools and providing 'the foundation on which to base our decisions and our work'. Reciprocally, their schools provided a platform and a space for the RSA in an area where 'the RSA is better known for its schools and educational vision and purpose than anything else'. The principals concluded their statement by reaffirming their own commitment to 'moving society forward' and building on 'the legacy of 10 years of RSA Academies' work in education.' (Note to the RSA on becoming a founding member of a new schools' network).

What is so remarkable about the principals' manifesto for future engagement is their allegiance to the totemic qualities of the RSA as the 'constant point on the horizon' (the original draft of the vision statement said 'lodestar') guiding their schools and anchoring them in a larger reality. For RSA Academies, the RSA has been analogous to the church within a church school, offering a sure foundation for purpose and values, a compelling narrative as an organising principle, and its own heroes as secular saints.

It is essential that the RSA's proposed network of schools tunes into the distinctive frequency of the RSA and can access the RSA's rich cultural capital and heritage so that the organisation is able to act as a 'constant point on the horizon' for the community of schools.

## Standards and performance

**A**ny consideration of the efficacy of the RSA Academies project must include a discussion about the quality of education provided by the schools. Robert Hill's paper on proposals to develop a family of RSA academies began with a mission and purpose to 'reflect the RSA's historic role in leading education and promoting social justice' through: (i) 'active social entrepreneurship' and 'innovative models of schooling'; (ii) the RSA's then focus on supporting 'social ownership'; and (iii) 'contributing to improving schools and the life chances of hundreds of young people'.<sup>8</sup> A second aim was to support 'the development of the RSA Opening Minds ... in contributing to school improvement'.<sup>9</sup>

### Context

The RSA chose to focus its energies on areas of social disadvantage, and that commitment has continued to the present with the schools having a proportion of student on free school meals at least in line with the national average, and, in respect of schools covering all or some of the secondary phase, above the national average (DfE data).

### A complete and generous education

RSA's vision statement, 'What does it mean to be an RSA school?' states:



An RSA school should be unequivocally mission-led, with the mission being to provide a complete and generous education, so all our students can find their passion and purpose in life and make a positive difference in society, as well as achieve individual success, whether in academic, cultural or sporting endeavours.



Whilst the overall picture of school performance is mixed (especially when considering headline DfE performance data), the impression derived from Ofsted reports over time is generally positive, with inspectors recognising that the schools have been working in challenging contexts.

At the time RSAA ceased its activities with the schools (August 2021), none of the academies had been judged to be 'inadequate' during their time as an RSA school, although the Central RSA Academies Trust – now the Central Region Schools Trust - had admitted to its group one school judged to be in 'special measures' and one 'requiring improvement' at their predecessor schools' previous inspections.

CRST has continued the mission of supporting vulnerable communities, having accepted the challenge of improving the RSA Academy, Tipton, and other schools that have required intervention to improve.

An overview of the academies' performance in published examination/test results reveals the complexity of school improvement. The following charts illustrate the percentage of students in the secondary schools achieving five

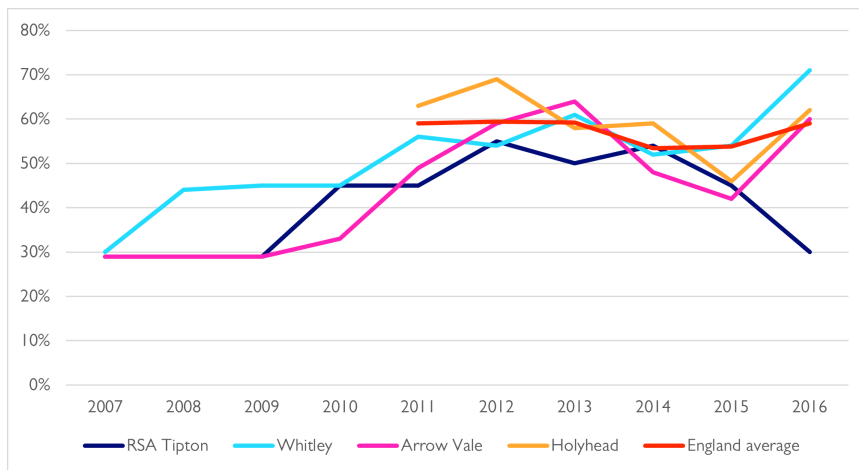
<sup>8</sup> Hill, R (2011) Op cit.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

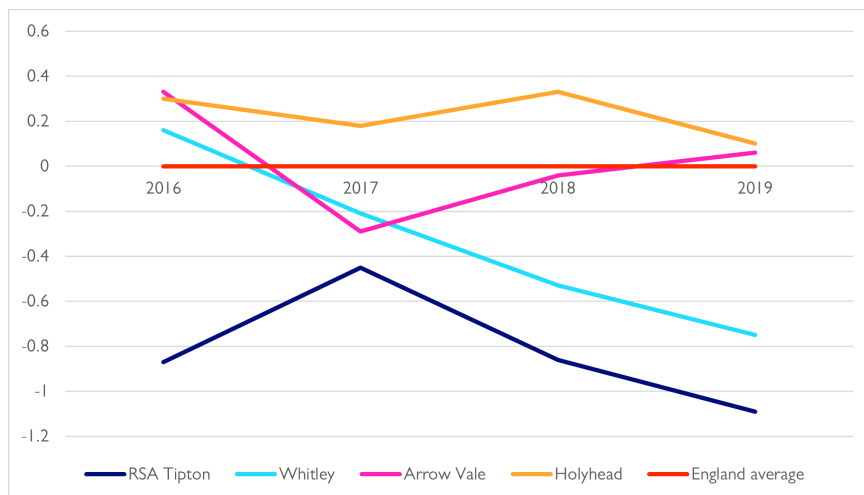
or more A\*-C grades at GCSE (including English and Mathematics) over the period 2007-16, together with the more recent measures for Progress 8 and pupils achieving level 5 at GCSE (English and Maths) for 2016-19.

No data are available for 2020 or beyond because of the disruption to public examinations caused by the pandemic.

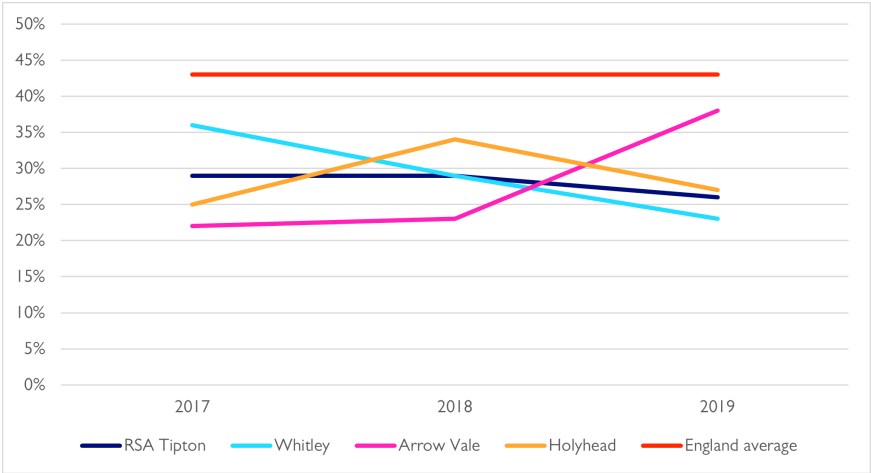
**Figure 1: % of Students achieving 5+A\*C GCSEs inc english and maths**



**Figure 2: Progress 8 measure**

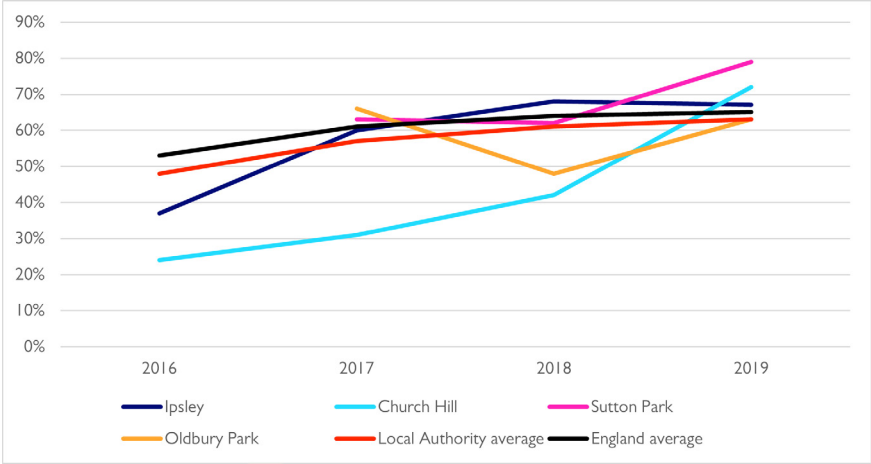


**Figure 3:** % of students achieving Grade 5+ in english and mathematics



For the primary-phase academies, the following chart illustrates the percentage of pupils achieving the expected standard in reading, writing and mathematics (RWM) at Key Stage 2 between 2016-19 (where data are available):

**Figure 4:** % of students meeting expected standard in reading, writing and mathematics



## Some reflections

This brief overview of the educational performance of the academies cannot do justice to the enormous commitment, energy and passion devoted to the task of school improvement over time by teachers and support staff, leaders, governors, and trustees. There have been ups and downs, but a holistic overview of the school performance dimension reveals a broadly positive narrative, albeit with some dips in standards along the way, and a mindset by governors and trustees proactively to address issues when they arose (such as the difficult decision to transfer sponsorship of the RSA Academy, Tipton, to CRSAAT in 2017).

As in all schools, strong leadership and governance have been critical to success. When the RSA Academy, Tipton, and Whitley Academy encountered difficulties, this was following a significant change in leadership and/or governance. Equally, the advent of new leadership can lead on to fortune.

From the outset, RSA Academies' role was to provide challenge and to facilitate support through externally led peer reviews (every autumn from 2012 through to 2019), the work of the performance review committee inaugurated in May 2016 (which brought a more structured approach to monitoring performance), and the work with the RSA Academies' Teaching School Alliance.

What is revealed is the challenge of systemic school improvement at scale. As Sir David Carter has observed, 'school improvement is messy and complex and above all it is not linear'.<sup>10</sup> Two structural factors are relevant to note here. The first is that RSAA had been navigating a fragmented terrain in which it had a majority governance stake in CRSAAT, a minority governance stake at Whitley and no governance stake at all at Holyhead, except for the MoU. The RSA Academy, Tipton, remained a separate trust up to October 2017. This means that RSAA had to mediate its school effectiveness oversight through slightly different relationships with each of the trusts.

The second factor, a correlative of the first, is that the formal responsibility for school improvement lies with the respective trusts, who are accountable through their funding agreements to the Secretary of State for Education. There was, for example, an inherent ambiguity and tension between RSAA's role as the 'principal sponsor' of the Redditch/Central RSA Academies Trust, in which it had ultimate responsibility for sponsored schools, and the Trust's own accountability to the DfE. Bringing 'converter' academies into CRSAAT created further complexity. This was on top of the revision of the Trust's Articles in March 2013 which made the Diocese of Worcester a member of the Trust (effectively bringing a third party into its management). At Holyhead School and Whitley Academy, RSAA had no such sponsorship role, and so its school effectiveness oversight was based on a questionable premise.

Through its performance review committee and annual peer reviews

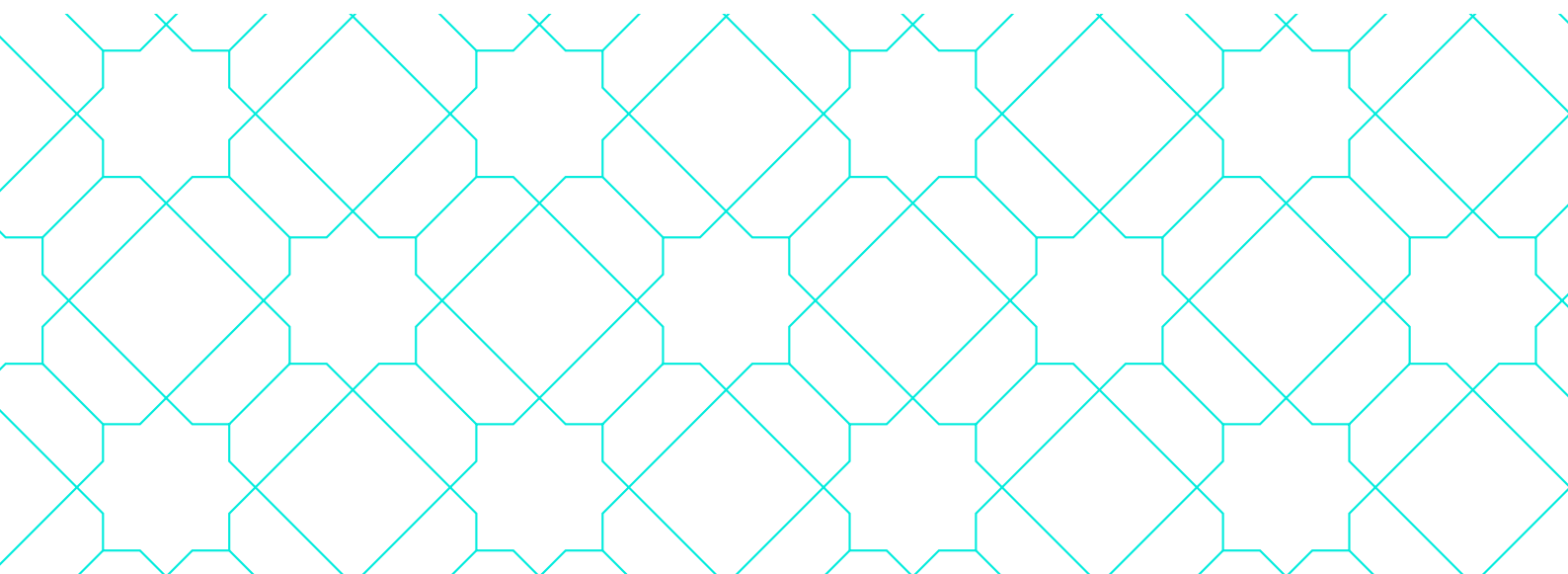
<sup>10</sup> Carter, D with McInerney, L (2020) *Leading Academy Trusts: Why some fail but most don't*. p121 Woodbridge, John Catt Educational Limited

of standards, RSAA sought to provide school improvement surveillance, but it had little or no effective leverage. The exposure of the RSA to reputational risk if a school failed was a concern sometimes voiced by the RSA's leadership, but the risk was only a relatively minor consideration in evaluating the future of RSA Academies. These structural factors were an inherent flaw within RSAA's status as an umbrella trust, which created ambiguity in terms of lines of accountability.

The effect of this 'disempowered oversight' can be perceived in the story of Whitley Academy, where the RSA itself appointed only two of the governors and was not a member of the Whitley Trust (reflecting the RSA's early view that 'outstanding' schools should have only light-touch RSA governance arrangements). When Whitley Academy encountered real difficulties, RSAA was unable structurally to intervene, and the Whitley governors, having reservations about the RSA dimension, withdrew from the RSAA arrangement.

The Whitley story illustrates the vulnerability of stand-alone academy trusts and demonstrates how even an outstanding school can stumble in some circumstances. When it also faced difficulties, the RSA Academy, Tipton, could potentially have been rebrokered into a non-RSA trust, but its transfer into CRSAAT on 1st October 2017 enabled it to retain its RSA ethos and access support from a partner trust. This transfer marked a significant inflection point in the RSAA story, as the (previously named) Redditch RSA Academies Trust became the Central RSA Academies Trust CRSAAT. A subtle change in institutional gravity had occurred, enabling CRSAAT to develop its capacity, gain sponsor status itself, and build its presence in the West Midlands.

What shines through the complex story of school improvement is the integrity of the exercise, the commitment to supporting vulnerable communities and to giving students a distinctive experience of school founded on the values of the RSA.



## Conclusion

**A**s RSA Academies closed its activities at the end of the 2020-21 academic year, there were around 5,800 pupils and almost 800 staff in the family of RSA schools. Over RSAA's lifespan, considering successive cohorts at all the schools in the family during this period, the RSA has been brought into contact – to a greater or lesser extent - with some 15,000 students. That is a very significant impact and achievement.

Of course, not all of these had the opportunity to participate in the set pieces like Artsfest or Takeover Day. Yet the diversity and range of activities and projects over the last 10 years has been impressive. Taken together, they represent a substantial investment of cultural capital in the schools by RSA Academies and a truly distinctive experience for the students.

RSAA gave students some jaw-dropping, inspirational experiences, which few other educational providers could emulate. Anyone who has seen the look of amazement in the faces of primary-age children entering the Great Room at RSA House could not fail to be moved. The RSA gave communities in the West Midlands the feeling of being special and the sense of psychological safety that comes from belonging to a larger enterprise that has a history and a presence.

The factors that would lead to RSAA's long-term unsustainability were perhaps deep-seated in its foundation. The RSA established RSA Academies as a separate trust to provide specialised leadership for the academies project, but also to manage risk. The intermediate status of RSAA as a bridge between the RSA and the schools created ambiguity in its status and some elements of dysfunction. RSAA staff were sitting next to their RSA colleagues in the RSA House but an invisible firewall impeded access to the RSA's business development and fundraising expertise. As a separate charity, RSAA was entirely dependent for most of its income on its benefactors in the shape of the RSA and the schools, whose membership fees were voluntary contributions. RSAA had no real means of enforcing payment. As schools faced increasing financial pressures, the issue of providing value for money became a more significant consideration for the principals, who increasingly perceived RSAA as a service provider.

RSAA's governance structure was problematic from an early time. The retention of the umbrella trust model of operation created structural ambiguity. With the benefit of hindsight, RSAA should have novated itself into a multi-academy trust at the earliest possible opportunity, but the idea was never pursued for various ideological or political reasons. This would not have resolved the RSA's anxieties about potential school failure or mitigated the risks inherent in directly managing schools, but it would have brought greater clarity to the relationships and given the enterprise greater financial stability.

Much of the ambiguity around governance resolves itself into the question of authority. Who was in charge? It depends on who answers the question!

RSAA's early authority as the sponsor ebbed away over time, as the academies system evolved, and multi-academy trusts became the preferred model of school collaboration. After Holyhead School joined the family (on an MoU only) in 2014, the only growth occurred within the Redditch/Central RSA Academies Trust.

There was the perennial question of whether RSAA should sponsor schools and trusts (ie have direct governance control) or should allow converter schools and trusts into the family. RSAA was unable to resolve the tension between these two approaches. It was really an identity crisis: what is our purpose? There is perhaps a tension between the desire to improve schools and the expectation to implement a particular educational philosophy or ethos. The churches understand this tension well. The two dimensions are not necessarily in conflict with each other, but achieving the right balance can be a challenge, especially when a school encounters difficulty.

RSA Academies was established on a wave of optimism about the opportunity for the RSA to make a substantial and innovative contribution to the British education system. Hill's paper outlined the expectation of working with outstanding schools to support others and quality assurance measures to address risks.<sup>11</sup> There was limited discussion of the complexities of school improvement and no premonition of the fragility to be encountered by the RSA Academy, Tipton. Schools are human institutions that can encounter complexity quickly and then require enormous energy to restore to fortune. The RSA may have underestimated the challenges ahead.

RSAA did not achieve the greater financial sustainability to which it aspired. Nor did it become the 'centre of a powerful/national/global community of schools ... influencing the practices of many more institutions', as it once hoped. Structural issues intervened. Its impact was ultimately quite limited and localised to the West Midlands.

What then remains? Taking the sponsorship fee (£1.5m) for the RSA Academy, Tipton, into account, over time the RSA has invested at least £2.5m into the academies project. There is also the huge investment of time and effort by RSA and RSAA staff, trustees, advisers, and all those involved in the academies to consider. Through its commitment to this project, spanning the period from 2008-22, the RSA has demonstrated that it is not simply an organisation for generating ideas but one that is prepared to turn ideas into action. RSA Academies has been one of the most substantial projects undertaken by the RSA in recent years. The RSA committed itself to this project in ways that were entirely ethical and honourable and directly relevant to the needs of contemporary society. This was no abstract research project but a hands-on, practical contribution to developing new approaches to education.

From its early visions, and through the experience of managing its various projects, RSA Academies was able to evolve an entire taxonomy of distinctiveness derived from the values, culture and heritage of the RSA.

11 Hill, R (2011) Op cit.

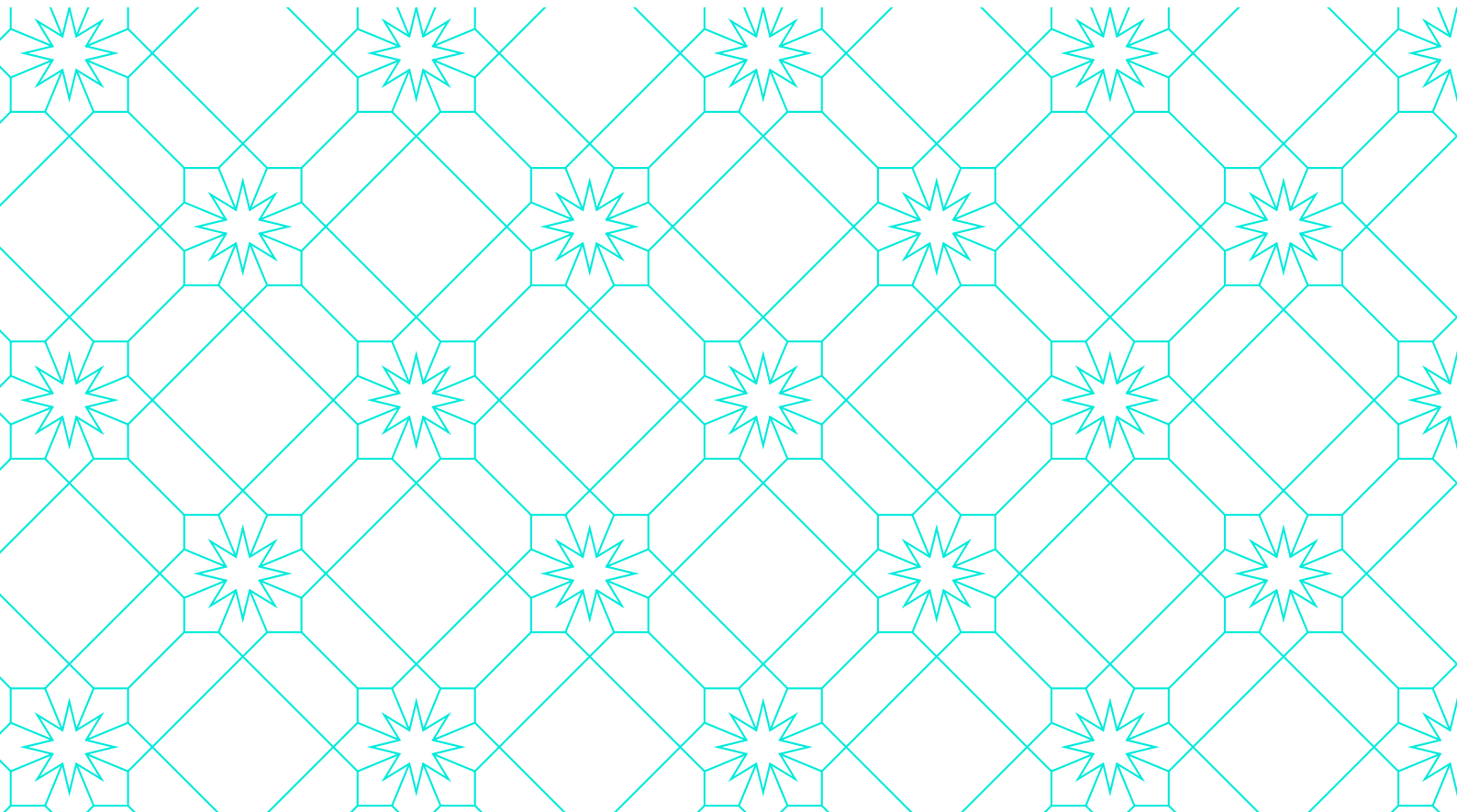


Few academy chains would have the cultural and intellectual capital to make such a bold and imaginative contribution to developing a truly 21st century educational ethos. It is unique and should be celebrated.

An especial mention must be made of the RSAA trustees who over the years had to navigate often turbulent waters and occupy the middle ground, balancing the aspirations of the RSA with the needs of the schools. RSAA, the governors, leaders and trustees of the schools all understood themselves to be part of a common purpose: to improve the life-chances of young people. Through RSAA, the RSA was able to sprinkle 'a little bit of magic' in communities that wanted to be raised up.

Through the academies project, the RSA has bestowed an amazing gift upon the family of academies. The soul of the RSA is its enduring commitment to 'the progress of human knowledge and culture' and its mission to 'unite people and ideas to resolve the challenges of our time'. The academies project embodied all these aims. It was a unifying force binding its community into the task of promoting 'social justice through exceptional schools' (the motto of the Central Region Schools Trust).

The challenge for the RSA's proposed new network of schools is to embody all that has been achieved but on a larger scale.



# APPENDIX 1

## Chronology of projects

### **Year 2013-14**

- Planning for schools to achieve Artsmark accreditation
- Arts Day (with Arts Prize) introduced
- Bus Ride Away (disaffected KS3 students visit places of interest)
- Student leadership conference (morphed into Takeover Day and RSA8)
- Pupil Design Awards (PDAs) initiated and developed
- Design project at RSA Academy, Tipton
- Interview skills for 6th form students led by Fellows
- University of Warwick partnership established with a view to increasing pupil aspiration for Y5 onwards (especially pupil premium students)

### **Year 2014-15**

- RSAA's Teaching School Alliance launched (focus: CPD, subject networks and informal mentoring)
- Artsfest, Takeover Day, PDAs – 20 finalists from 3 academies
- Project: Leadership programme (social action) for Y8 (RSA8) initiated, including a stay at Warwick University
- Annual University of Warwick Lecture (at British Library) followed by debating workshop and various outreach projects (chemistry, gifted youth, Unitracks for Yrs 10-11, Warwick Summer School)
- Debate on future of news (Sky News)
- Event: New voices in climate change (March 2015)
- Project: A Manual of Modern Making (design and technology, especially digital innovation – 3D printing, laser cutting etc). (£162,000 Comino Foundation-funded project over three years)
- Licensed to Create published (December 2014)
- RSAA TSA coordinated Research Rich Schools initiative with BERA, involving 14 other TSAs (March 2015) to deliver a framework and resources
- Project: Broadening Horizons (mentoring for Y9 and Y10 involving five Fellows)
- Several RDIs supporting arts, creativity and design initiatives
- Introduction of reduced Fellowship fee for staff/governors

## **Year 2015-16**

- RSAA TSA develops externally-led peer review initiatives
- Project: Catalytic Teaching and Learning led by several RDIs, including Helen Storey (Field of Dreams, Limb Bud dress). Y8 print-making/ sculpture project
- Artsfest, Takeover Day, PDAs. Children's Commissioner gave a Gold Award for Takeover Day
- RSA8 continues
- Schools debate on climate change
- Performing Arts Hub initiated: projects included B3AT - developing student design skills; song-making/production; vocal training and verbal techniques
- RSA Cup – University Challenge-style quiz
- Manual of Modern Making – Year 2
- Annual Warwick Lecture (on Teacher Recruitment and Retention Crisis) – followed by various initiatives for sixth formers
- University of Warwick residential: social action focus together with 'slam poetry' activity (developing confidence in speaking skills)
- Project: Football beyond borders (combining football sessions with homework club – focus on literacy)
- Broadening Horizons project continued

## **Year 2016-17**

- Artsfest, Takeover Day, PDAs
- RSA8 continues
- Project: Secret Gardeners led by RDIs. Themes: trauma, recovery, reflection, community, lifecycles/plant biology, maths. Masterclass with 8 teachers and 36 students from 5 schools followed by projects with 140 students working with RDI-donated artefacts
- Arts, culture and creativity and world beyond school commitments launched. World beyond school coordinator appointed. Workshops for all teachers Autumn 2016
- Project: RSA's Citizen's Economic Council's Inclusion Roadshow at RSA Tipton discussing what 'economy' means
- Booklet produced: 6 ways in which Fellows can engage with RSA schools – sent to all Fellows in West Midlands resulting in 40 positive responses
- Broadening Horizons project continued and extended in the light of Fellows' interest
- Project: Opening Doors linking schools in Redditch with local businesses
- £80K grant awarded by Pears Foundation for A Whole School Approach to Mental Health training in schools

## **Year 2017-18**

- Artsfest, Takeover Day, PDAs
- RSA8 continues. Several social action projects: fundraising for charities including a hospice in Coventry and homelessness charity in Redditch
- RSA Academy, Tipton, transferred to CRSAAT
- RSAA TSA externally-led peer reviews re KS3 provision
- RSA Cup (University Challenge) for all schools
- Arts Connect West Midlands led workshop on arts, culture, creativity commitment
- All schools working towards Artsmark Gold or Platinum
- Project: Mental Pictures (Helen Storey Foundation) launched following on from Catalytic Teaching and Learning
- RSAA Poetry Competition launched 2018
- RSAA Performing Arts Hub: Transitions play (Birmingham Rep) – 45 secondary students with an audience of 250 people
- Workshops on world beyond school commitment (careers strategy and policies)
- Letter writing initiatives, especially concerning transition
- Opening Doors project continues involving local businesses
- Project: A Whole School Approach to Mental Health launched September 2017 – runs throughout academic year 2017-18 (3 training sessions for most staff)
- Broadening Horizons project continues
- RSAA Performing Arts Hub: Performing Pedagogies (teacher innovation and drama/theatre aim to improve student's language/literacy development and story-telling)
- Annual Warwick University lecture and debate: How to make universities more inclusive
- Fellowship event in February 2018 with a specific education theme

## **Year 2018-19**

- Artsfest, Takeover Day, PDAs
- RSAA Spoken Word Competition (poetry anthology)
- Arts/Design project led by Mary Restieaux RDI on colour/dyeing and careers in textiles (at Whitley)
- tarinainanika – corporeal mime theatre and workshop (Tokyo Fugue: The Universal Language of the Body) led by Tanya Coke FRSA
- Project: Contemporary Arts Space (with partner, iniva)
- RSAA Performing Arts Hub: Song Cycle (with Birmingham Contemporary Music Group) at CBSO (celebration of RSA mission/values through an original collection of songs, Do you see? Do you hear? – 170 students)

- Project: RSA4 (£128,000 received from The Pears #iWill Fund), to run for three years from January 2019
- RSA8 Leadership Programme: skills workshop followed by University of Warwick away day
- Project: Conflict Resolution (workshops) led by Chris Langton FRSA
- Opening Doors to Business continued with planning to extend into the Black Country
- Work on lesson plans for the World of Work Show (re: construction industry)
- Report published on A Whole School Approach to Mental Health (October 2018) following evaluation by Anna Freud Centre

## **Year 2019-20**

- Launch of RSAA suite of distinctiveness documents: (i) What does it mean to be an RSA school? (ii) Partnership Framework; (iii) Evaluation Schedule
- Artsfest, Takeover Day, PDAs
- tarinainanika – corporeal mime theatre and workshop (Fellow-led): Coffee and I
- Contemporary Art Space project launched September 2019
- RSA4 project including initial evaluation by Behavioural Insights Team
- RSA8 project followed by University of Warwick away day
- Opening Doors to Business projected launched in Black Country July 2019
- Project: 'So you want to be a...?' [Medic] launched (careers information)
- Project: Krystal Douglas PhD Student – on how friendships/family influence career choice and pupils' perception of themselves
- Work with RDIs on Design and Technology curriculum at KS3 (and how creative design principles can influence the whole curriculum)
- Discussions around embedding creativity into the curriculum
- First (pilot) RSA Distinctiveness Review at Sutton Park RSA Primary Academy
- Project: History Day at RSA House for Y9 at Arrow Vale RSA Academy re Enlightenment and origins of the RSA
- End of RSAA financial year disrupted by pandemic

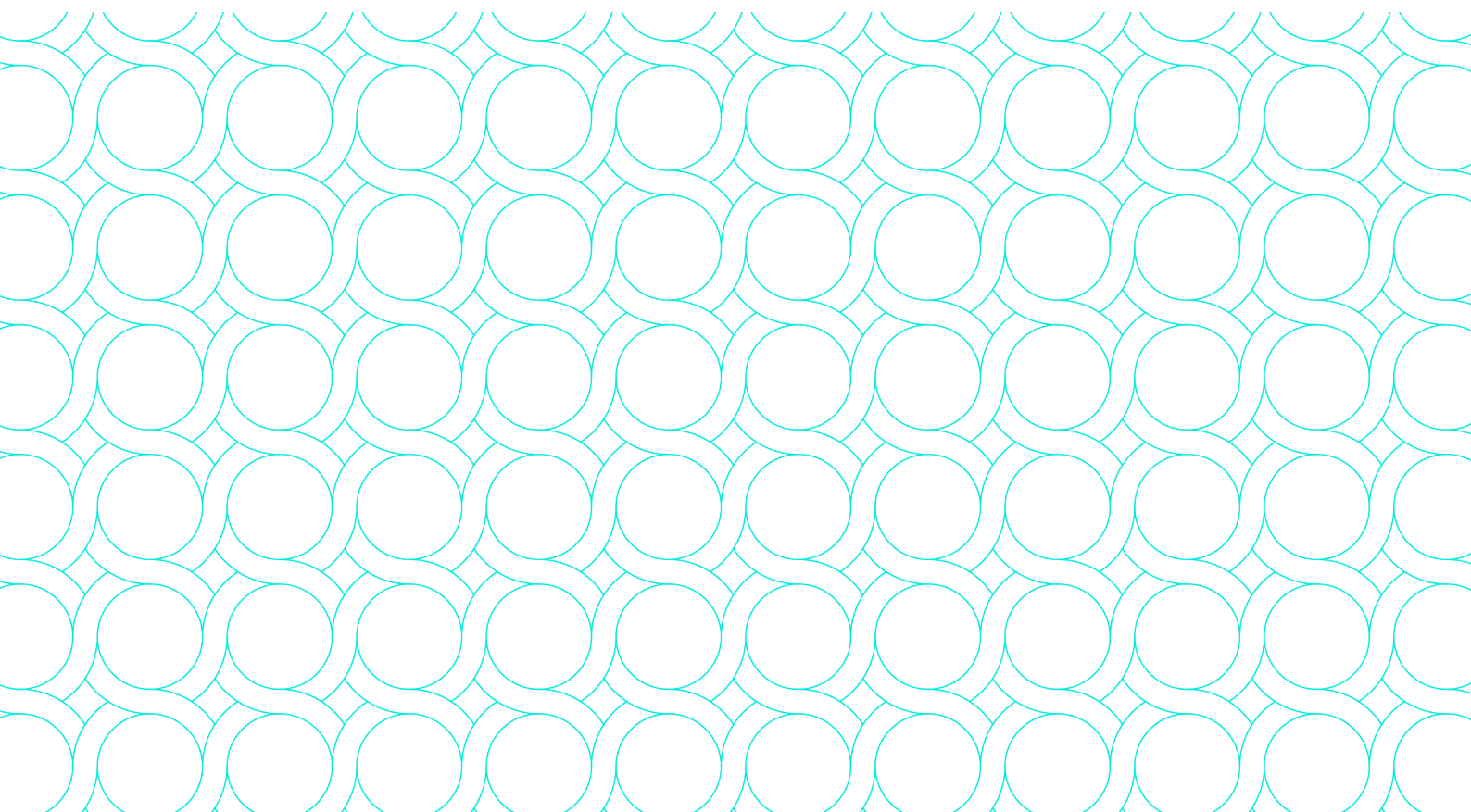
## **Year 2020-21**

- Substantial disruption to RSAA engagement with schools because of Covid-19 pandemic
- Ongoing work on all projects, Takeover Day, CAS, RSA4, RSA8 etc, continued in a virtual mode up to Easter 2021, with projects resuming (virtual or otherwise) for summer term
- Contemporary Arts Space project concluded with ongoing legacy for art works
- New project: Epic Steps (Y5) careers workshop (online)
- RSA determines to disinvest from RSAA with effect from 31 March 2022 (end of current MoU period)
- Discussions/consultations with schools on withdrawal of RSA/RSAA and transition plan with a view to concluding activity by 31 August 2021

## **References**

The majority of sources referred to are RSAA board papers, minutes and reports, and are unpublished internal company documents.

Ofsted reports for the academies are available on the Ofsted website.



The RSA (royal society for arts, manufactures and commerce) believes in a world where everyone is able to participate in creating a better future. Through our ideas, research and a 30,000 strong Fellowship we are a global community of proactive problem solvers. Uniting people and ideas to resolve the challenges of our time.



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