

The Discipline of Change: How Schools Can Review, Implement and Reflect with Purpose

At the heart of every excellent school lies a commitment to growth; not only the growth of the pupils we serve, but of the school itself. In education, standing still is not a neutral act; it is a decision to fall behind. But how do schools change intentionally and productively? How do we review our provision, implement meaningful improvements, and ensure that change leads to better outcomes for pupils?

This week's essay offers an insight into that process. It explains how we conduct thoughtful, evidence-informed reviews of our work, make changes with clarity and purpose, and embed a culture of ongoing reflection. I draw on the Education Endowment Foundation's (EEF) *A School's Guide to Implementation*, viewed through the lens of our own experience here at Blundell's.

This is not a technical essay, it is a human one. Because improving a school is not just about strategies or data. It is about values, relationships, and a shared determination to get better for the improved experience of our pupils.

Why Review Anything at All?

A good school does not change for the sake of change. It changes because it listens; to its pupils, to its staff, to emerging research, and to the evolving world beyond its gates. Sometimes this means reviewing an academic programme, a pastoral system or a co-curricular offering. Sometimes the change is prompted by data but, more often, it is prompted by a question: *Could we do this better?*

We do not get everything right the first time, but nor should we expect to. As our pupils grow and the world around them shifts, our school must keep pace; not reactively, but thoughtfully.

At its best, school improvement is not a matter of reacting to trends or adopting the latest innovation. It is a thoughtful and principled journey, a process rooted in what a school truly stands for, informed by data and research, and open to learning from others. It is not simply *what* we change that matters, but *how* and *why* we choose to change.

At Blundell's, this understanding underpins every review we undertake. We understand that, although the urge to fix things quickly is understandable, meaningful change rarely happens overnight; thinking fast and acting slowly is more effective.

In this essay, I want to share how we at Blundell's thoughtfully approached the review of School House, our structure for pupils in Years 7 and 8. After five years of running it in its current form, we wanted to know: is this model still serving our pupils as well as it could? I will explain how we went about the review, how we started making changes, and how we are evaluating whether those changes are working.

I use School House as the example here because it is the review of which we are currently in the midst. However, I could just as easily have chosen the curriculum review that ran from 2017 to 2023, the ongoing pastoral review, or the newly launched co-curricular review. At Blundell's, we believe that a good school is a restless one; always reflecting, always questioning, and always seeking to improve its practice.

At the heart of all our reviews lie three guiding principles: staying true to our values, intelligent use of evidence, and an eagerness to learn from, and collaborate with, others.

I. Starting from Values

Every meaningful review begins with a clear articulation of a school's values. Values are not window dressing, they shape the questions we ask, the outcomes we prioritise, and the practices we choose to adopt. Before rushing to action, we invest time in fully understanding the issue.

In the case of School House, we returned to first principles. We asked: "What are we trying to protect? What are we trying to preserve? What matters most for our pupils? What is the purpose of the first two years at the Senior School?"

We identified a range of drivers for change, from logistical considerations to deeper cultural questions, but our focus remained firmly on the pupil experience. Our aim was to ensure that these formative years were shaped by the lived values expressed in *Roots and Wings*, and defined by clarity, kindness, coherence, and ambition.

2. Gathering Evidence: Looking Inside and Outside

Once values frame the process, the next step is to gather evidence, as change should not begin with a hunch. A good review is rigorous and avoids leaping to solutions before fully understanding the problem. This involves looking both inward and outward and the understanding that no single piece of data tells the whole story, but together, they offer a picture.

Internally, we draw on a wide range of sources: performance data, staff input, lesson observations, Pupils and parents are key in this diagnostic process. Their insights help build a shared understanding and encourage later buy-in. When people feel that their voice has shaped the analysis, they are more likely to support the solutions. Most importantly, this ensures this phase is collaborative. Schools are communities and, if you want to understand what is really happening, you must listen to those at the centre of it.

Externally, we engage with research, and we enjoy the great privilege that comes with visiting other schools. The questions we ask are: "What can we learn from elsewhere? What are we already doing well? What can we adapt for our own context? What has worked in similar contexts? What does research suggest is most effective? What are the core components of a successful approach? And, crucially, how do these align with the values of our school?" This is not about importing a programme wholesale. It is about learning from elsewhere, then tailoring wisely.

I invited staff to volunteer for the School House review team and selected 10 colleagues from over 25 who expressed interest from a mix of departments and responsibilities. This group met regularly and took part in three dedicated 'away days', where we stepped off-site to think deeply and creatively about what we wanted for our youngest pupils. We consulted widely internally, holding forums with pupils and staff across both the Prep and Senior School. We launched a detailed parent survey, and over 90 families responded. Their feedback was both generous and insightful, affirming much of what we were doing well while also raising important questions: "Why do pupils in Year 7 see so many different teachers? Could transitions between Year 6 and Year 9 be smoother? Could the curriculum be better balanced? Can we help them manage prep, given how tired pupils are when they start at the Senior School?"

We also visited eight very different institutions, including stand-alone prep schools, academically selective and non-selective schools, all-through schools, and those with particularly vibrant Key Stage 3 programmes, across both the independent and state sectors.

The result was a shared diagnosis of the challenges and a clear consensus around what needed to improve.

3. Preparing for Change

We then move into the preparation phase. This is arguably the most important stage because clarity, alignment, and planning make success far more likely.

Once a course of action is agreed, the review team prepares the ground. This involves careful planning: identifying the key people involved, allocating time and resources, agreeing how the impact will be measured, and ensuring that everyone understands not just what is happening, but why.

We begin by articulating a clear rationale: why this change matters, what it hopes to achieve, and how it connects to our values. Next, we define exactly what will change. We specify the “core components” - the essential elements that must be in place for the change to work.

Then, we plan for support. This means designing high-quality professional development, allocating time for collaboration, anticipating barriers, and agreeing how progress will be monitored. Implementation plans are not static documents; they evolve as we learn what works.

We therefore set out to explain why the changes to School House were necessary and how they aligned with our values. We designed a coherent plan that placed Tutors at the centre of daily life, improved curriculum continuity and smoothed the transition from Year 6 to Year 7 by redrawing the timetable to prioritise Maths, English and Science, and from Year 8 to Year 9 by strengthening opportunities for enrichment and leadership. We rethought the structure of the day completely to make better use of the time and new specialist coaches available. Prep was reshaped to be more manageable and meaningful, reducing the amount of stress at home when pupils start at a busy Senior School. New ambassador and captaincy roles gave Year 8 pupils a greater sense of ownership and responsibility and more parent contact points were introduced to create a more seamless integration process.

Communication here is crucial. When everyone understands both the “what” and the “why,” the “how” becomes far more manageable. We ran parent forums to explain the process and the changes, and Heads of Year fed back to pupils. Explanations were shared not only through formal channels, but also through the quiet, daily conversations that build trust and help people feel part of the journey.

4. Delivering Thoughtfully

The biggest risk during delivery stage is speed. There is a temptation to push quickly - especially when a change feels exciting or overdue. But lasting improvement takes time. It needs modelling, feedback, support, and patience. New practices rarely embed after one INSET session.

This is where the human side of change matters most. Implementation is not a checklist, rather it is a social process, shaped by how people feel, how they work together, and whether they believe in what they are doing. Leaders must remain visible, encouraging and reflective. Challenges must be named, not hidden. Quick wins should be celebrated; early setbacks acknowledged.

Feedback loops are vital; staff, pupils and parents must be invited to share what is working and what is not. Adjustments should be expected, not feared. We must accept that change is not a one-shot effort, it is a learning process.

Throughout the School House changes, we worked hard to keep everyone involved. Tutors were supported in adjusting to their new central role. Feedback loops were established with pupils, staff, and parents. Staff were encouraged to share what was working - and what was not. Early wins, such as stronger relationships and more consistent routines, were celebrated. Setbacks, such as occasional confusion over new systems, including wrinkles with Wednesday lunchtimes, were acknowledged and addressed openly.

5. Reflecting and Reviewing

The final stage, *sustain*, is often the most overlooked. Many school initiatives begin with energy and good intention but fewer make it through to becoming embedded, consistent, and enduring.

Why? Because sustaining change is hard; it requires ongoing attention, even as the usual day-to-day demands on time continue. It takes humility to listen, (especially when what we hear is that something is not working!) and it takes the commitment to stay the course, trusting in the process and remembering that these changes were made for the right reasons.

This phase also involves revisiting data, listening again to those affected, and adapting where necessary. One particular challenge lies in accepting that not everything will work brilliantly from the outset; we must allow time to see whether a change settles into place or whether, in fact, we have made a mistake. If it is the latter, we respond not with panic, but with care, adjusting thoughtfully and deliberately, rather than reacting hastily.

Throughout our reviews, we have learned that sustaining change often comes down to habits. Do staff have regular opportunities to reflect on their practice? Are systems in place to keep the new approach visible? Are we still asking, “Is this helping our pupils?”

And we are brave enough to stop doing what no longer works. The discipline of de-implementation - letting go of legacy practices - is as important as implementation itself. It respects time, preserves energy, and sharpens focus.

This phase is very much still underway in School House. Among the many positives, one change that has not worked as well as intended has been the new activity structure. Designed around the Duke of Edinburgh model, which all pupils now undertake in Year 9, it aimed to develop habits of service, skills, and physical activity. However, in introducing this framework, we unintentionally removed too many of the more niche options that pupils had previously enjoyed, including valuable time for rehearsals and other specialised pursuits. When we spoke with pupils, this was the one area they clearly missed. In response, we have found a way to bring back these opportunities next year, while still retaining the core aims of the DofE-inspired structure.

Alongside this adjustment, the next phase of change is taking shape. From September 2025, we will introduce:

- A new house system for Years 7 and 8, to strengthen identity and peer mentoring.
- Revised reporting focused on learning behaviours to support academic coaching.
- An updated Friday enrichment model, balancing academic depth with creativity and choice.
- A new layer of Faculty Coordinators to oversee both curriculum and enrichment.

And beyond that, Phase 3 is already in planning for 2026. The review of School House is not “one and done.” It is iterative, inclusive, and grounded in the lived experience of our pupils and staff.

Why This Matters

As parents, you may wonder why any of this matters? Surely what matters most is what happens in the classroom, on the sports field, or in the music recital?

And of course, it is, but those things are shaped by something deeper: by the structures and values that sit behind them. When a school takes the time to review what it does, to listen to its community, to draw on evidence, and to implement with care, everything improves. Not overnight, but sustainably.

Children notice more than we think; they feel the difference when staff are confident and connected. They thrive in schools where change is purposeful, not chaotic; where reflection is embedded, not sporadic; where improvement is continuous, not reactive.

Even excellent schools are not perfect. But they are relentlessly curious. I feel that excellent schools should always be asking: “Is this good enough for our pupils?”, and when the answer is “not yet,” they should act.

A Final Thought

In an age of novelty, it is tempting for schools to chase every new idea. But true improvement is not about doing more things, rather it is about doing the right things well.

Review. Reflect. Implement. Sustain. These are not just steps in a guidebook. They are a mindset, and like all mindsets, they are best learned through deliberate practice.

When we do this well, change becomes culture. This is vital as, in the words of Peter Drucker; “*culture eats strategy for breakfast*”.