

SBN Case Study: Oakwood, Birchfield and Maple Grove Schools, London

School-based nurseries is a term used to describe early years provision which is based within a school site. They may operate independently from the school by a private, voluntary or independent (PVI) sector provider or be run by the school/academy or as governor-run pre-school provision in a maintained school.

If the school provides care for children under two years olds, it must register with Ofsted separately and be inspected independently of school provision. If it is run by a private, voluntary or independent (PVI) sector provider operating on school premises, the provider must also register with Ofsted separately and be inspected independently.

This case study is one in a series exploring how schools have embedded nurseries on their sites. It focuses on a Federation of three nurseries- Oakwood, Maple Grove and Birchfield (names changed) - spread across neighbouring London primary schools.

The case study explores:

- Background and development of the SBN
- Curriculum, pedagogy and physical spaces
- Staffing, recruitment and CPD
- Governance and Ofsted
- Funding and financial sustainability
- Reflections on SBNs

Overview of the Federation:

School type/ organisation:	Three nurseries; part of a Federation
Delivery model:	Direct Delivery
Age groups:	Oakwood: Two to four years Maple Grove: Six months to four years Birchfield: Nursery merged into a foundation stage unit
Timings:	Oakwood: 7:30am to 5:45pm; term- time only Maple Grove: 7:30am to 6pm; year-round

1. Background and development of Oakwood, Maple Grove and Birchfield school-based nurseries

The Federation run three nurseries, Oakwood, Maple Gove and Birchfield nursery, which are all part of a Federation:

- **Oakwood:** the nursery was initially undersubscribed, which changed when the primary school expanded from one-form to two-form entry. It began with a 26-place provision for three- and four-year-olds, which has since been expanded to 60 places. As soon as the government introduced the 30-hour entitlement for three- and four-year-olds and the 15-hour entitlement for disadvantaged two-year-olds, the nursery implemented both, which has since made term-time daycare self-financing.
- **Maple Grove:** when a local nursery ceased operations unexpectedly, the Federation led the expansion of Maple Grove Nursery from 42 to 60 places to accommodate the children from the closed setting. Once enrolment stabilised, they reverted to 42 places to ensure sustainability. Maple Grove run year-round wraparound care, including breakfast clubs and after-school sessions, and close for one week at the end of August and two weeks over Christmas. They also oversaw the creation of two dedicated rooms for 42 babies and toddlers so that children experience a seamless 0-4 progression that the community values highly.
- **Birchfield Nursery:** the Federation's newest setting struggled with lower occupancy after the school it was attached to received a Requires Improvement Ofsted rating. With only four bookings for the next year, the Federation worked with the school leadership team to merge nursery places into Reception classes, to create a foundation stage unit. By sharing staff and space, they reduced financial risk and reinforced pedagogical continuity between early years and Key Stage 1.
- **What operational model underpins these school-based nurseries?**

All three nurseries are proudly operated by the school, benefiting from the full use of its premises and the support of shared senior leadership and administrative teams. By integrating joint utility services, the nurseries are able to significantly reduce rent and business-rate overheads. Core funding comes from government entitlements, 15 hours for two-year-olds and up to 30 hours for older children, supplemented by additional hours parents purchase and means-tested benefits such as childcare support through Universal Credit. Sessions align with school term dates and range from flexible three-hour blocks to full-day care, enabling parents to tailor provision around work while maintaining statutory staff-to-child ratios. Thanks to strong demand from parents, the nurseries' flexible approach remains both financially sustainable and responsive to the needs of the community.

- **Which enablers and barriers most influenced their development?**

Immediate access to school buildings significantly reduced setup time and costs, allowing the nurseries to launch quickly. Having established roles such as a Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) and a Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) in place provided essential expertise and continuity, strengthening the nurseries' operational and safeguarding frameworks. Leveraging school-wide administrative systems and utilities streamlined operations which they believe enabled a more cost-effective model. Although attracting and retaining qualified Level 3 educators had been a challenge, thought to be impacted by some

local private providers offering higher salaries, the nurseries have worked hard to ensure high retention rates of 90% per year.

For further guidance on recruitment, please view –

1. [General guides to EY recruitment: Childcare Works](#)
2. [Vodcast on recruitment and retention in Early Years](#)

2. The Federation's approach to curriculum, pedagogy and physical spaces

- **How does the curriculum bridge nursery and primary education and support families?**

The curriculum starts with the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) prime areas of learning: communication and language, physical development and personal, social and emotional development. The Characteristics of Effective Teaching and Learning¹ run through and underpin each of these areas, and integrate specific areas such as literacy and numeracy through topic-based projects inspired by children's interests. The nurseries try to make sure the children's environment is enabling and stimulating in all respects. For example, at Oakwood, they have home visits to gather detailed information on each child's strengths and preferences; at Maple Grove, extended in-school induction days are used [to understand the child's interests](#). They share curriculum frameworks and hold joint professional-development days with Reception teams so that every child experiences a consistent approach as they move into reception. Each child has a key person in nursery that supports them through the year. The nurseries have a focus on supporting children to develop a growth mindset, to develop resilience.

- **What adaptations have been made to the physical environment of the school?**

A priority was to make sure children had a useable outdoor space; all three sites designed their spaces with a commercial provider. Each nursery features dedicated indoor-outdoor access to promote free-flow play across all seven areas of learning within the EYFS. Equipment ranges from water and sand tables to mark-making stations and climbing frames. Recognising the importance of sensory regulation, Maple Grove and Oakwood developed calm and alert rooms, fitted with specialist lighting, soft furnishings and bespoke resources for children with autism and other additional needs. Flexible partitions create two breakout zones for small-group work and one-to-one interventions, ensuring every child receives tailored support.

¹

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/64e6002a20ae890014f26cbc/DfE_Development_Matters_Report_Sep2023.pdf

For further guidance, please view:

1. [Early years foundation stage statutory framework](#)
2. [Childcare Works HUB: SEND and inclusive practice](#)

3. The Federation's approach to staffing, recruitment and CPD

The Federation described a strong recruitment strategy where candidates go through competency-based interviews and observations with children to ascertain whether they are suitable to work with children. Once appointed, they receive a thorough induction into the school policies. The nurseries schedule regular CPD sessions, bespoke early-years inset days and a structured mentoring programme that pairs apprentices with experienced practitioners. Their quality-assurance processes include systematic learning walks, formal observations and SMART appraisal targets aligned to nursery priorities, which they believed fosters a culture of reflection and continuous improvement in practice.

4. The Federation's governance and Ofsted inspections

- **How is your nursery provision integrated into the broader school governance structure?**

The Federation was proud that it embeds nursery governance within each school's leadership governance. Central to this was having an early years governor in all three schools. These designated governors conduct termly visits and lead pupil voice sessions which they believe ensured alignment with the Federation's strategic goals. They also identified that standard governor training does not cover early years curriculum and practice adequately so they recommended bespoke training for governors.

- **What has been the Federation's experience of Ofsted inspections?**

Aligning the Federation model, which differs from more traditional models, with registration processes presented some challenges. For example, each setting must designate one individual as the nominated person, whereas the Federation have a shared leadership model. The Federation worked collaboratively with Ofsted to increase awareness of the experience in the less-familiar area of processing simultaneous registrations for multiple settings within a federated structure. This included a workshop and recorded 'test' application to support any future revisions to the application process.

Recent inspections were highly positive. Inspectors praised the early years provision in both schools.

For further guidance on Ofsted registration, please view:

1. Ofsted - [Registering school based provision](#)

5. The Federation's approach to funding and financial sustainability

- **How are the nurseries funded, and what strategies support their financial sustainability?**

Senior leaders highlighted that they carry out detailed break-even analyses, comparing staffing costs with anticipated income to establish the minimum occupancy needed to cover salaries and overheads. Core to this is that fees are set at or slightly above market rates as they feel under-pricing tends to undermine perceptions of quality, whereas competitive rates reinforce value.

Waiting lists are reviewed regularly and parental surveys inform adjustments to session lengths, term-time versus holiday provision and fee tiers, ensuring they remain responsive to local needs and financially viable. A lot of parents were not aware of nurseries in a school context; parents often thought they have to go to a separate private provider. They pointed out that this perception led to a shortfall of 10 places in one nursery during the pandemic, which was a challenge financially. These fluctuations in parental demand can affect financial sustainability quite significantly. However, the Federation were happy to report that demand recovered post-pandemic due to word-of-mouth referrals.

In terms of sustainability, they believed they had a clear, popular offer to meet the needs of all parents. For example, working parents are offered flexible wraparound care till 5:45 p.m., while also providing shorter options, such as three-hour blocks, to accommodate a wide range of needs in the market.

For further guidance on funding, please view:

1. [Early years funding: 2025 to 2026](#)
2. [Childcare Works HUB: Early Years Business Planning](#)
3. [Childcare Works HUB: Early Years Finance and Funding](#)

6. The Federation's reflections on school-based nurseries

- **What are some of the key successes and lessons learnt?**

Parent surveys show that families are highly-satisfied with the Federation nurseries, valuing the seamless integration of school and nursery, the quality of care and their children's developmental progress. Rapid uptake of new funding entitlements and the expansion of wraparound services were also noted as standout successes.

In hindsight, the Federation wished they had conducted more in-depth market research before launch and secured larger capital investments, particularly under Basic Need or SEND grant programmes, to ease early cash-flow pressures and accelerate growth.

- **What key pieces of advice would you give to other schools hoping to establish their own school-based nursery?**

The Federation recommended networking with other school nurseries, engaging actively with sector bodies such as the National Day Nurseries Association² and maintaining open dialogue with the local authority by asking for their advice. They also recommend grounding provision in robust demand analysis, pricing services to reflect the quality offered and leveraging the unique strengths of school-based models in terms of shared leadership, facilities and governance. They believed this helps to build a sustainable, high-quality early years environment that genuinely serves the community.

² <https://ndna.org.uk/>

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