

SCHOOL FEDERATIONS

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1. PURPOSES & METHODS OF THE STUDY

1.1 The term “school federation” embraces many variants on the concept of inter-school working. As the Education Guardian put it in an article of 16th December 2003, “federations range from informal partnerships to single corporate bodies - in effect, single multi-site schools”. The purposes of federation are examined in Section 3.

1.2 This study focuses on one type of federation - that in which a struggling school works with a strong school. The recognition that leadership is central to achieving effective and improving schools has led government, local and national, to investigate ways in which the leaders of highly-effective schools can be used to help turn around schools in sustained, serious difficulty. Section 4, the heart of the study, identifies factors leading to success in these contexts.

1.3 To gain perspective, the study also looked briefly at models of inter-school working based on voluntary association (Section 2). Issues which the DfES needs to address are raised in Section 5.

1.4 The methods employed were:

- literature review: what research into collaborative working, especially linking the leadership of strong and weak organisations, is there within the social sciences?
- intelligence gathering from key organisations such as branches of the DfES formerly part of the SEU, the Innovation Unit, OfSTED and LEAs - what is the scale and diversity of school linkage, what key case studies are there?
- analysis of a range of case studies suggested by the intelligence gathering.

1.5 A note about language: terms associated with inter-school working are used inter-changeably and are confusing. One of the issues which the DfES should address (section 5 issue A) is an agreed language.

This study uses terms as follows:

Support federation: the association between a strong and a struggling school

Collaborative: all other forms of inter-school working

All interviewees resisted the terms ‘donor’ and ‘recipient’, and ‘senior’ and ‘junior partner’, but a shorthand language is needed to describe the supporting and supported schools. This study will use the terms ‘lead school or ‘lead partner’,

and 'partner' for the supported school; the latter term acknowledging that its role is not a passive one.]

1.6 Inter-school working aims to raise standards; since most associations are at a relatively early stage of development, they have little student outcome data and cannot yield significant evidence about the key issue of sustainability. Identifying what makes inter-school working successful is therefore at best tentative.

1.7 In the light of scanty outcomes data and the prospect of more authoritative studies ¹, I have tried to make this study useful by:

- identifying the common features of federations, especially their lead schools, which have shown early success: what do they have and, crucially, who does what to bring about a raising of standards (Section 4.1 – 4.2)?
- identifying the critically distinctive characteristics of schools which have the potential to be effective lead schools within a federation (Section 4.4), not just identifying in hindsight why a federation did or did not work ²;
- avoiding the trap that brief must equal trite: some analyses are of the “mother and apple pie” variety - predictable and undeniable; the study aims therefore to be provocative in places, going beyond the strict terms of its brief to suggest some “matters arising”, set out as issues in Section 5.

¹ The University of Warwick is carrying out a longitudinal study of federations and NCSL is conducting a study of executive headship that overlaps both the content and the interviewees of this study.

² to quote an example used by Jim Collins (2001), an investigation into the factors promoting the success of gold-medal-winning athletes might conclude that they all have coaches - but so did those who came tenth. Having a coach is therefore not a critical distinction.

2. CLASSIFICATION OF METHODS OF INTER-SCHOOL WORKING

2.1 Since the 2002 Education Act brought legal significance to the term 'federation', groups have sought other titles - partnership, syndicate, collegiate, cluster - to convey that they are working together in ways that fall short of the formal and binding "hard federation", defined by the DfES (Federations website) thus

- *"The definition as invoked in the 2002 Education Act which allows for the creation of a single governing body or a joint governing body committee across two or more schools from September 2003 onwards.*
- *A group of schools with a formal (i.e. written) agreement to work together ... in part through structural changes in leadership and management, in many instances through making use of the joint governance arrangements invoked in the 2002 Education Act."*

2.2 The DfES Federation Website lists 35 federations (late October 2004) approved and funded as pilots by the DfES, with a few more in the pipeline and no further tranche planned. The reality is that there are many more inter-school partnerships, many of them more formal and better established than some of the pilots. Some have origins in the late 1980s in the consortia that characterised TVEI, while others are of very recent origin. Some are communities of schools in challenging settings, such as EAZs and LIG collaboratives, others are pyramids of primary, secondary and special school partners within a geographical area and others again are "communities of practice" (see 2.4). An estimate based on one region of the country suggests that over half of all secondary schools are in some sort of network, and that many are in several (Section 5, issue B).

2.3 Federations can be classified in different ways - for example:

2.3.1 by the degree of collaboration: hard/soft, legal entity/loose association. Analysis shows that the same factors link with success in hard and soft federations; hardness/softness is therefore not a critical distinction;

2.3.2 by the agency for their creation: self-determined or brokered by LEA or DfES, which is closely allied to ...

2.3.3 by purpose: communities of practice (2.4) or help for a struggling school.

The most useful functional classification of federations is into two based on their purpose, as proposed in 2.4 and 2.7. The number of variants or sub-divisions of these two is considerable (2.5 and 2.7); again, this study does not find these to be critical distinctions: all variants are equally capable of being successful and are equally likely to display the key success factors.

2.4 **Self-determined groups**, hereinafter called **collaboratives**, are “communities of practice” as defined by Wenger (1998), groups which share the same goals and perceive that joint working speeds the achievement of those goals and/or extends them. The activities of such groups centre on critical reflection, collaborative learning and mutual critique, as described by Wasser and Bresler (1996) in their analysis of how collaborative groups work. Those activities exist along a spectrum, and the collaborative decides how far to the right along that continuum it wishes to proceed:

Purchasing (economies of scale)	Professional interchange	Shared functions
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2.5 There are many variants on the model:

- numbers of schools (from 3 up to about 16): the average is 4 to 6
- pyramids including one or more secondaries working with primary/middle/special schools (Dorchester) - effectively mini-LEAs - or horizontal groupings involving a single phase (West Kent - although one of the strands of collaboration here is improved working with primary partners)
- distance travelled along the continuum of collaboration.

These are matters of fine detail; all can be equally successful.

2.6 From the DfES’ point of views, collaboratives have great potential as ways of bringing about improvement in good schools. They seems particularly successful in addressing new, developmental needs, such as e-learning, and those which are challenging and essentially collaborative, such as the Tomlinson 14 – 19 proposals (3.3, fifth bullet). There is however little evidence that they share practice to address their own weaknesses. The potential of the collaborative to address each school’s within-school variation systematically is generally not fulfilled: sharing practice so that School A’s good science department supports B’s weak one, with reciprocity in, say, mathematics, rarely happens and is a weakness (Section 5, issue C).

2.7 **Support federations**, brought into being to bring about improvement in weak schools. These are the subject of detailed analysis in Section 4. There are also variants on this model:

- running two schools as one under a single head (Gateshead), which may or may not be a permanent arrangement;

- the development of a family of schools, a brand, each with its own headteacher and under the oversight of an executive head (Ninestiles/Waverley/International), which is a permanent arrangement;
- the cloning of excellent schools (Telford/Walsall Academy; 3Es group based on the Solihull model), which is a permanent arrangement;
- satellite schools: extensive support including key staff is provided by the lead partner for a limited period; the partner school retains autonomy, including after the contract comes to an end (Telford/Madeley Court).

2.8 However, this study suggests that there is barely a cigarette paper's difference between them (Walsall and a possible future Sandwell Academy, although they have no executive head, are a family, a brand like the Ninestiles group), and that all can be equally successful, as long as they conform to the basic rule - "the deeper the problem, the closer the association" (see 4.1.2 fourth bullet for detail).

2.9 Costs for substantial and sustainable improvement, if buildings costs are discounted, are in the range £50 – 150k/year; Ainscow and colleagues suggested that the comparable figure for a Fresh Start solution is £500k over one to two years. However, some costings are simplistic; there is some work to do to ensure that all inputs are included - specialist school grant, LIG, Leading Edge Grant, Federation Grant, the cost of redundancies and LEA input (but much of the latter is the redeployment of fixed costs) - and that different projects are costed comparably. The best examples (such as Thomas Telford/Madeley Court) are fully costed and quote a figure closer to £200k/year over five years. The issue of intellectual property is not fully addressed - should the lead school be paid only reimbursement costs for staff, travel etc, or a proportion for its intellectual property? (Section 5, issue D).

2.10 Well organised, both the collaborative (in good schools) and the support federation model (in weak schools) have great potential to bring about powerful improvement.

2.11 Hybrids, such as attempts at creating communities of practice from the outside, generally by LEAs are, for obvious reasons, much slower to start and have a higher failure rate. In Slough, for example, two self-determined collaboratives left a group of three non-aligned schools, and the LEA has understandably sought to complete the pattern by fashioning these into a third collaborative, which has,

predictably, been much slower to get going. This has considerable implications for any planning for universal notion of collaboration - see Section 5, issues E and G - and for the role of the LEA in intervening and supporting differentially (4.3).

2.12 This study posed the question: **do the same success factors apply in all types of inter-school working?** The answer seems to be that there is a core of conditions necessary for success in any type of federation, listed by the DfES (Federations Website) as follows, but that they are not sufficient for success in the support federations:

*“A sense of **shared identity** between schools: for example through geographical proximity, or a sense of being an inclusive community.*

- *A sense of **common purpose**: The groups of schools involved in collaboration should have a shared sense of what needs to be done and how it is to be done, and a joint vision for improving the attainment, achievement and progression of young people.*
- ***Leadership** a collaborative partnership needs a strong cohesive leadership, and federations should be interested in developing and sustaining leadership across all levels of the schools.*
- *A strong **management** infrastructure: federations must demonstrate that they have the capacity to deliver.*
- ***Trust** is fundamental to effective collaboration and should be built into every level of management. Schools need to share a sense of openness and a willingness to operate in a joined-up and united way.*
- *A **system of review**: federations will need to be monitored and evaluated to show that they are being effective.*
- ***Commitment**: schools must be prepared to commit both time and resources to ensure that the federation is effective and sustainable. They will also need a commitment to raising standards and achievement in all of the schools in the federation and to continually improving progression for young people.”*

2.13 This analysis is based on pilot federations, groups of early volunteers; it would be surprising if they did not show commitment, shared purpose etc. The success factors for support federations are considered in detail in Section 4.

3. WHY FEDERATIONS?

3.1 All types of federation are brought into being to raise standards. The DfES (federations website) elaborates the aim thus “ *[to] raise standards, promote inclusion, find new ways of approaching teaching and learning and build capacity between schools in a coherent manner.*”

3.2 The same website shows how ambitious for the impact of federation the DfES is: “*We hope that, as schools move towards structured and sustainable collaboration, we will be creating system-wide change and actually transforming the culture of education .. We are therefore keen to promote collaboration at all levels.....Federations are part of the Transforming Secondary Education agenda, which sees diversity and collaboration as the (my emphasis) two main vehicles for raising standards and driving improvement in teaching and learning.*” The DfES clearly sees a future in which formal collaboration among secondary schools is the norm.

3.3 This belief seems to be a response to:

- what is perceived in hindsight as the over-competitiveness of the 1990s, consuming energy and limiting choice. A county council/LLSC publication (East Sussex, 2003) describing the potential benefits of a post-16 collaborative puts it “*the current competitive provision does not encourage impartial advice and guidance [at 16+]*”;
- the achievement of political objectives, such as breaking the link between disadvantage and under-achievement and widening the 14 – 19 curriculum. The language shift, *improvement* having given way to *transformation*, signals a more radical approach to closing the gap between the best and worst schools. Government believes that primary schools have been transformed by the national strategies and that the same approach is becoming effective in the 11 – 14 age range; it rightly sees the post-14 sector as more complex and diverse and less easily marshalled than its younger counterparts, and partnership among schools, colleges, other providers and local authorities to generate locally-determined, bottom-up solutions as essential;
- a widely-held belief, often poorly-argued and stated as indisputable fact, that working across boundaries is ‘the way forward’ - for instance Tom Bentley, Director of Demos, in his foreword to Hargreaves (2003):

“ ...the contours of a transformed education system are coming into view. Its major features will include: many dynamic networks of schools and other providers operating collaboratively across local areas ...leadership capacity distributed widely across high-performing schools and community networks..”

- examples where federation has been an undoubted success:
 - the success of support federations in turning round a small number of dysfunctional schools which had proved resistant over a long period of time to other methods of rescue. Well-known examples are Kingsdown High School, Wigan and the Ninestiles/Waverley/International schools group in Birmingham. The first has the great advantage of having been analysed and written up by a team of professional researchers (Ainscow et al), which concluded that the school-to-school support model brings greater and, probably, more sustainable improvement at a much lower cost than the super-head/Fresh Start or, in the US, reconstitution models;
 - self-determined collaboratives, such as the large group in West Kent, clearly committed to joint working at a fundamental level and enthused by the potential of the group to address new challenges

- the acknowledgement by many, including headteachers, that the complexity of modern secondary headship is too great to be undertaken alone, and that some of the new agendas can only be realised in partnership. In the final draft of the Tomlinson proposals for 14-19 education (DfES 2004), for example, the chapter on delivery begins with a section on collaboration, extracted with my emphasis (underlining) below:

“283. ...in time, all young people in an area should be entitled to access the full range of diploma lines and main learning options. This cannot be achieved without a significant level of collaboration and planning across an area....The new system would rely on schools, colleges and training providers working collaboratively. Collaboration is not a new idea and we want to build on existing good practice ... collaboration would need to happen more systematically if all learners are to have access to a range of options”

- a perception that LEAs can be effective partners in and brokers of, but not deliverers and leaders of, transformation (see Section 4.3);

- the secondary education system has not been successful in learning from its own best (or better) practice, and that federations will facilitate both this and an *“increase [in] capacity within the groups of schools to achieve higher standards, providing:*
 - *improved teaching and learning*
 - *a structured way for schools to collaborate, learn from each other and share best practice*
 - *improved senior and middle management, joint appointment of staff and coherent training*
 - *joint staffing opportunities including Specialist Teachers and wider career opportunities across the federation*
 - *governance support and development*
 - *a cost-effective and coherent curriculum, increasing the opportunity to fulfil individual students’ needs, extending curriculum entitlement*
 - *models of good practice to improve teaching and learning and inclusion*
 - *cost effectiveness – economies of scale*
 - *a basis for further partnerships, including cross-phase and with other providers (eg. 14-19, community services etc).*
 - *saving on planning and administrative time*
 - *strategic planning, for example through the sharing of complementary specialisms” (DfES Federations website)*

- These do indeed form the agenda of the best collaboratives. Previous efforts to share good practice from school to school (beacon schools, ASTs etc) have had limited success. Some researchers, especially Reynolds, believe that, as within-school variation is much greater than between-school variation, attention would better be paid to the within-school level to bring about improvement. Collaboratives do seem to offer the opportunity to square this circle - to use the opportunities brought by partnership and reciprocity to address variations between subjects - but there is little evidence of this happening. There are some striking examples, such as the franchising of one school’s modern language teaching into the other schools in the Wigan support federation.

4. WHAT FACTORS PROMOTE SUCCESS IN FEDERATIONS?

Section 3.3 (seventh bullet) set out the conditions necessary for the success of all federations. To 'get ahead of the game' and help plan future federations to be effective, four other questions need answers:

4.1 What do successful support federations, especially their lead schools, do or have to make improvement happen, turning round struggling schools?

4.2 What school improvement model do support federations operate?

4.3 What is the role of the LEA?

4.2 What features of schools mark them out as having the potential to be effective lead schools within a support federation?

4.1 What do successful support federations, especially their lead schools, do or have to make improvement happen, turning round struggling schools?

4.1.1 **Pre-requisites and approach:** (for more detail, see Section 4.4, which translates this section into a set of identifiers for potential lead schools)

- They **deliver before they disseminate**: their credibility is based on secure, rapid, sustained improvement. Sustained high performance and continuous improvement, plus the building of a team (*vid inf*), shores up the lead school, ensuring that it does not suffer collateral damage while providing support to other schools.
- They exude **confidence** and build that quality in the partner school, partly because their methods have been successful in their own school, but mainly because they have a **clear programme for school improvement**, adapted in detail to the situation, but very similar in all partnerships, and set out in 4.2
- They acknowledge that there are **strengths in the partner school** - departments, individuals and functions - and deliberately set out to identify and grow them.
- Thus they acknowledge **reciprocity** in the partnership. Although the benefits are mainly in one direction, there are big **wins for the lead partner** too, especially the professional growth and development of its staff. This is turn

boosts staff retention, and a growing reputation for quality and opportunity improves recruitment. The strengths in the partner school may be superior to their equivalents in the lead school, and are used to bring about further improvement in the lead, and confidence in the partner, schools.

- In particular, they perceive that federation provides opportunity for the development of **new management roles** - associate headship, assistant head i/c teaching and learning across the federation - and thus an increase in capacity. One senior member of staff said that working across the federation had provided him/her with “near risk-free career development”. All lead schools say that the capacity of their staff to take on new roles within the federation exceeded their expectations, and they fulfil Hargreaves’ (2003) stricture that *“A primary function of the head is to ensure that as many as possible [of the staff] have been given leadership opportunities.”* The federation, by growing leaders, can make a major contribution to the recruitment of heads and other senior leaders to challenging schools, including academies (see section 5, issue G).
- Recognising these opportunities and converting them into reality requires **very strong headship** coupled with a **team approach**. Some interviewees found this near-paradox difficult to understand: that, without excellence in headship, the partnership never gets off the ground, but if s/he attempts to go it alone, we are back to the catastrophic Fresh Start/superhead days. Single-person strategies have limited impact and sometimes destabilise either or both partners. Collins (2001) compared continuously-improving companies with those which had not sustained improvement: *“larger-than-life, celebrity leaders who ride in from the outside are negatively correlated with taking a company from good to great”*.
- The paradox repeats in that all lead schools heads agreed that the job is too big for one person, but that the **personal presence** of the “captain on deck” is vital at key times and in key places, which they identify with great care.
- Far from developing a cult of personality, lead school heads **replace person with system**, thereby promoting reliability in both lead and partner school.

- They have very **acute understanding of finance**. They identify resources from different sources and make funding streams such as specialist school, Leading Edge, LIG, federation funding etc. work together, being creative and bending the rules slightly when it is helpful.

4.1.2 Preparatory phase

- A **mandate**, understood by the whole school community and accepted by its key players, to help bring about rapid and major change. The existence of a mandate helps overcome the issue raised by several researchers in different ways - that school improvement is technically straightforward but socially very complex.
- This is an arranged marriage, **brokered** in most cases by the LEA, sometimes DfES; it is not necessary that it is consensual - there are successful examples where the partner school was initially in denial and resisted the support - but progress is much more rapid if the partner school has accepted that it is in serious difficulty and has asked for help.
- The mandate exists in the form of **written contract and groundrules**; this, like the published action plan (4.1.3, third bullet) ensures openness and accountability.
- The lead partner is given the **power**, including £, to bring that change about. The rule is “the deeper the problem, the closer the association” - the more severe the problems of the partner school, the stronger the need for managerial control, rather than just advice or influence, by the lead school. Dysfunctional schools are effectively taken over by the lead school, which has decision-making, including financial, control. The association model, providing advice, is not as effective in such cases. Control can be reduced to support with a veto, and then to consultancy, as the competence of the partner school, especially its headteacher, grows.
- The mandate, the brokerage and the transfer of power and financial control require that the **governing bodies of both schools and the LEA be partners** in the process.

- In some cases, weakness in the partner school governing body requires that it be changed into an **Interim Executive Board**, with the LEA exerting its power to appoint additional governors.

4.1.3 Early days:

- They **confront the partner school with the realities of their situation**, challenging their myths of adequacy and uniqueness and facing them with truths about value added, similar schools' performance and the financial situation (a major deficit often "comes to light"; sometimes large reserves "come to light"), but offer solutions and a way forward as well.
- They bring a sense of **urgency and pace** - not merely a sense of speed, because they have an assured touch and clearly know what they are doing - and exude energy, ensuring a number of early successes in key areas such as student behaviour and management systems, and often some improvement to the physical environment.
- They begin with a short period (a week or two at most) of **situation analysis**, at the end of which they draw up and publish an **action plan**. Publishing ensures wide understanding and total **clarity about accountability**. Lead schools consider themselves accountable for the partner school's success, and relieve the partner school of many burdens, allowing them to concentrate on carrying out key changes reliably.
- They carry out an individual analysis of staff potential, leading to the quick and accurate **identification of 'blockers'** to change among the staff, and deal with them. The **increased pace** is too hot for some managers in the partner school and they go, releasing blockages without the need for more formal procedures.
- However, it is accepted that there may be **a small number of casualties**, and that this involves costs, which the LEA will pick up. The removal of a very few staff (and students) has a big impact on effectiveness - in no way is the partner school like a battlefield after the 'takeover'.

- They carry out the same procedure with students. Usually there is a very small number of **permanent exclusions**; sometimes this is avoided by facing these students and their parents with some hard realities about choices and consequences.
- The action plan and school improvement programme have three characteristics:
 - they go to the **heart of the root causes** of the problem, addressing head-on tough issues which have been ducked before, such as weak teachers, an overblown management team or a governing body which is full of friends rather than critics;
 - they have the **sharpest possible focus** on raising examination success, on teaching and learning as the major levers, and on order, system, consistency and an appropriate curriculum as the pre-requisites;
 - as well as doing things, they involve stopping doing things - such as teaching some parts of the National Curriculum totally unsuccessfully.
- They designate a **small support team** to be attached full time to the partner school, matched to its need, for a period of three to six months. The team is designed to have a mix of skills, and is likely to include a manager (as opposed to leader) to bring system and order to management and finance, and at least one middle leader.
- In the early days of the action plan, they **invade and saturate the partner school** to bring about the rapid, secure changes described.
- The early successes and obvious improvements create tangible benefits in the partner school, and a sense that things can be changed, that we can make a difference; this **empowers** its people.
- They **professionalise the partner school**, by such means as a written code of practice for staff, ensuring staff wear badges, that school signs are professional etc.

4.1.4 Development phase:

- The increase in their own capacity means that the best lead schools can deploy a **help team matched precisely to need**: one lead school has fifteen ASTs. The attached team (4.1.3, eighth bullet) changes over time.
- They **pair middle leaders** in the two schools for **coaching**, ensuring that leadership roles can be seen to be for the many, not just the few.
- They understand that, although the quick hits are vital to build morale, sustainable improvement takes three to five years to secure, and so are there for the **long haul**.
- If this is not to be a permanent arrangement, they plan for and manage the **exit strategy**, so that there is a planned withdrawal, not an abrupt abandonment.

4.2 The support federation school improvement model

4.2.1 The model adopted by lead schools reflects the researched characteristics of both **ineffective schools** and **rapidly improving schools**. The research into ineffective schools is summarised in a DfES publication (Reynolds, Hopkins and Potter, 2001); a brief summary is provided as an Appendix.

4.2.2 The factors promoting school improvement were researched by Gray, Hopkins, Reynolds et al (1999), who established a set of four strong correlates with sustained, rapid improvement:

- extensive tactics for grade enhancement, endeavouring to get the very best results out of students by e.g. identifying and mentoring borderline candidates, careful selection of exam syllabuses and tiering of papers; we would now add revision classes, homework clubs, summer schools ...
- writing school-based policies for teaching and learning
- using those policies to intervene in teaching and learning: monitoring, addressing weaknesses, sharing practice including buddying stronger with weaker, innovating ...
- giving responsibility to pupils, both the management of their own learning and seeking out and making use of the student voice.

These principles can be detected in the model outlined below.

4.2.3 One major problem in traditional school improvement programmes is getting a school moving - how to start to move schools which are historically ineffective (Stoll and Barber, 1996). The invasion/saturation model overcomes this critical problem.

4.2.4 The key to the school improvement model is consistent implementation of a few, influential systems, according very closely to the principles of high reliability schools (see bibliography, HRS website):

- intolerance of system failure
- a small number of clear goals, understood by all; a strong sense of primary mission
- consistent application of standard operating procedures (SOPs), in systems, teaching and behaviour management
- a culture of monitoring against SOPs, including peer monitoring
- extensive training and retraining; very careful recruitment

- data richness: use of data, especially pupil performance data, to guide decision-making
- early identification and tackling of issues, preventing cascading error
- simultaneous top-down and bottom-up leadership
- close attention to the quality of resources and the learning environment.

4.2.5 The model has other strengths which accord with research:

- It reconciles fidelity with flexibility by **co-constructing** the detail with the partner school to match its precise needs.
- The model **simultaneously engages the school level (management) and the classroom level (teacher)** (Hopkins and Harris 1997); without significant investment in resources and in training of teachers to teach to an agreed teaching model using a limited repertoire of styles, improvement will not be brought about - but unless effective management has already been secured, all such investment is wasted;
- Since the purpose is to help schools become self-improving, self-managing organisations, the underlying purpose is **capacity building** - such as through strategic planning and professional development.

4.2.6 The **components of the programme are:**

They focus immediate action - on the first day of the federation or even before it starts - simultaneously on four key levers for improvement:

Behaviour and its management: they bring order to the corridors and classrooms through a clear code, consistently applied; this often results in a small number of permanent exclusions.

Management: they change management structures immediately, often resulting in some redundancies, and bring in simple systems for line management and accountability, and procedures to be followed, into situations which are Byzantine on paper and non-existent in reality.

Curriculum: they introduce a more relevant curriculum, suspending courses which are unsuccessful (helping staff restructuring) and introducing multi-GCSE vocational courses. This begins on day 1: they don't write off Year 11

and start with younger groups, they change the curriculum for the current Y10 and 11 mid-year and those students achieve better results than expected.

Teaching & Learning: in sequence, they:

- use pupil performance data and lesson monitoring records - or carry out a programme of monitoring of all staff for the first time - to identify and address weak teachers and managers: a small number leave and support programmes are introduced for others
- focus in the early days on consistent lesson routines (planners out, lesson objectives on the board, starters, plenaries) and prompt starts and finishes to lessons
- introduce tactics for grade enhancement - revision clubs, mentoring of borderline candidates, coursework guides - with current Y10 and 11
- begin a longer-term discourse about teaching and learning quality, with extensive staff development programmes

They may well also do something about the **learning environment**, using small amounts of capital funding to improve classrooms etc.

4.2.7 Thus, through quick wins within a longer-term strategy, they bring order and system, begin to restore the confidence of all, including parents, and to build a culture of success and empowerment: things do not have to be this way - we can change them.

4.2.8 The stages of recovery are described by Stark (in Stoll and Myers, 1998) as:

- *acknowledge failure, face up to problems, preparing action plan which is aimed at regaining commitment as well as re-establishing basic competence [3 months]*
- *implement action plan: restore leadership, re-establish sound management, improve teaching and learning [18 months], within which period morale and self-esteem re-established by early success with e.g. environment, behaviour*
- *“progress towards excellence”.*

Support federations do this job in a shorter time.

4.3 The role of the LEA

- 4.3.1 Some of the best projects retain the LEA as full partner.
- 4.3.2 Brokerage and matchmaking: involves knowledge of the capacities of both parties.
- 4.3.3 A part of the brokerage role particular to the LEA lies with governors and elected members, especially those who are both. This may involve making adjustments to the governing body, appointing additional governors and/or turning it into an IEB.
- 4.3.4 Recognising that it is a valuable partner with clear roles but can't do it alone, because in most cases it does not have a combination of the saturation capacity, the skills and the credibility; it is unavoidably associated, however justly, with the present state of the partner school and accused of having ducked tough decisions in the past.
- 4.3.5 Releasing resources of all kinds, especially through its HR department to fund redundancies.
- 4.3.6 Beginning to deliver funding through federations rather than through individual schools.
- 4.3.7 Providing resources matched to need, as determined by the partnership and especially by the lead school. Recognising that federations and collaboratives, just like single schools, need differential intervention and support.
- 4.3.8 Providing ongoing critical friendship and support.

4.4 Identifiers of lead schools: characteristics that identify the potential to act as a lead school in a support federation

4.4.1 The Gray, Hopkins, Reynolds et al (1999) study concludes that sustained improvement requires strategic action simultaneous with tactical - that grade enhancement tactics are necessary but not sufficient - and it sounded an ominous warning *“it would seem unwise to rely too heavily on approaches to change which assume that such a capacity [for sustained improvement] is widely in place”*⁹. Their findings suggest that only a very small proportion of secondary schools (less than 5% and probably no more than 2%) have the full understanding of improvement that this suggests.

4.4.2 Leading edge schools have demonstrated by meeting transparent criteria that they are capable of determining the support they need and what they can give to other schools. The criteria are too broad however, including schools with excellence in some functions; there are shortly to be over 200 and maybe more. This group, 6% of the total number of schools and possibly to become 8 or 9%, greatly exceeds the Gray, Hopkins and Reynolds threshold, and contains schools which do not have vital capacities to lead others.

4.4.3 Lead schools should be chosen from **within the Leading Edge group**, ensuring, under the proposed OfSTED four-point scale, classification as an “outstanding” school. The OfSTED report should also rate management/ leadership as outstanding, with particular strengths in self-evaluation, planning and implementation. This ensures that the strength of leadership is dispersed, not just held by the head or SMT. The school should also have A* or A grade value added over a period, say three years.

4.4.4 **Longevity of successful headship:** a striking feature of the lead schools interviewed, and of other outstanding schools in the author’s experience, is that their heads have been in place for eight years plus. This brings continuity of vision and an eye for detail, meaning a thousand small steps in the same direction, leading to big breakthroughs. Jim Collins (2001), analysing businesses which have gone “from good to great” (carefully defined), showed that their take-off was not attributable to any one action or person, but to the cumulative effect of the myriad changes they had made in previous years. He likens this to the energy needed to turn a large flywheel.

- 4.4.5A tradition of **teamworking in projects and plans**; in particular, a senior management team which has strengths both in management and leadership, strategic and operational fields - strengths in systems and procedures as well as vision.
- 4.4.6As a result of the team culture, heads who see their **success in the success of others**.
- 4.4.7School leaders who **critically understand the processes of school improvement**: they have not just have brought about improvement, but are able to deconstruction the key features for replicability. What was critical to making it work? What was peripheral? What therefore must we transplant?
- 4.4.8A school in which **evaluation is embedded at all levels**, and in which middle managers have as clear understanding of evaluation, planning and improvement as those in the leadership group.
- 4.4.9School leaders who **know who delivers** in school, and in what settings: they have sophisticated review procedures to ensure optimal deployment of staff. Who gets the best out of top sets and C/D borderline sets? Who runs the best departmental meetings? Who observes lessons with the keenest eye and feeds back to the greatest purpose?
- 4.4.10 A headteacher who has considerable **intelligence about strategic issues in the locality** - it was remarkable the degree to which the best lead school heads interviewed could all talk from detailed knowledge about educational achievement in the area/LEA, about other strategic issues concerning, for example, housing, health and social services, and how these impinge on the education service. This is not just a matter of breadth of interest, but of what Michael Fullan (2003) calls "moral purpose" in leadership - one of his hallmarks of quality leadership in a culture of change: *"In addition to the goal of making a difference in the lives of students ... moral purpose means acting with the intention of making a difference in the (social) environment....school principals have to be almost as concerned about the success of other schools in the district as they are about their own schoolbecause sustained improvement of schools is not possible unless the whole system is moving*

forward. This commitment to the social environment is what the best principals must have" (my underlining)

- 4.4.12 School leaders have considerable **business acumen**, with acute knowledge of funding streams and how to make them work together, with the ability and willingness to bend the rules slightly.
- 4.4.13 They maintain the vision and ethos by internal promotion, and thus **build a recognisable brand**, such as Ninestiles, ULT, 3Es, Vardy ...
- 4.4.14 They have a belief in **immediacy** and a bias for **action**, and can balance this with analytical skills; they have a sense that things can be done. They are decisive and up the pace.
- 4.4.15 They show great **honesty**: a tradition of openness is important in bringing the partner school to an understanding of the situation facing it.
- 4.4.16 Unlike failing schools, which are insular, believing that they are unique and that no-one else understands their unique difficulties, potential lead schools are **networkers and magpies**, pinching ideas and making them harmonious with their school's own ethos.
- 4.4.17 They are **tight on values, loose on freedom to act**.
- 4.4.18 Unlike the partner school, the lead school has real **expertise in exam requirements**, how to maximise grades, what distinguishes a grade A/A* or level 7+ piece of work. They know their own curriculum inside out, and how to get the maximum out of students using it.
- 4.4.19 It is interesting to note how closely these attributes correspond with the findings of other studies. In their study of schools which succeeded "against the odds" in improving against a background of significant pupil and community disadvantage, Maden and Hillman (1996) found the following shared characteristics:
- a leadership stance which embodies (in its leadership team) and builds a team approach

- a vision of success couched in academic terms and including a view of how to improve
- careful use of targets
- improvement of the physical environment
- common expectations about behaviour and success
- investment in good relations with parents and the community.

5 KEY ISSUES

- A The need for a common language to describe federations and their members.
- B The excessive number of bodies involved in partnering - EIC, EAZ, LIG, Specialist Schools Trust, NCSL, LEA, Leading Edge consortium. Likewise, there are too many sources of good ideas, and yet no clear and authoritative strategic oversight of weak schools, nor overview of the need for intervention and the scope to deliver it in the secondary sector. The logical extension of a belief in lead schools is a secondary school improvement agency, run by the 50 or so best secondary heads in the country in partnership with DfES, subsuming the other organisations.
- C How to ensure that collaboratives address weaknesses as well as development needs.
- D The need to develop a graph to show improvement (change in average GCSE points/pupil) against input (£) in unit time, and thus to identify an expected band of improvement per cost input. Not all federations currently state their full costs, omitting e.g. cost of redundancies, staff time etc.
- E Self-determined collaboratives and brokered support federations both work; groups of pressed men and women - fat boys in the playground who don't get picked for other people's teams - predictably form weak collaboratives and pose a threat to any DfES view of universal partnership.
- F Payment to the lead school should include an element for intellectual property, not just for reimbursement of teacher time, transport and subsistence, encouraging investment in the capacity of the lead partner. Collaboratives are predicated on free exchange, but the lead partner in a support federation should be paid for its intellectual property.
- G Linked to E, the need for clarity about what federations are to be or become - geographical, pyramid, mandated ...If they are to be learning networks, these are *“not ‘clusters’, which simply connote geographical proximity, nor ‘groups’, which suggest an almost accidental agglomeration of disparate institutions. Rather they are seen as being overtly associated with each other in forms of connection and*

relationship that are deliberately established and worked upon in the pursuit of a commonality of interests, concerns and goals” (Chapman and Aspin, 2003), which does not square with the idea of compulsion.

- H. By developing leadership potential at all levels, federation is a major strategy in the recruitment of senior leaders to challenging schools, including academies. Finding heads for 200 academies and for other challenging/below floor target schools has to be a major concern; federation can make a contribution.
- I There are problems in setting up federations where there are communities of weak schools, such as in some urban unitaries; cross-border federation can be done, as it is in Southend and Essex, but requires careful brokerage.
- J There are counter-cultural forces to be addressed: single-school issues such as admissions and accountability in league tables and in OfSTED inspection.

Appendix :

CHARACTERISTICS OF INEFFECTIVE SCHOOLS: FINDINGS FROM THE LITERATURE

Extracted from Reynolds, Hopkins, Potter and Chapman, 2001

At whole-school, including leadership, level:

- lack of the competences needed to improve
- unwillingness to accept evidence of failure
- blaming others - pupils, parents, LEA ...
- fear of change and of outsiders who embody it; belief that change is for other people
- controlled by change rather than in control of it
- dysfunctional relationships, with cliques
- goals are not plausible or relevant
- lack of academic focus; principals who take no interest in curriculum and attainment
- passive about recruitment and training
- school does not build longitudinal databases on pupils' progress - not outcomes-oriented
- valid improvement strategies are adopted but not carried through
- governing body may be passive, lack knowledge or have factions (may be political or ethnic).

At classroom level:

- timetable not an accurate guide to academic time usage
- inconsistency, including some high-quality teaching
- low expectations
- emphasis on supervision and routines
- low levels of teacher:pupil interaction about the work
- pupils perceive teachers as not caring, praising etc.
- high noise levels and lots of non-work-related movement
- lots of negative feedback from teachers

Problems may be mutually reinforcing: since the agencies of effective change are synergistic, so is their absence. The scale and intractability of problems in the long-term, serious difficulty school cannot be ignored; these schools may have:

- lost public support

- been vilified in the press
- suffered multiple staff changes, including at SMT level
- “enjoyed” false dawns
- lost numbers and therefore have had to take other schools’ excludees
- a very challenging pupil population, with extremely high SEN demands of all kinds
- huge budget problems
- a community of extreme poverty and deprivation
- a migrant population, many of whom have low literacy and/or EAL issues
- a significant number of “ghost” pupils who take up excessive amounts of time and who depress exam and attendance statistics
- a history of factionalisation and industrial unrest
- a crumbling physical environment.

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