**Research Report
No 188**

DfEE

*Causing Concern but Improving:
A Review of Schools' Experiences*

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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1. INTRODUCTION

When people talk about school 'failure' they usually attribute it to one of several causes: a lack of will or effort on the part of those most closely involved; a lack of appropriate personnel equipped with the skills needed to bring about recovery; a lack of resources; or a lack of knowledge about what to do. This review is mainly concerned to contribute to the last of these issues. It brings together evidence from a variety of different sources (research studies on school effectiveness and improvement, Ofsted reports and overviews, the DfEE Standards web-site, case studies of individual schools, schools' own accounts of the changes they have initiated and media contributions) with four purposes in mind:

1) to outline some of the challenges and difficulties facing schools 'causing concern';
2) to describe some of their common experiences;
3) to piece together some of the problems they encountered in seeking to improve; and
4) to establish some of the ways in which they have successfully overcome them.

The review is distilled from experiences across a range of institutions: primary, secondary and special schools; large schools and small schools; schools in inner cities, in rural areas and with a sprinkling from more advantaged communities; schools which have 'caused concern' for a long time; and so on.

Each, of course, has had a different starting point; all have had some unique experiences.[1] A review will fail to give adequate expression to the diversity. Furthermore, given the range, the idea that there could be some common 'blueprint' for improvement across all of them seems improbable.[2] Regrettably, not all of them have significantly improved; they too have contributions to make to the knowledge-base although to date rather less about them has been entered into the public domain.

What all these schools have shared in common is the experience of being put under enormous pressure to raise their standards and improve quickly; indeed, the vast majority have participated in the government's Special Measures programme. It would be disingenuous to pretend that this policy has not engendered strong views and feelings - both for and against. Indeed, virtually every school which has been told it is 'failing' seems to have something to say on the topic. Such concerns are not ignored in what follows but they do not form a central focus; nor do questions about alternative strategies for raising educational standards in disadvantaged areas.[3]

The driving questions addressed in this review have been about schools' experiences as both they and others have reported them. What were the problems? What did they do? What were some of the common factors influencing or inhibiting improvement? And what advice could they pass on to other schools finding themselves in similar positions?

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[1] For some examples see Mortimore (1996) and the contributions to Part 3 of Stoll and Myers (1998).
[2] For fuller reviews (and critiques) of the search for the sources of school effectiveness (and latterly school improvement) see Silver (1994), Gray *et al* (1996), Stoll and Fink (1996), Reynolds and Teddlie (1999) and Slee *et al* (1998).
[3] For fuller discussions see, for example, the contributions to Barber and Dann (1996) and Kovacs (1998).

2. SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF SCHOOLS IN SPECIAL MEASURES

By the Summer of 1999 some 900 schools had been placed in Special Measures. This total included around 3% of secondary schools, about 3% of primary schools, 8% of special schools and 6% of Pupil Referral Units (PRUs)(Ofsted, 1999:54). For every secondary school placed in Special Measures there have been four or five primaries. The build-up in numbers during 1997/98 and 1998/99 has been matched by a substantial increase in the numbers of schools coming off Special Measures. By the end of 1998/99 somewhere in the region of 400 schools had emerged from Special Measures .

The 1999 annual report from Ofsted's Chief Inspector suggests that the number of primary and secondary schools has been rising; indeed, during the year 1997/98 some 4% of secondary schools inspected were made subject to Special Measures. Ofsted identifies two contributory reasons for this trend. First, and in relation to primary schools, 1997/98 was the last year of Ofsted's initial cycle of inspections. In a number of cases schools had had their inspections delayed, sometimes because of 'particular internal difficulties' the full nature of which had eventually come to light during the inspection. Second, in relation to secondary schools, just under half (40%) of those being placed in Special Measures were there because 'national indicators and previous inspection reports had shown them to be weak' (Ofsted , 1999a: 54). 'These were schools which had made little or no improvement since the first inspection or in which (inspectors judged) the quality of education to have deteriorated'.

Progress in Coming Off Special Measures

The two main thrusts of the Special Measures programme are that schools should turn themselves round and that they should do so fairly promptly. A two-year window is offered for this to happen. The limitations of existing data, however, make it difficult to say precisely what proportion of schools meet both these targets. Given that schools are constantly being put into Special Measures and subsequently removed from them, the picture is blurred whenever any particular 'snapshot' is taken.

By November 1998, for example, 760 schools had been placed in Special Measures since the introduction of the programme five years previously. Of this total 7% (just over 50 schools) had been closed and 22% had successfully emerged from Special Measures. In broad terms this would suggest that for every school that doesn't make it some three do. However, whether this interpretation holds depends crucially on the prognosis for the remaining 71% of schools which were still failing at the time the picture was taken.

After a school has been placed in Special Measures and produced its action plan a team of HMI make the first of several monitoring visits. The main purpose of these visits is to assess the school's progress. The data suggest about one-in-five schools were judged to be making 'good' progress at the time of the last visit whilst a similar proportion were making only 'limited' progress; in the remaining three-out-of-five schools HMI judged that progress was 'reasonable'. Table 1 links these judgements with the periods of time schools had already spent in Special Measures.

It is clear from Table 1 that the prognosis for two-thirds of schools (67%) is, in HMI's view, fairly good (cells 1, 2, 4 and 5). The evidence from their monitoring visits indicates that these schools were making 'good' or 'reasonable' progress within the two-year time-frame. For most of the remaining third the picture was less clear although potentially optimistic - progress to date had been 'good/reasonable' even though the two-year period had expired (cells 7 and 8) or, where progress was more 'limited' it was too early to make a firm prediction (cells 3 and 6).

In the case of 3% of the schools in the 'still failing' group, however, HMI judged that only 'limited' progress had been made *and* that they had been in this position for more than two years (cell 9). If it is assumed that the future of all the schools in this last category is in doubt, then the expected number of schools in Special Measures that *might, at some point or other, be closed* rises. Taking into account schools which had already closed, some nine-out-of-ten schools (91%) could eventually be expected to emerge successfully from Special Measures.

Table 1: HMI's Prognosis for Schools Still in Special Measures

Time in Special Measures		HMI Judgement of Progress		Total
	'Good'	**'Reasonable'**	**'Limited'**	
under 1 year	(1) 3	(2) 21	(3) 8	32%
1 to 2 years	(4) 14	(5) 29	(6) 8	51%
over 2 years	(7) 3	(8) 10	(9) 3	16%
Total	20%	60%	19%	100% (322)

Source: DfEE internal analysis.

Table 1 suggests that roughly one-in-six schools had been in the Special Measures group for more than two years (cells 7, 8 and 9). Detailed analysis indicates that different types of school have required different amounts of time to improve. For example, the typical primary school and the typical special school have come off Special Measures in between 20 and 22 months; in the case of secondary schools the average has been higher at around 27 months (table not shown).

All three figures, however, mask considerable variations within types. Small numbers of schools in Special Measures seem to have recovered in around a year; in others slow but steady progress towards the removal of Special Measures was still being made some three years after first entering the programme. Schools serving areas experiencing very high levels of social deprivation took longer than average to come through; primary schools in these communities have taken about four months longer than the average whilst secondaries have taken five. Larger primary and secondary schools have also required two or three months more to come up to the mark.

Whilst this review concentrates largely on schools needing Special Measures it also refers, at times, to a further group of schools considered by Ofsted's inspectors to have 'serious weaknesses' (Ofsted, 1999a). The size of this group is considerably larger - some 12-13% of schools have been judged to be in this position. In general, less is known about the circumstances of these 'ineffective' schools. However, insofar as their experiences are relevant to the recovery process, they feature as part of the evidence base.

Context and Location

The most obvious contextual characteristic shared by schools in Special Measures is that they tend to be located in areas experiencing high levels of social deprivation. As an early Ofsted analysis, reported by the DfEE, put it: 'schools drawing their pupils from the least favoured socio-economic groups account for only 17% of schools throughout the country but the same data indicate that over two thirds of failing schools belong to this group' (DfEE, 1996: 2).

Subsequent Ofsted analyses have continued to underline what the DfEE referred to as 'the clear link between socio-economic deprivation and the likelihood that a school will be found failing' (DfEE, 1996: 2). For example, the 1999 annual report of the Chief Inspector states that 'just over one third of (primary schools) have intakes with high levels of disadvantage in and around large cities' and that 'about half the secondary schools subject to Special Measures have intakes with high levels of disadvantage' (Ofsted, 1999a: 54).

Both assessments are reinforced by the evidence in Table 2 which compares the presence of poverty (as measured by entitlement to free school meals) in schools in Special Measures with other schools. It is clear from the table that secondary schools in Special Measures have more than twice as many pupils on free school meals as the national average.

Table 2: Incidence of Special Measures and Levels of Free School Meals

	% of Pupils Eligible to Receive Free School Meals	
Type of School	**National Average**	**Schools in Special Measures**
Primary	23%	37%
Secondary	18%	41%

Source: DfEE internal analysis.

Whilst schools serving severely disadvantaged areas are over-represented amongst schools in the programme, Ofsted points out that 'primary schools subject to Special Measures continue to differ in size, type and socio-economic circumstances' (Ofsted, 1999a: 54). Small primary schools and, in particular, small primary schools in rural areas,

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are also present in larger than expected numbers. Problems specifically associated with their size seem to make them more vulnerable. Secondary schools in Special Measures are similarly varied but the range is more restricted; hardly any could be described as serving socially advantaged areas. Boys' only schools serving inner city communities, smaller schools and schools with falling rolls are also over-represented in the secondary group.

As with primary and secondary schools, the incidence of social deprivation in special schools in Special Measures is well above the national average. What is particularly striking about these schools, however, is the extent to which they provide for 'pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties and cover at least three key stages'. This was the case for almost half the special schools placed in the programme during 1997/98 (Ofsted, 1999a: 54). Schools which had recruited SEN pupils with a wide range of disabilities from their localities also appear to have been particularly prone to difficulties.

Most LEAs have (or have had) at least one failing school. However, there are undoubtedly some regional variations in the incidence of schools entering into Special Measures. As an early DfEE (1996: 2) analysis concluded: 'Failing secondary schools are concentrated in urban areas, particularly London and the major conurbations of the Midlands and the North. The primary schools are more geographically dispersed: the majority are, again, in the inner cities but there is a fair scattering in county towns and suburbs and a substantial number are small, isolated country schools'.

Common Problems Facing Schools in Special Measures

Schools in Special Measures face many problems. The criteria which Ofsted employs to judge schools' performance, however, delineate a core set of concerns[4]. The application of their inspection framework focuses particular attention on three features of failing schools which emerge 'consistently' across cases (Ofsted, 1997a: 8). These are:

- the under-achievement and low levels of attainment of the pupils;
- a high proportion of unsatisfactory teaching; and
- ineffective leadership.

Every school in Special Measures is required to draw up an action plan and, not surprisingly, strategies to address the three concerns outlined above feature prominently in them. A more detailed review of schools' action plans, however, suggests that schools in Special Measures embark (and need to embark) on a broader agenda.

Table 3 is based on an analysis of the keywords featuring most frequently in the action plans of schools in Special Measures. It shows that issues to do with the curriculum and the quality of teaching featured in the plans of the greater majority of schools in Special Measures, that some aspect of management (including leadership) was an issue in about half of them and that in somewhat less than half there were concerns about assessment. Interestingly, issues to do with pupils' overall attainment levels were *explicitly* mentioned

[4] Inspectors reaching the conclusion that a school should be recommended for Special Measures are expected to answer over 20 questions which are outlined in Annex 1 of the Inspection *Framework.* Any school recommended for Special Measures is then subsequently visited by a team of HMI who decide whether to confirm this recommendation.

in less than half the plans although clearly most of their thrust will have been in this general direction.

Table 3: Issues Identified by Inspectors as Needing to be Tackled (a) Whilst School on Special Measures and (b) After School has Come Off Special Measures

Issues Identified	Proportion of Schools Where Issue at 1st Inspection	Proportion of Schools Where Still Issue at 2nd Inspection
Curriculum	greater majority	less than half
Teaching	greater majority	majority
Management	about half	well under half
Pupil Attainment	less than half	about half
Assessment	less than half	less than half

Source: DfEE internal analysis based on the major issues addressed in schools' subsequent action plans.

A keywords analysis can provide only the most rudimentary of insights into the problems facing schools in Special Measures although the recurrence of certain themes is interesting. There were some variations from these general patterns when the type of school is taken into account (table not shown). At the time of the first inspection curriculum issues were less prominent in secondary schools and teaching was more of an issue in primary schools. By the second inspection, however, concerns about teaching had become more salient in secondary schools whilst monitoring had emerged in primaries. Curriculum issues had also become more prominent in special schools.

3. A QUESTION OF CULTURE?

There is one thing on which most researchers and commentators are agreed - schools in trouble have had troubled histories. In a brief but instructive intervention into the debates David Hargreaves has expressed concern that: 'there is too much emphasis on the symptoms of failure and too little understanding of its pathology' (quoted in Stoll and Myers: 1998: 6).

A number of commentators and researchers see the core problem facing failing schools as one of 'culture'. When teachers talk about 'the way we do things around here' they are referring to the school's culture. In a pioneering study of organisational cultures Schein refers to the 'deeper level of basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by members of an organisation, that operate unconsciously, and that define in a basic taken-for-granted fashion an organisation's view of itself and its environment' (Schein: 1985: 6).[5] As Louise Stoll (1998: 1) has argued, these elements are 'situationally unique' and are 'what makes (culture) so hard to grasp and to change'. Teachers in ostensibly similar schools can see things very differently.

Hargreaves (1995) outlines four different types of school culture and explores some of their consequences for school improvement. These 'types' are defined in terms of two key components: the need for social control over pupils and teachers (the instrumental dimension) and the need for social cohesion (the expressive dimension). Of course, few schools are at the extremes of either of these dimensions, but where a school is 'exceptionally weak' on both it can face serious problems. For Hargreaves the failing school is a clear case of the 'anomic' institution:

> "For both teachers and students the school is close to breakdown - a classic 'at risk' situation. This is a 'survivalist' culture. Social relations are poor, teachers are striving to maintain basic control and allowing pupils to avoid academic work in exchange for not engaging in misconduct. Lessons move at a leisurely pace; little time is given to academic tasks. Teachers feel 'on their own', unsupported by the (head) and colleagues in curriculum planning and classroom control. They manage each lesson as best they can. Life is lived a day at a time. Many students feel alienated from their work which bores them, but there are no compensations in warm relationships with their teachers who enjoy little professional satisfaction. Delinquency and truancy rates are high as is staff absenteeism, especially of the occasional kind. The ethos is one of insecurity, hopelessness and low morale (Hargreaves, 1995: 28).

The issue of relationships features prominently in other accounts as well. David Reynolds, for example, argues that 'poor relationships' and 'low levels of staff competency' interact. Such schools, he maintains, are:

> "...likely to be missing the prior competencies that are needed to do precisely the kinds of things that we tell them they have to do to become more effective (like development planning). They may be thoroughly non-rational institutions, where all sorts of delusions may flourish.

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[5] Quoted in Stoll (1998).

> There may well be in these schools various pathologies - there may be a fear of
> outsiders which is likely to be masked by strong defences, both personal and
> group-based. There may be a reluctance to risk change, not because the school
> doesn't need it (which is the reason ineffective teachers will give) but actually
> because of the fear that the change will be unsuccessful and further hurt teachers
> who have, in reality, low self-esteem. The ineffective school may also have inside
> itself 'multiple schools' formed around cliques and friendship groups, cliques that
> act to reflect and in turn mould differences in competence. There will be none of
> the organisational, social, cultural and symbolic 'tightness' of the effective
> school" (Reynolds, 1995: 67).

This kind of analysis has lead Reynolds (1996 and 1998) to argue that 'ineffective'
schools may need to be rebuilt, possibly from the ground up. Stringfield (1999) refers to
the 'chaos of factors' underpinning even the most 'exemplary' of schools. Drawing on
work from other fields (notably engineering), they argue for the creation of the 'highly
reliable' organisation - the school which is primarily oriented towards the elimination of
failure. It is a conceptualisation of the educational process which is simultaneously
powerful *and* emotive. Some schools might find it a useful template; others will want to
reject it as too mechanistic, opting instead for a more organic approach to the change
process.

In their pioneering study *Improving the Urban High School*, Louis and Miles (1992)
argue that some schools had developed 'improvement cultures' whilst others had not or
were only in the early stages of doing so. What differentiated those which managed to
improve from those which didn't was the way they handled problems and their 'coping'
strategy - a cultural characteristic. Less successful schools were into 'shallow' coping -
'doing nothing, procrastinating, doing it the usual way, easing off, increasing pressure'
and so on. More successful schools, by contrast, had acquired what Louis and Miles term
'deep' coping strategies. They were interested in the reasons why things were as they
were and were prepared to change them; consequently the initiatives they launched were
often substantial. They were also prepared to restaff and retrain where necessary and, on
occasion, go back to the drawing board. The challenge for failing schools is to find ways
of moving from the 'shallower 'to the 'deeper' strategies.

Different Types of 'Failure'

Whilst acknowledging that failing schools may have many of the characteristics outlined
above, Kate Myers prefers a more differentiated picture (Myers, 1998: 179). Based on her
own experiences of working with schools in difficulties, she suggests that there are at
least three types:

> "striving schools are those that are in trouble but determined to change and
> improve. Although the head and staff know there are serious problems to address,
> they do not accept a simple definition of their future. There was a great
> determination to 'prove our accusers (the inspectors) wrong'. The fact that the
> vast majority of the staff worked with the head to demonstrate that the judgement
> was wrong proved to be very significant for the schools' subsequent

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improvement. The head exercised strong leadership and the staff *allowed* her to do so".

This kind of school does not fit neatly into some prevailing views about failing schools. It may already have in place some of the characteristics schools in this situation need to develop in order to improve. Myers' other two categories match stereotypes more closely:

"swaying schools are ones where, for a while, it may be touch and go whether the school will survive, let alone improve, in the face of their difficulties. Within a two-year period there was considerable staff turnover including the head and the deputy head.....Staff morale wavered. On occasions staff appeared organised and enthusiastic but at other times they were demoralised and dejected. In the end, 'under new management' and with additional support, the school started to improve".

So-called 'sliding' schools are the third type in Myers' typology. It is this group that comes closest to the 'ideal types' Hargreaves and Reynolds portray. They are:

"...(schools) that seem to have become fixed in a never-ending downward spiral....This school experienced considerable staff turnover including most of the SMT. A number of initiatives were mounted to counter high student disaffection and improve student behaviour but these were rarely carried through because staff were constantly 'firefighting' in response to immediate problems. The cumulative effect of these problems was that the staff became increasingly cynical about whether new initiatives could have any impact. As each initiative failed to deliver an improvement in student behaviour it became more difficult for the staff and students to believe that anything could work. In addition, there were serious relationship problems amongst the SMT and dysfunctional relations were also apparent amongst other staff".

In short, low staff morale could lead to 'resistance' to change simply because stability was more reassuring and may, indeed, in certain circumstances, have seemed necessary for 'personal survival'.

Michael Barber is another commentator who points to the different circumstances of different schools. In his Greenwich lecture he divided them into those which are 'struggling' (a much larger group than is conventionally considered) and those which are actually 'failing' (Barber, 1995). Myers does not suggest that her typology of failing schools is the only one that could be adopted but its existence alerts us to the need to think carefully about the circumstances of individual schools and the kinds of improvement strategies they might require. Louise Stoll (1996) has recently added a fourth type to the list: the 'cruising' school. This type is some distance from the other stereotypes (Stoll and Fink, 1996: 32). The 'cruising' school is perceived as 'effective or at least more than satisfactory by teachers and the school's community' until the inspectors tell a different story:

"It has a carefully constructed camouflage. Whilst it appears to possess many of the qualities of an effective school, it is usually located in a more affluent area

where pupils achieve in spite of teaching quality. League tables and other ratings based on absolute achievement rather than value-added often give the appearance of effectiveness.........It is generally unsuitable for the less academically involved pupils and unchallenging for the more able. It also contributes little to goals of social justice for 'at risk' pupils (Stoll and Fink, 1998: 193).

External Influences and Constraints

The balance between internal cultural features and external influences and constraints, as well as the ways in which these interact, has received little attention in most accounts of school improvement. Stoll and Fink argue that an 'ineffective' school:

> " could be viewed as one that is controlled by change rather than controlling it; that lacks appropriate conditions and strategies; is not pupil-outcome oriented; and, for whatever reason, does not attempt to improve. Such a school tends to be locked into crisis planning and makes little attempt to build the capacity to respond to increasingly complex and unpredictable societal changes" (1998: 191).

But what accounts for schools getting into this position? Martin Thrupp (1999) argues that improvement researchers have either ignored or given too little emphasis to the constraints imposed by a school's 'social mix' which, he suggests, is the crucial element which defines and holds a school's culture in place. But whilst such factors may go some way towards explaining a school's position at or near the bottom of the rankings, how is it that some schools get into this position and others don't?

In a recent study Gray and colleagues (1999) have argued that more attention should be paid to a school's 'natural history'. They show how poorly-performing schools had a number of 'ghosts' and 'legacies' in their recent pasts which interacted with community characteristics. They write:

> "...all experienced significant changes in the composition of their catchment areas, problems with their local communities, difficulties in managing falling pupil numbers, budget restraints and the threat of closure. In addition they have been characterised by low staff morale, general developmental apathy and low levels of pupil performance.... Improvement from such a baseline represented a formidable challenge. The total quantum of staff energy for change was, of course, finite and much of it was consumed in attempting to keep the schools functioning on a day-to-day basis as viable institutions. Much of whatever energies were available for change had to be focused *within* the schools. Of comparable importance, however, was the restoration and maintenance of support and regard from their communities and, in particular, their parent bodies" (Gray *et al*, 1999: 73).

Hitherto researchers have tended to give primacy to the cultures of 'ineffective' schools whereas inspectors and policy-makers have emphasised the specifics of what needs to be tackled to get schools back on track. The former seem to assume that if the general conditions for change and improvement can be generated, particular strategies for addressing specific tasks will follow in their wake; the latter that by focusing on particular concerns a more general orientation or responsiveness towards improvement issues will be engendered. In practice, of course, most change makers try to bridge the

gap between the two. They build, at much the same time, around both. By working on some of the issues identified by the inspectors they hope to shift the culture and by reinforcing aspects of the culture they hope to improve the ways in which particular concerns are tackled. Captured in a phrase their aspiration is that colleagues will, in time, come to say: "that's how we *used* to do things round here - now we do them differently".

4. TRACKS TO IMPROVEMENT

To be removed from Special Measures schools must demonstrate to the HMI responsible for monitoring them that they have made progress on various fronts. Advice from Ofsted (1997b) outlines seven areas in which evidence is sought (see Table 4). These relate to specific aspects of educational standards, the quality of teaching and the management and efficiency of the school.

Table 4: Areas in Which HMI Seek Evidence of Schools' Progress:

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with reference to educational standards:

1) pupils' attainment (in secondary schools and some special schools) on various measures of performance at GCSE; and pupils' attainment (in secondary and primary schools) in relation to performance in National Curriculum tests;

2) levels of exclusion as well as types of exclusion;

3) pupils' levels of attendance;

4) pupils' progress in lessons (as observed);

5) pupils' attitudes, behaviour and personal development (as observed).

with reference to the quality of education being offered and the school's management and efficiency:

6) the proportion of teaching judged satisfactory or better (as observed) along with evidence for schemes of work; and

7) evidence of 'effective leadership and management, appropriate staffing for all classes and 'secure' budgeting and financial management (as judged by HMI).

Source: Ofsted (1997b)

This is an extensive and potentially challenging agenda. The mix of things which any particular school has to undertake will, of course, differ. Ofsted are careful to stress that these are 'indicators, not a tick list to recovery' and that 'a school can be removed from Special Measures even if weaknesses remain'. Crucially, however, it must show that it is offering an 'acceptable standard of education' in terms of the Ofsted Framework and 'is well placed to make continued improvement'. The judgement that a school has made sufficient progress is made on the balance of the evidence and permits a school's performance to be seen in the round. Areas where improvement has been rapid can compensate, to some limited extent, for others where change is less evident.

A good deal of the evidence, to date, about schools in Special Measures has been derived from case studies. Such approaches can yield insights into the specific circumstances of individual schools and help to show the ways in which progress in one area may be linked to progress in others. There is a danger, however, that they may produce, albeit unintentionally, a somewhat skewed picture. Schools which have improved rapidly or, alternatively, hardly moved at all may become unduly prominent. To counter any such tendency there is a need to bring together a wider range of experiences. The following account, therefore, has been pieced together from a number of disparate sources.

Areas of Measurable Progress

As part of this review a small but random selection of administrative files for schools in Special Measures was studied. These provide evidence on schools' improvement drawn from HMI's monitoring visits. When a school is making 'good' progress only three or four visits may be necessary before it is deemed to have been 'restored to health'; where progress is more limited, however, further visits may be required (between 6 and 8 is not unusual). In the process evidence is assembled both on issues emerging from the implementation of schools' action plans and in relation to the specific criteria listed in Table 4 above.

It is clear that schools are expected to make progress across a broad range of fronts. However, two of the four criteria where judgements are based primarily on evidence gathered from HMI visits and observation seem particularly crucial: improvements in the quality of teaching and in leadership (criteria 6 and 7 respectively).

To judge from the small sample reviewed, schools in Special Measures may secure increases of up to 25% in the area of 'quality of teaching' - the overall proportion of lessons judged 'satisfactory or better' by HMI *might* rise from somewhere over half to around three-quarters over the course of 18 months. However, the proportions might vary for lessons at different key stages and increases of between 10% and 20% seem much more common.
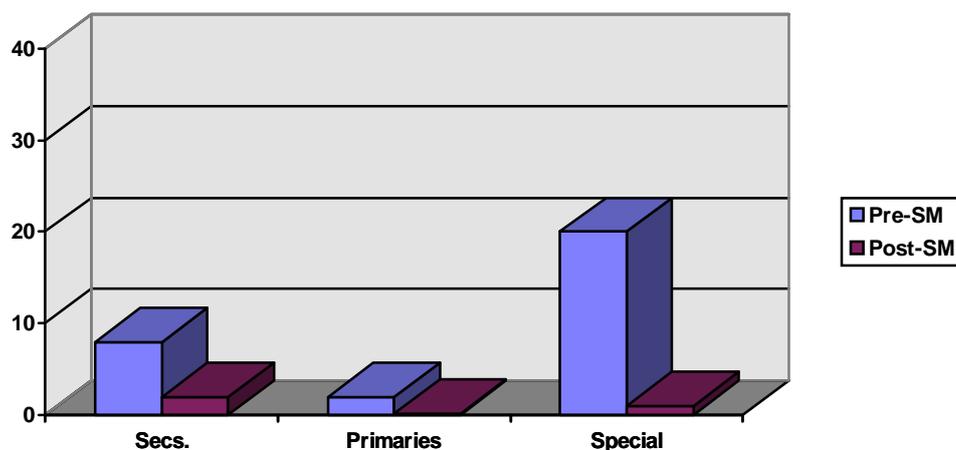
Evidence relating to improvements in the effectiveness of schools' leadership is, of necessity, more qualitative. Changes to the membership of senior management teams probably provide the key to this judgement. These usually, but not invariably, involve the hiring of a new headteacher around the time of the inspection putting the school into Special Measures - either shortly prior to it or shortly after. In the case of a primary school a change of deputy sometimes seems to be enough to tip the balance.

Some more systematic evidence relating to two of the other listed criteria (attendance and exclusions) is now available from internal DfEE analyses. (The data analysis undertaken by the DfEE on pupil attendance and exclusions is based on an early sample of OfSTED Reports for primary, secondary and special schools that had come out of special measures by Spring 1999. The attendance and exclusion data was extrapolated from the OfSTED reports placing schools in and removing schools from special measures). Secondary and special schools coming off Special Measures seem, on average, to have raised pupils' attendance (as formally recorded in school registers) by some two percentage points - overall figures have risen from the low to the mid-eighties. In primary schools, where

attendance already averaged over 90%, improvement has been confined to around a percentage point.

Improvements in the area of exclusions have been more dramatic, especially where special schools have been concerned. When entering Special Measures special schools have had exclusion rates averaging some 20%; amongst schools coming off Special Measures the average has fallen to below 1% (see Figure 1). In secondary schools the changes appear to have been almost as substantial whilst in primary schools exclusions have been virtually eliminated.

Figure 1: Levels of Pupil Exclusion Before and After Special Measures Broken Down by School Type

Source: DfEE internal analysis.

It is more difficult to tell what the effects on pupils' measured attainments have been. The HMI responsible for monitoring schools' progress are expected to seek evidence in relation to performance in GCSE at various levels (such as those achieving 1+ A* to G grades or 5+ A* to C grades) and to look, in particular, for signs of 'increases, year-on-year, in the proportion of pupils....with an emphasis on trends, for example, over three years' (Ofsted, 1997b: 2). Similarly, they are expected to judge, in both primary and secondary schools, what proportion of the school are 'achieving levels of attainment appropriate to their age' in National Curriculum tests and, again, there is a concern for evidence relating to 'sustained improvement year-on-year'.

We can be confident that schools removed from Special Measures have satisfied the HMI monitoring them that they have made progress. It is, nonetheless, surprising that neither of the two major reports from Ofsted (1997a and 1999b) on the experiences and challenges faced by schools coming off Special Measures makes any mention of the *actual* levels of improvement in pupil performance and progress secured by the schools involved over two years (for those recovering more quickly) or three years (for those taking longer). This is clearly an area where further research is needed.[6]
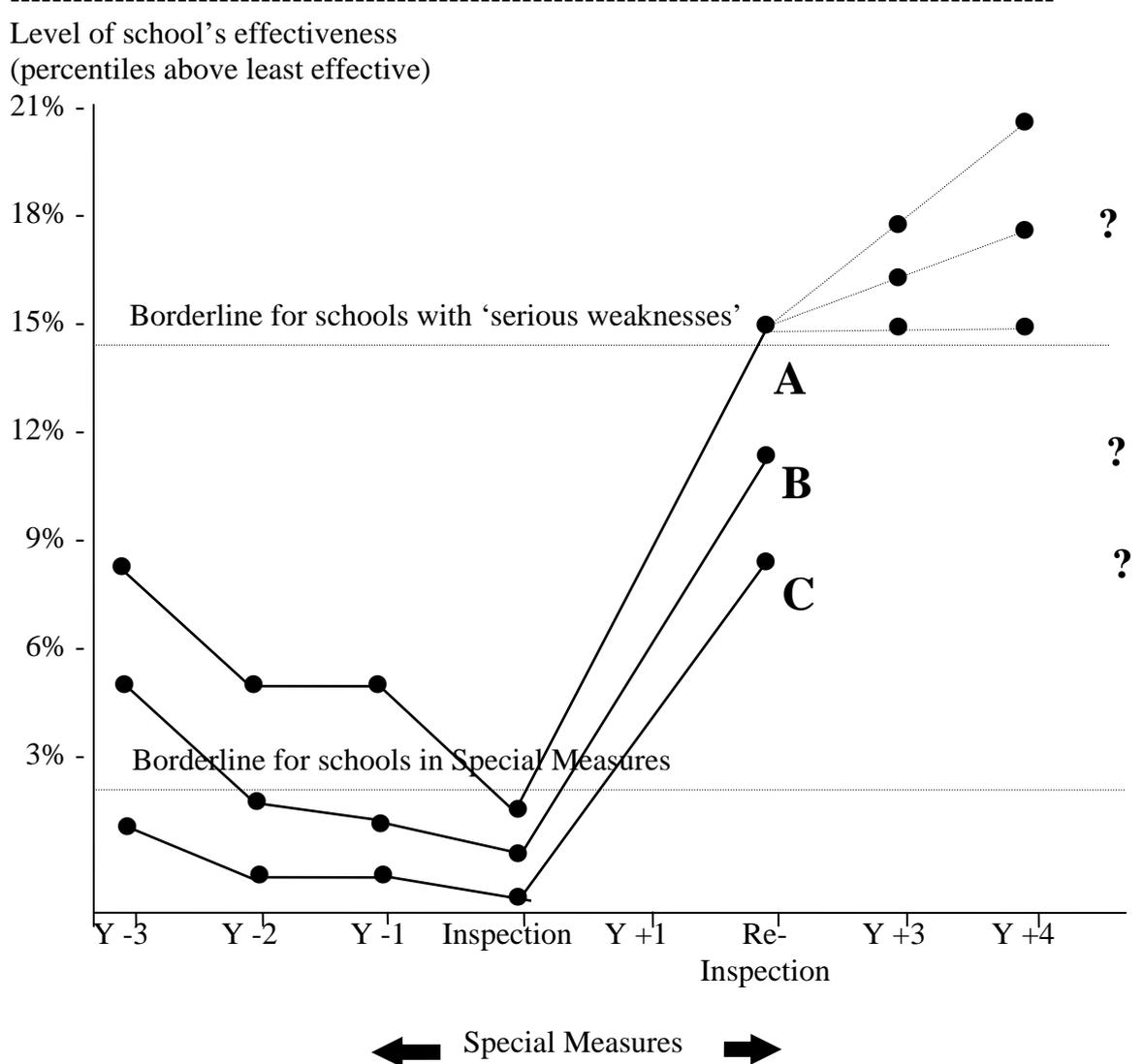
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[6] A story in *The Times Educational Supplement* (29 August 1997) refers to this issue but the number of cases mentioned is too small for any generalisations to be appropriate.

Table 3 earlier showed that whilst schools might be making progress in particular areas these could still be issues *after* Special Measures had ended. Teaching and attainment, for example, were still prominent concerns in at least half the schools. As Ofsted has suggested, a school 'does not have to be a good school before Special Measures are removed' (Ofsted, 1997b: 4). What it must demonstrate, to HMI's satisfaction, is that subsequent progress will *probably* be sustained.

Improvement Trajectories

Research on schools' 'improvement trajectories' is still at an early stage but can help to illuminate the nature of the challenges facing different schools (Gray, 1998; Gray *et al*, 1999). The vertical axis in Figure 2 refers to schools' overall levels of effectiveness with the 'most effective' being placed at the top of the axis and the 'least effective' at the bottom. The horizontal axis describes the schools' positions over time from a period three years prior to the inspection to the position some four years after it.

Figure 2: Improvement Trajectories for Three Schools in Special Measures
(The graph is confined to the least effective fifth of schools)

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For the purposes of this discussion the figure is confined to the least effective fifth of schools (the remaining four-fifths including the most effective are excluded). Horizontal bands are also shown representing (roughly) the bottom 3% of schools (those that can expect to be placed in Special Measures) and the bottom 15% of schools (which includes those with 'serious weaknesses').

Schools in Special Measures share at least two things in common. At the time of their first inspection they find themselves in the bottom band. To be removed they must get themselves onto a 'trajectory' which secures a fairly rapid increase in their position. Several possibilities are outlined in Figure 2. In one (School A with the steeper slope) the school makes sufficient progress over its time in Special Measures to move beyond the group of schools with 'serious weaknesses' and join those which are simply 'less effective'. In another (School B with a less steep slope) progress is not quite so rapid and the school finds itself in the upper reaches of the 'serious weaknesses' group but the prognosis looks good; if the slope is extrapolated for a further year then the school will, at some point in the not-too-distant future, move out of 'serious weaknesses' and into the much larger group of schools which are simply 'less effective'.

Estimates by researchers of the general rates of improvement in secondary schools' performance over recent years suggest that increases of this order are possible (Gray *et al*, 1999; Sammons *et al*, 1997). At the time of writing no equivalent evidence on primary schools' rates of progress was available but improvements on this scale do not seem implausible[7]. In both cases the school must improve its ranking in terms of its 'effectiveness' by something in the order of ten percentile points. Whether schools in Special Measures face level playing fields in this respect is, however, a matter for further research.

Figure 2 shows, in addition, the schools' 'trajectories' in the years prior to the inspection which originally placed them in Special Measures as well as their subsequent performance. In one case a school was functioning at a higher (although not necessarily acceptable) level of 'effectiveness' but had 'dipped' into the Special Measures band around the time of the inspection (School A). In a second the decline in performance seems to have been of longer standing - overall levels of effectiveness had been falling over a number of years (School B). The third, meanwhile, had always occupied a position in or close to the bottom band (School C). The challenges facing schools on these different trajectories undoubtedly vary.

The improvement trajectory for School A in the post-Special Measures period is also extrapolated in Figure 2. In the most optimistic scenario the school continues its rapid rate of improvement; in the most pessimistic it remains on the borderline of the 'serious weaknesses' band. In reality rather little is known about these phases of schools' development and more research is needed. Such limited evidence as is available, however, suggests that in the greater majority of cases three years of year-on-year

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[7] Some further assumptions are probably necessary since a school's 'effectiveness' is a relative concept. For a school to improve its position in an 'effectiveness' ranking other schools must stay in the same position or improve more slowly. Since the emphasis in re-inspecting schools in Special Measures is on the progress (in absolute terms) which they have made since the first inspection, the judgements being made about 'effectiveness' are probably benchmarked in terms of schools' positions at the time of the first inspection rather than two years later.

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improvement in schools' effectiveness represents 'a good run'; after this schools begin to plateau, possibly consolidating existing gains before considering further challenges. Schools which can at present sustain progress for longer periods seem fairly rare (Gray *et al*, 1996). [8]

Creating Some Conditions for Change

The first few months after a school is put into Special Measures are a time of crisis. An action plan is demanded but there is also a pressing need to find (or rediscover) a sense of purpose. Pragmatism and vision are required, probably in equal measure. To add to the pressures the school must find ways of progressing issues with a rapidity which may be unfamiliar.

How schools handle these tensions in the early stages will vary - every school is potentially different. Nonetheless, some common patterns can be discerned from their accounts. Schools which show signs of progress have found ways of tackling (some) staffing issues, have succeeded in developing a sense of commitment to the school's future from key players, and have experienced certain contextual factors either working in their favour or, at worst, not working against them quite as strongly as in the recent past. Table 5 summarises some of the key factors in these early stages.

Table 5: Some Initial Areas for Change

Commitments

- renewal of teachers' commitment to the school
- acceptance of need to change by staff (and pupils)
- involvement of concerned parents and governors in supporting action plan(s)
- use of external support (usually from the LEA) to encourage developments

Restaffing

- some recent changes in leadership at senior level
- some 'fresh but experienced' blood in classrooms

Context

- clarification of the school's future (notably in relation to any extant proposals for closure)
- reductions in competition for pupils with other local schools
- the absence of extreme social deprivation
- a relatively short history of problems at the school.

How schools have restaffed and secured renewed commitments is dealt with in greater detail at a later stage in this review. Contextual questions cannot, however, be ignored - lack of movement on some of the factors listed in Table 5 markedly inhibits a school's

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[8] This observation is based on evidence drawn from schools across the range of 'effectiveness'; the sample sizes analysed were too small for generalisations to be made with any great confidence to schools specifically in Special Measures.

ability to make progress. Where debates about the need for closure have continued for a number of years, for example, and are not brought to a rapid conclusion by the school's entry into Special Measures, continuing difficulties are commonly reported. Many schools in Special Measures have already experienced problems in recruiting pupils up to their target numbers. Furthermore, where parents have some choice of schools (and especially in urban areas), initial reactions to reports that a school is in trouble may compound recruitment problems - the next intake may require still more persuasion that the school can deliver on its promises.

High levels of social deprivation and exclusion are facts of life which many schools in Special Measures share in common. Schools which experience them in their severest forms, however, appear to have greater difficulty than others in making progress. The longer time period (up to six months more) that they require to come off Special Measures is one very tangible indicator of the scale of the problems they face.

Schools may also have experienced a succession of other problems, sometimes extending back over a number of years. The list of those frequently reported in case studies of schools in Special Measures includes: staffing problems with frequent changes of headteacher (a new head or acting head every 12-18 months); high levels of staff turnover amongst other members of staff with the staff split between those who have been in post for many years and newly-qualified teachers; long-standing disputes between management and unions; cases of arson and vandalism; conflicts between pupils, sometimes along ethnic lines; and tensions between the school and its local community.

Within six months a school which is beginning to make progress is likely to have turned its attention to some further issues as well. Four particularly salient ones are listed in Table 6. They include: the introduction or revamping of codes of conduct relating to pupil behaviour and expectations along with their enforcement; targeted efforts to tackle attendance and exclusions, particularly in secondary schools; a focus on aspects of teaching and curriculum including the development of strategies for handling 'incompetent' or potentially 'incompetent' teachers; and the more systematic use of performance analysis and review to identify areas of under-performance where interventions might usefully be contemplated. Some of these issues are considered in greater depth in the sections which follow.

Table 6: Major Issues on the Road to Recovery

- Pupil behaviour and expectations
- Attendance and exclusion (in secondary schools)
- Teaching and curriculum including the handling of 'incompetent' teachers
- Performance analysis and review

5. LEADERSHIP: PEOPLE AND COMMITMENTS

The stage at which a school is being placed in Special Measures is almost universally reported to be one of turmoil. This can easily become a time for recrimination and blame. Everyone examines their own commitments to the school (pupils, parents, teachers and policy-makers alike) as well as their responsibilities. How well a school survives will depend crucially on how quickly some convincing strategies can be formulated.

Feelings and Commitments

Whether one is a pupil, teacher, parent or governor the initial experiences of those involved in schools which have been placed in Special Measures are scarring. Linda Turner (a head on secondment to her LEA as an adviser) took over a primary school. She states simply: 'the staff were devastated' (Turner, 1998: 96). John Cullis, an experienced head who agreed to turn around a failing primary school, commented in similar terms: 'confidence and morale were devastated. I just had to listen, to gain people's trust and to give them reassurance and respect' (Cullis, 1999).

Staff at the Ridings School, many of whose problems were played out on nightly television, had similar responses. 'Many staff', Peter Clark (the new head) reports, 'were very upset' (Clark, 1998). Other evidence confirms that teachers feel that that their 'professional selves' have been confronted (Wilcox and Gray, 1996).

Such feelings are widespread. Regardless of teachers' own position, experience or, crucially, performance in the school, they report being deeply affected. Drawing on the literature of bereavement Stephen Pugh (who became head of a special school in trouble), suggests staff responses 'followed the recognised pattern of grieving (denial, anger and depression)' before more constructive possibilities for change began to emerge (Pugh, 1998: 108). Feelings of shock and anger prevail, even amongst those who have already prepared themselves for the worst.

Such responses are sometimes matched by other emotions. Clark suggests, for example, that at the Ridings:

> "Others saw the (temporary) closure as a step forward: at least, they felt, something would now happen. Some also saw it as an opportunity to make sure that when the school re-opened it was on their terms - perhaps they would play a more significant role in its future management".

The Ridings is likely to have been an extreme case. Studies of other schools, however, confirm that it is rare for the staff in an institution in trouble to share a united view (Gray *et al*, 1999).

There is another group whose feelings have, at least in comparison with those of teachers, been relatively neglected - namely pupils. Recalling the traumatic period when the school was put into Special Measures, Jean Millham, head of Morningside Primary, said the impact of failing an inspection was dreadful. 'I had a playground full of weeping children who felt that they had been rubbished; they had been told that yet again they were no

good'. [9]Clark also describes in some detail the responses of pupils to the news that the Ridings was in the throes of failing its inspection and would be (briefly) closed. Reporting on the pupils' responses, he writes:

> "The older (pupils) were concerned for their futures and GCSE courses but when the younger ones were told there were many smirks. 'I understand why you're pleased', Peter Bartle (Calderdale's Chief Adviser) told them, but in time you'll look back on all this with regret" (Clark: 1998).

However, as Clark himself goes on to report, there were signs of change amongst some pupils at the Ridings over the ensuing weekend:

> "Anna (the deputy) and I took the first assembly together. The students behaved impeccably. Attendance was around 75%....... 'Things have now changed', I explained as they listened politely and attentively. 'We're here to ensure that there'll be no return to the shambles of the previous weeks. It's not in your interests and it won't be allowed to happen....We want to work with you to rebuild the school'."

Other accounts confirm that pupils' concerns run deeply - it is, after all, their educational futures which are at stake. But, as an American educator, Sonia Nieto (1994), reminds us:

> "Reforming school structures alone will not lead to differences in student achievement....if such changes are not accompanied by profound changes in how educators think about students..... One way to begin the process of changing school policies is to listen to students' views about them (but) student perspectives are, for the most part, missing in discussions concerning strategies for educational problems".

Pupils quickly grasp the implications of the negative publicity which attends 'failure'; the danger is that they accept the label. Whilst change leaders frequently acknowledge the importance of winning pupils' 'hearts and minds', to date too little attention has been given to the distinctive part pupils can play in becoming a force for change (Rudduck *et al*, 1996).[10]

Comparatively little is known about the feelings and motivations of those who agree to take on leadership roles in schools in Special Measures. It is widely assumed that financial considerations are a persuasive factor. Certainly, for someone who is currently a deputy headteacher this is likely to be true. But, as an Ofsted study (1998a) suggests, the use of major salary increases varies considerably from LEA to LEA. 'In some LEAs, seconded headteachers transfer onto the going rate for the receiving school, or an adjustment is made so that the headteacher is not out of pocket but in other LEAs salary enhancement can range up to six thousand pounds, depending on the persuasiveness of the case' (Ofsted, 1998a: 17).

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[9] Quoted on the BBC On-line Network website, 9 February 1999.

[10] In an unpublished account Rudduck (1999) mentions some of the issues pupils raised when staff in a school in Special Measures were persuaded to listen to pupils' views and started to build them into their agendas for change.

Whilst pay matters, other 'motivational' factors seem to count as well. The Ofsted study lists some of the qualities heads used to describe themselves: 'tenacious', 'charismatic' and 'a street fighter' being amongst them. As the report observes:

> "the (heads) have been asked to take on a difficult task because they are believed to have the necessary skills but they need to know how well they are succeeding. Having previously enjoyed a good professional reputation, seconded heads sometimes worry that if they are not successful in the secondment their career will suffer. Whatever the circumstances, affirmation of success is uppermost in headteachers' minds" (Ofsted, 1998a: 15).

Leadership At All Levels

Leadership and staffing issues dominate accounts of the challenges schools have faced in securing progress. Indeed, early predictions about a school's prospects are likely to be intimately bound up with feelings about its leadership. As Ofsted (1998a: 4) notes, when a school is put into Special Measures 'a common outcome is for the headteacher to consider whether she or he has the necessary skills to improve matters. In many cases the headteacher leaves the school'. Alternatively, an LEA may have anticipated the likely findings and brought about a change in the run-up to the inspection. Stark (1998: 39) reports that during the period 1993-96 'in just over half the cases thus far the head has changed within a term or two before (25%) or after (75%)the school's failure'. The challenges which heads face in the aftermath of the inspection will differ accordingly. In either case, however, be they 'new broom' or longer-standing incumbent, the head has to establish or re-establish their credentials to lead the changes.

How a head stamps their impression on a school during these early days can be crucial. Stark has outlined the array of skills possessed by heads who turn their schools around (see Table 7). The list is both multi-dimensional and extensive. Schools in Special Measures which can recruit candidates who possess all these characteristics will be fortunate. More often some compromises are required.

Whilst acknowledging the range of leadership skills that heads may need, Brighouse and Woods (1999: 76) place the emphasis elsewhere:

> "...some leaders have the capacity to sweep away problems, not by minimising them, still less by ignoring them, but mainly by turning them into opportunities for growth and development. Moreover, if they hadn't this gift themselves, they recognised the need and were good at identifying people in the organisation who had.....these leaders move beyond 'order' and 'relationships' in their activities and find ways of engaging the staff in continually exhilarating discussions about the purposes of the school".

In some ways the 'new broom' faces the easier task. High hopes usually attend the change of leadership on all sides - amongst pupils, parents, governors and staff. As Gray and colleagues (1999: 56) observe:

> "Teachers' feelings about how well the school as a whole is doing are often bound up with their perceptions of their heads' performance. The arrival of a new head

offers the prospect of change for those who seek it; even the more cynical seem prepared to suspend judgement during a new head's honeymoon".

But, as Stark also notes, 'in a substantial number of cases a head who has been at the school for some years has remained at the helm'. More attention needs to be focused on the ways in which they too increase the pace of change at their schools.

Table 7: Leadership Skills of Heads Leading Schools to Improvement and/or Recovery

- *strategic skills*: formulating (or helping governors to formulate) an overall vision for the future of the school; and within it, identifying strategic targets and prioritising between them;
- *monitoring skills*: keeping tabs on the crucial points where improvement is needed, including classroom observation of colleagues' teaching as a constructive rather than an oppressive technique;
- *collegiate skills*: enabling the governors to work as a cohesive, focused unit; creating a sense of common purpose and identity amongst teaching colleagues; this includes the crucial trait of being 'approachable';
- *staff management skills*: including gaining the co-operation and respect of colleagues and if necessary taking and implementing tough decisions about early retirement and competency proceedings';
- *staff development skills*: planning the personal development of other teachers to give them the skills they need to raise standards;
- *resource management skills*: relating limited means (financial and staffing) to strategic ends, matching the priorities and ensuring proper resource control; and
- *ambassadorial skills*: representing the school's interests to the LEA, diocese or other body, negotiating their support and more widely presenting its public face to parents and the local community (particularly to local newspapers) to regenerate public confidence

Source: Stark (1998: 40)

It is easy enough to assert that some change of leadership is required - ensuring that the replacement is up to the demands is more problematic. The leadership templates both Stark and Brighouse and Woods outline are, after all, formidable. Location and context, the scale of the problems facing the school, the new resourcing available to support the demands of a prospective head and the ratio of stress to reward may all inhibit the search for the 'right' person. Christine Whatford's (1998) account of her efforts, as a Chief Education Officer, to find a new headteacher for a troubled school in her LEA underlines how difficult the search for new leaders can be and the range of concerns that prospective heads seek reassurance on. Anyone already well-qualified for the job was likely to be fully occupied making their contribution elsewhere and needed to be prised out. Furthermore, from the perspective of potential candidates the risks may well outweigh the likely rewards; some may view it is as a step to something better, others as a challenge too far.

Rethinking Leadership

The difficulties of securing appropriate leadership in times of crisis has lead some LEAs to rethink their school improvement strategies. Several approaches have emerged. Rather than waiting for a school to be inspected and then responding, for example, they have tried to anticipate the likely results. In this scenario the need to strengthen a school's leadership has surfaced as an issue in the run-up to the inspection (Ouston *et al*, 1997). A part of the Special Measures programme is, in effect, put into place prior to the inspection rather than in its wake. As a result, the period for recovery is extended. But such a strategy also carries risks. Handled insensitively, such interventions may actually undermine the existing leadership and precipitate the judgements they were intended to evade.

Ideally, a school in Special Measures would have a field of applicants. In practice it may be lucky to have any choices at all - between, say, an 'insider' who knows the school well, but could be seen as part of the problem, and an 'outsider' who might, under certain circumstances and with the right package of incentives and encouragement, be persuaded to take it on. Schools have, perforce, been required to think more laterally about the injection of new leadership.

The hierarchical structure of schools in this country focuses attention on the headteacher. The experiences of schools in Special Measures, however, suggest that it is the *combined* skills and experience of the senior management team that matter. Vivien Cutler took over Highbury Grove, a boys' secondary school in trouble. She writes:

> "Most studies of school effectiveness see leadership as the key to school improvement. But this underestimates the importance of the senior management team in facilitating coherence and supporting middle managers in a range of roles" (Cutler, 1998: 94).

This is a relatively neglected area but one which offers some alternative avenues for development. The shift of focus away from the potentially dispiriting quest for the 'right' leader can open up a broader range of opportunities for restaffing at senior level.

A striking feature of several 'ineffective' secondary schools which have improved rapidly is the extent to which they have benefited from some form of 'dual' leadership (Gray *et al*, 1999). One member of the team has concentrated on 'maintenance', the other on 'change'. Such partnerships have typically tended to emerge over several years and have relied on a measure of mutual trust and understanding; formal clarifications of the 'division of labour' have emerged at a later date. Could they, one wonders, be deliberately forged at an earlier date?

The attraction of an expanded view of leadership for schools in Special Measures is that it widens the range of available strategies and (importantly) potential candidates. A change of deputy (or an additional deputy) in a secondary school can give some impetus to action although, without other changes, it may not be sufficient to overcome inertia. In a primary school it may be just enough to tip the balance and could, in some contexts, be sufficient.

Part of the power of changes in leadership is, of course, symbolic. But changing the headteacher alone is rarely sufficient. It is the 'new team' which frequently accompanies

such restructuring which secures progress. By widening concepts of leadership a school's capacity may be (temporarily) expanded.

The Role of External Support

Two other strategies also merit attention. Both are examples of the ways in which an LEA (or other outside body) can anticipate the likely needs of schools potentially in difficulties. 'Consultant heads' are experienced colleagues whom LEAs can deploy for varying lengths of time to support school managements. They might provide specific kinds of help prior to an inspection, serve as 'caretaker' managers during periods of crisis and subsequently help the school to strengthen its commitment to change. Schools also report that governors sometimes take on a particular responsibility (such as assisting in the creation of a financial plan) whilst LEA support staff may be available to give added impetus to the revamping and development of school policies.

The second strategy is more radical and still embryonic. It involves matching interventions to 'stages of development' (Hopkins and Harris, 1997). Rapid change may, in certain circumstances, require toughness and a willingness to be decisive as well as diplomacy and tact. Few prospective heads possess both sets of attributes in equal measure. Even if they do, circumstances may not permit them to be revealed - resentment and resistance may follow. A small number of LEAs have begun to see recovery as a two stage process in which certain heads are deployed as the educational equivalent of 'trouble-shooters'. They intervene and then move on, making way in the process for successors who can work on longer-term issues at a rather less hectic pace. More evidence of the medium-term effects of this kind of approach on schools' development in the post-Special Measures phase is, however, required.

> In brief, the quality of LEA interventions depends heavily on the preparations they have made (Southworth and Sebba, 1997; Ofsted, 1998a).[11] Where such understanding is present it can enhance considerably the potential for improvement. Handled badly, and with insensitive monitoring, however, it can simply compound the pressures a school is already under. With LEAs' own performance on the line, they can sometimes transfer their own anxieties onto the failing institution. It is one of the ironies of school improvement that some of the schools which feel most strongly that they 'did it by themselves' were amongst those which have been most heavily supported by LEAs who believed in 'helping schools to help themselves' (Gray *et al*, 1999).

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[11] Since the role of the LEA has recently been comprehensively reviewed by a research team from the CEPPP Centre at Brunel University (1999) it is not reviewed here in any detail.

6. STAFFING AND RESTAFFING:
THE NEED FOR SOME RENEWAL

A persistent characteristic of schools in trouble is that they have difficulty attracting and retaining *skilled and experienced* teachers. Indeed, the decision that a school should go into Special Measures may initially reinforce this tendency. As Whatford (1998: 80) put it:

> "....the fact that a weak teacher had left did not necessarily mean that it was a stronger teacher who replaced them. In other words, being able to attract and recruit staff to a school in Special Measures was very difficult".

Furthermore, the staffing profiles of such schools tend to be polarised between newly-qualified teachers (for whom this is the first job) and others who have been in the school for a long time (and may well have served under several heads as a result). Such differences are mirrored in the schools' middle management structures where turnover may have been relatively high. The need for some 'fresh but experienced' blood to formulate policy and contribute to classroom developments is paramount.

Schools which have made rapid progress whilst in Special Measures have tackled these problems in one of several ways. Some have been lucky. They have advertised a key vacancy in the normal way and found someone suitable to fill it; the construction of an appropriate 'package' and some judicious support from the LEA have often paid dividends here. However, such schools have learnt to be realistic about the prospects - the greater majority of potential candidates, they reason, are likely to be deterred by the 'Special Measures' label. The newly-appointed head at Phoenix School in Hammersmith, for example, decided that 'he was going to appoint temporary staff knowing it would be problematic rather than permanent staff who in the event might not be up to the job' (Whatford, 1998: 870). Careful selection of staff appears to have paid some dividends although securing suitably-qualified staff was still a problem several years later. [12]

Other schools have opted (or been forced to opt) for alternative but related strategies. Either they have attempted to secure the services of an LEA advisory teacher to teach in the school (albeit on a temporary, part-time but extended basis) or they have purchased a substantial amount of 'curriculum support' from the same kind of source.

The Problem of the 'Incompetent' Teacher

Most teachers in a school in Special Measures will need to raise their levels of performance but almost every such school is also likely to have some 'incompetent' staff, whether formally identified by inspectors or informally by some other means. A research project undertaken by Wragg and colleagues (1999) has recently looked in greater detail at some of the issues.

As part of the research headteachers were asked to list the areas in which they regarded the performance of so-called 'incompetent' teachers as 'unsatisfactory'; their replies for a

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[12] The head is reported as saying: 'I have advertised time and time again and ended up with fields of one or two candidates' (*Times Educational Supplement*, 4 June 1999).

sample of almost 700 teachers are contained in Table 8. Core elements of classroom performance (such as expectations for pupils, planning and preparation, and classroom discipline) feature prominently on the list.

Table 8: Heads' Perceptions of Areas of 'Unsatisfactory' Performance Amongst 'Incompetent' Teachers

Area of 'Unsatisfactory' Performance	% of all 'incompetent' teachers
Expectations of pupils	65%
Pupils' progress	64%
Planning and preparation	58%
Classroom discipline	57%
Inability to respond to change	51%
Differentiating work to pupil's abilities	50%
Monitoring and assessment of pupils	49%
Relationships with pupils	48%
Managing classroom resources	43%
Adhering to school policies	34%
Relationships with teacher colleagues	32%
Commitment to job	29%

Source: Based on 684 cases, Wragg *et al* (1999: 6).

Heads and colleagues reported that they had made considerable efforts to assist such teachers. Where they had made some difference and helped a colleague to improve, heads mentioned various factors as being influential. First (and overwhelmingly) the availability of 'in-house support' appeared crucial along with a 'positive and sensitive approach'. A degree of 'openness and honesty', combined with a process for monitoring progress and providing opportunities for 'observing good practice', also played a part. But 'in-house support' had not invariably worked and where schools had turned to 'LEA support' this too could run into difficulties. Relationships between a head and unions could also be important. As Wragg and colleagues (1999: 9) note:

> "Offering a high level of support, observing someone's lessons, encouraging them to watch others, giving detailed and honest feedback; all these may lead to success with a teacher who actively seeks to improve but fail if the teacher is acutely stressed, resistant or simply appears not to have the inner resources to change existing practices".

Asked to explain the reasons why their colleagues had failed to improve heads mentioned a range of factors including: denial ('the teacher would not accept there was a problem'); personality ('this person should never have been a teacher'); difficulties in adapting to the demands of the National Curriculum and health-related problems. Laziness, personal problems and context also received occasional mentions.

Nonetheless, the potentially explosive nature of issues related to so-called teacher 'incompetence' must be remarked upon. For many teachers (and especially those who disagreed with the charges of 'unsatisfactory' performance) what seemed obvious deficiencies to management were variously attributed to a range of other factors including: the belief that there was a conspiracy; bullying and victimisation; racial discrimination; incompetence by the head; unjustified complaints from parents; clashes of philosophy; inadequate resourcing; and the need to make staff cuts as a result of financial pressures (Wragg *et al*, 1999:21).

The senior management teams of school in Special Measures have typically learnt to tackle 'competence' issues on the hoof (Fidler and Alton, 1999). Handling them insensitively, however, can simply compound existing problems.

7. PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND
THE CONCERN FOR TEACHING

Eventually schools in trouble must face up to concerns about the quality of teaching. Precisely how school leaders initiate such developments, however, requires careful planning. It is highly unlikely that staff in a school in Special Measures will have a tradition of discussing teaching and learning - one of the challenges is to create one.

Shortly after taking up his post the head of Haystock school realised that some action on teaching was crucial to his school's subsequent development (Gray *et al*, 1999). During his first few months, therefore, he interviewed every member of staff about their professional aspirations and their views of the school. Subsequently he arranged a programme of classroom visits which resulted in his seeing every member of staff:

> "This was potentially a very high-risk strategy; the details required a good deal of negotiation with staff. A sophisticated observation schedule was constructed and used; time was made available to discuss the classes observed with the staff members concerned; and the confidentiality of the completed schedules was respected.....Arising out of the exercise came some consideration of the factors which led to effective and ineffective lessons. These results were circulated to staff and departments were encouraged to refine the list of factors further" (Gray *et al*, 1999: 70).

Subsequently a professional development group was started within the school to explore issues related to the 'quality of learning'; membership was voluntary but interest grew. As a result the staff became increasingly aware of what they might aspire to but had, to some extent, been helped to discover it for themselves.

At Woodseats school a programme of classroom observation was undertaken using carefully negotiated and defined headings. These included: teaching, learning, classroom management and organisation. This was followed up by the provision of verbal and written feedback. As a result of the programme some changes to teaching ensued. There was less whole class teaching and more differentiation with some grouping by ability; lessons were given a clearer focus and curriculum co-ordinators used the introduction of the Literacy Hour as an opportunity for further training.

In some schools the advantages of undertaking teaching reviews from within may be outweighed by feelings of suspicion. Learmonth and Lowers (1998) describe how an external consultant can help in such circumstances:

> "...(someone) who is not part of the day to day school community with whom the individual teachers come in contact, can often start the precarious process of professional self-review and, when appropriate, can extend it to other members of the department and to senior managers. Pupils also have an important part to play in this process: their evidence about the sorts of teaching and learning approaches which help them make progress should be a vital influence on the choices teachers make in planning each lesson. In due course it will be an important task for the consultant to suggest that there are areas of the curriculum - the use of language

for example - where it will be useful for all staff to share their experience of individual lessons in the spirit of self-review" (Learmonth and Lowers, 1998: 136).

What is common to both these approaches is that they start from the individual teacher and work through to the wider implications for the group. As Learmonth and Lowers remark, 'schools talk a lot about the dissemination of good practice but rarely do much about it'.

Supporting Colleagues

Occasionally, as in the case of some 'incompetent' teachers, the individuals concerned may need to have the rudiments of 'good practice' explained to them - some direct coaching may be required, especially in relation to the criteria Ofsted employ to judge teaching. For the majority of teachers, however, the issues will be rather different - models of better practice are already likely to be internalised. As Watling and colleagues (1998: 60) put it, there should be 'intensive work on re-skilling teams of teachers in a limited but specific repertoire of teaching and learning styles......Ideally, teachers should be encouraged to explore new skills in teams in order to create new partnerships to support the re-skilling process'. Crucially, teachers will want to explore how to operationalise their knowledge within *the particular context and circumstances* they find in *their* school.

Strategies which have worked for individual teachers have also been applied to whole departments. Indeed some schools have made departmental improvement the centre of their change efforts (Sammons *et al*, 1997). Gray and colleagues (1999: 85) report that schools' thinking in this area is still, however, developing. Typically a school might reason along one of four lines:

> - appoint a new head of department when the occasion arises;
> - assume that school-wide initiatives will work at departmental level;
> - disseminate the practice of 'well-running' departments to others; and
> - develop the 'ticking over' departments with the help of external support.

When schools have simply relied on the first and second of these progress has been limited and patchy; consequently some have learnt to develop and give greater prominence in their thinking to the third and fourth approaches, with members of the senior management team deliberately adopting a 'coaching' role with respect to particular departments.

Schools which report placing the development of 'better teaching' at the centre of their improvement efforts claim that the process has been rewarding but also point to some difficulties. Indeed, even schools which are much further on in terms of strategies for professional development seem challenged. For a hard-pressed colleague to assume responsibility for mentoring other members of staff is both time-consuming and personally demanding. Members of the management team who take on this role may not be fully trusted, whatever the assurances they give. Meanwhile, 'outsiders' (be they LEA or independent consultants or, occasionally, governors) run the risk of simply being seen as adding further to the 'innovation overload' as they suggest new ways of working.

Furthermore, as Reynolds and Packer (1992) remind us, unless such relationships are handled well, attempts to get the staff to discuss the educational problems facing a school can result in 'increased interpersonal conflicts amongst staff, a breakdown of some pre-existing relationships and much interpersonal hostility'. Colleagues can simply learn more about each others' limitations. Consequently a good deal of effort may need to be put into reminding staff how much progress they are making and how far they have already travelled.

Expanding Notions of Professional Development

Teachers, as Southworth (1994) reminds us, often have strong views about what constitutes their own 'development' and that of their institution. In arguing for an expanded view of what should count, he lists some twenty opportunities for professional development. However, he also shows how different activities could lead to different outcomes, all of them probably worthwhile in their own right but some, perhaps, facilitating a school's development more readily than others (see Table 9).

Table 9: Probable Outcomes of Different Forms of Professional Development

Focus on Shared Work (promoting stronger professional interactions)	Focus on Classrooms (increasing interactions inside classrooms)	Focus on Pupils (creating stronger emphasis on pupils' work and achievements)
joint planning	classroom action research	analysis of pupil outcome data
writing policies	visiting classrooms	reviews of pupils' reports
leading staff workshops	observing classrooms	shadowing pupils
monitoring students	teacher appraisal	monitoring pupils' work
pairing curriculum co-ordinators	touring the school	assessment trialling agreements
curriculum reviews	'showing' assemblies	staff conferences on individual pupils
joint work: visits, concerts, parental events, school assemblies	explaining and/or demonstrating classroom and teaching practices to colleagues	
	team teaching	

Source: Southworth (1994)

Attention to the rudiments of teaching, frequent reminders about the inspectors' criteria for judging performance and careful attention to the nature of professional development can pay dividends in the short-term but, as Brighouse and Woods remind us, are unlikely

to be sufficient to sustain teachers' enthusiasm. Describing some ten different initiatives[13] which have had significant and longer-lasting effects on particular schools, they suggest these are all examples of:

> "integrated and focused programmes of educational interventions which are designed to make a distinct difference to previous practice. They will usually have a significant impact on teachers' behaviour as reflective professionals, on pupil development and learning and on whole-school culture" (Brighouse and Woods, 1999: 121).

Brighouse and Woods refer to these kinds of initiatives as 'butterflies'. 'The best butterflies'; they suggest, 'will affect the most processes and make an immediate and disproportionate difference to the climate and culture of the school' (1999: 110). Similarly 'exciting ideas' represent a recurring theme in schools' own 'stories' of school improvement. Both, Brighouse and Woods would argue, can become forms of 'professional development' in their own right. At some point in the early stages of the improvement process teachers also need to find something which galvanises them as well as their schools. As Michael Fullan (1993) reminds us, teachers respond to visions as much as (if not more than) mandates.

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[13] Their list includes: annual learning plans, processes for welcoming visitors to the school, strategies for noticing the invisible child, improving staff meetings, improved communications between staff and governors, arrangements for appointing new teachers, the use of assemblies to build achievement cultures, 'praise' postcards, a staffroom teaching and learning noticeboard and a young teachers' club. Clearly other schools would be in a position to add examples of their own to this list.

8. TACKLING BEHAVIOUR AND ATTENDANCE

Problems associated with pupil behaviour are likely to be of long-standing in schools entering Special Measures. As John Dryden, head of Alderman Derbyshire School describes it: 'Pupils have often been poorly taught by staff who don't stay long. So they achieve little, bunk off and misbehave, reinforcing its (the school's) poor reputation'.[14] Poor teaching and poor behaviour are, in short, inextricably linked. To make progress on one requires progress on the other.

Schools in Special Measures report two levels of indiscipline. Almost all have suffered, in common with many other schools, from continuing low-level disruptions, both during lessons and in breaks. Nearly all, however, have had to cope with more serious outbreaks as well including violence towards staff and pupils. Responding to the latter requires a different level of initiative to the former.

Policies for Behaviour and Attendance

A familiar first step has been to re-assert the existence of behaviour policies which may have become forgotten or been inconsistently applied by different and changing members of staff. Consequently, schools have developed or rediscovered Codes of Conduct which they then begin to apply more rigorously. As one teacher put it: 'The code is a quick device or common language for dealing with minor offences - it provides a quick reminder without interrupting everyone in the class' (Gray *et al*, 1999: 82). A pupil in the same school said: 'Pupils usually abide by the Code of Conduct. It's a good idea. If you don't keep to it, teachers stamp down on you very quickly' whilst another remarked: 'The teachers are now more strict, so there is not so much messing about as there used to be. This is better. We noticed the improvement'. At the same time these developments have been coupled with 'merit' systems which reward pupils in more tangible ways for good behaviour.

Whilst the reassertion of discipline along traditional lines may help to deal with low-level classroom disruption and the more minor kinds of misbehaviour, schools have needed a more sustained and in-depth analysis to deal with some of their more serious problems. A working party has been convened or an informal survey of key events has been undertaken with a view to providing some starting-points.

Playtimes and lunch breaks have often proved to be flashpoints. Staff at the Ridings, for example, concluded that this was one of the main problem areas and responded by volunteering to staff 'social bases' for each group during the lunch-hour which was also shortened. Meanwhile, teachers at Mansel Primary (a school which also had significant behaviour problems) became more directly involved in structuring play activities during breaks, simultaneously providing an element of supervision and adult involvement.

Mansel's initiative was part of a broader review concerned to involve pupils more extensively in commenting on and helping to improve aspects of their school. Regular sessions (linked to PSE) in which appropriate classroom behaviours were discussed became an integral part of the school's curriculum. At Northicote a student council was

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[14] reported in *The Independent*, 28 January 1999.

formed and given a real voice. Meanwhile, at Harborne Hill, the head met with each pupil in the school as well as conducting a survey of pupil opinion which was then clearly acted upon. All three also made concerted efforts to reach out to their communities and involve parents in contributing to what they were doing.

Thomas and colleagues (1998: 33) report on the unusual case of a special school for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties where 'young people had helped in drawing up ground-rules for behaviour in class and around the school'. Whether such efforts to involve pupils and parents are typical of other schools in Special Measures is not, however, clear.

Strategies to promote better behaviour have fed into schools' policies on attendance. Again schools have found that the reassertion of a policy can produce results, albeit rather limited ones. Keeping track of who is off school and why can reduce unnecessary absences, especially when combined with efforts to involve parents more systematically in 'policing' the strategy. Similarly, more frequent registrations can reduce internal forms of truancy during the course of the school day. In short, the simple assertion that attendance matters can secure some modest improvements. Where these simple strategies can be combined with whole-school measures which demonstrate to pupils that the school cares whether its pupils attend, rather larger gains seem possible (Ofsted, 1999b: 26).

Nonetheless, as the figures reported in an earlier section underline, the majority of schools in Special Measures have had difficulty securing gains in attendance levels of more than a few percentage points. Indeed, in many schools overall levels have remained obstinately constant, despite the very obvious efforts of all concerned to tackle them. Consequently schools have found themselves reaching out into the communities they serve to form fresh alliances with concerned parents and representative groups. In some cases they have found it necessary to form closer relationships with the police as well to ensure that truancy levels are kept down.

The Provision of Safe and Secure Environments for Learning

Behind the inspectors' concerns and the attendance figures lie bigger challenges for a minority of schools in Special Measures. These may go some way towards explaining some of the disproportionately high exclusion rates found in certain schools. The creation of a safe and secure environment in which teaching and learning can proceed with the minimum of disruption has been a priority in these cases. Some have needed to take urgent measures to increase the security of their physical environments as well as reducing vandalism and conflicts between pupils. Such steps, of course, rarely get mentioned to the press for fear that the labels stick - a reputation for being the 'worst school' in an area is hard to shake off. Nor, for that matter, do they impact much on the more familiar statistics which tend to be premised on the assumption that basic 'conditions for learning' are already present.

9. TAKING STOCK AND
THE AGENDA FOR CHANGE

One of the most striking features of 'successful' schools serving disadvantaged areas is the existence of someone on the school's team who is prepared to 'analyse and grapple with the problems' (National Commission on Education, 1996). This person will often (but not inevitably) be the head. Their influence will be important in further analysing the inspection report, drawing up the action plan and monitoring and evaluating progress.

The Role of the Plan

Amongst the first tasks for a school in Special Measures is 'the production of the plan'. Since there is a well-established literature on planning in schools it will not be rehearsed here in any detail (cf. Hargreaves and Hopkins, 1991; Sebba *et al*, 1996; MacGilchrist et al, 1997; DfEE, 1997 & 1998). Nonetheless, as Thomas and colleagues (1998) point out, action planning can present particular problems for schools in Special Measures.

On the plus side, they suggest, the urgent need to produce a plan can create a sense of participation across teachers and governors. Since weak (and non-participatory) planning will almost certainly have featured on the inspectors' list of concerns, this will have the effect of immediately putting the planning process centre-stage, possibly for the first time. Handled well, the action plan can provide a common focus for discussion and action. Subsequently, noting that issues in the plan have got implemented can also create a sense of achievement amongst staff and a feeling that things are improving. Indeed, over time, a more coherent 'vision' for the school may begin to be incorporated into the plan itself.

On the down side planning exercises, by their very nature, can create additional burdens for schools. Lacking traditions in this area they can seek unsatisfactory solutions. Pressured time-spans can lead to one person (usually the head) undertaking all (or most of) the work. Taking stock, identifying issues, working on them and subsequently delivering in an explicit way may also constitute unfamiliar territory. Finally, there is the danger that the action plan can become an end in itself. It may come to be seen as the school's development plan and this (somewhat truncated) 'development plan' can, all too quickly, become the school's 'vision'. In the process the essence of a good plan, which focuses attention on key issues for recovery and allocates responsibilities, can be lost.

Getting the right balance between planning and action can be problematic for any institution. In their classic study of the school improvement process in North American urban high schools, Louis and Miles suggest that:

> "in 'depressed' schools one of the few ways of building commitment to a reform programme is for successful action to occur that actualises hope for genuine change. Effective action by a small group often stimulates an interest in planning rather than vice versa" (Louis and Miles, 1992: 204).

There are echoes of this reminder in the experiences of schools in this country although, crucially, some differences as well. The decision that a school will be going into Special

Measures will probably inject some of the sense of urgency that might otherwise be missing. When action is required on all fronts, planning and prioritising what will initially be tackled can help to get things moving. The overriding purpose of the plan is to create some preliminary focus - it can subsequently be revised to take account of changing realities. Crucially, when things begin to improve, it can be modified to incorporate and express some collective vision

The Contribution of Performance Analysis and Review

An action plan needs to include a series of performance targets for pupils and staff. In the general malaise that can affect schools in difficulties, systematic analyses of pupil progress may have been neglected. In particular, the part that the school itself can reasonably be expected to offer to its pupils' development may be ignored. Staff will almost certainly have realised that their pupils' performance is low in absolute terms, although they may be somewhat vaguer about the precise nature and extent of the shortfalls. However, they may also have learnt to attribute these to sources and circumstances beyond their control. Furthermore, they are likely to have become quite skilled at rehearsing the reasons why things are as they are. Their low positions in performance tables over a number of years, for example, may have become accepted whilst inspectors' concerns about the same issues may have unwittingly served to reinforce such views. To add to the problems, keeping track of pupil progress in institutions with high levels of pupil mobility may have been neglected.

Such a situation prevailed at Northicote School. As Geoffrey Hampton (1998) explains, colleagues in his school needed to establish more realistic expectations for their pupils' progress. The introduction of 'value-added' data, supplied by the LEA, helped to focus teachers' attention on what was potentially attainable.

More effective schools are already likely to have used a number of approaches to boosting pupil performance; Special Measures schools may, however, have made only limited use of them. Gray and colleagues (1999: 118) list a variety of approaches secondary schools have used in recent years to keep up with the pack. They include:

- entering the majority of pupils for one or two more exams;
- paying particular attention to 'borderline' candidates;
- monitoring departmental exam results more closely and comparing departments;
- reviewing choices of exam boards and syllabuses;
- introducing strategies for pupil monitoring and individual target-setting;
- starting mentoring programmes to offer regular support to designated pupils; and
- providing additional classes for older pupils in lunch-time, twilight and holiday slots.

Brooks and colleagues (1999) have reviewed a comparable range of activities being used in primary schools to raise achievement. As in secondary schools, the strategies employed have ranged widely. But, at the same time, and in much the same way as described above, primary schools have focused more narrowly and strategically on ways of improving pupil performance in relation to the particular measures being employed to assess their progress. Again additional support for pupils on the 'borderline' of key targets and the provision of extra sessions to hone 'key skills' figure prominently on their lists.

The use of such 'tactics' can create some sense of movement but their one-off nature also needs to be recognised. They can 'jolt' a school into gear and create some limited gains. However, unless they are backed up by more systematic and wide-ranging approaches, these will be limited and may well fade as the nature of the commitments they demand, both from pupils and teachers, begins to emerge.

Consequently, schools in Special Measures have found it worthwhile to concentrate on some more specific forms of performance review. There has been an unfortunate tendency, however, for less effective schools to make less of such evidence and, it must be said, often to be comparatively naive in using it. Furthermore, poor record-keeping has sometimes frustrated their introduction. As a result the problems associated with their more systematic use should not be under-estimated (Gray *et al*, 1999).

Some form of value-added analysis has often been introduced to help staff and governors understand just how far the school as a whole is falling short of comparably-placed institutions. Such analyses have often been made available by LEAs and have been quite widely shared. In a minority of cases, and in the absence of more systematic evidence being available, schools have had to make do as best they could by relying on more *ad hoc* strategies. The introduction of more systematic evidence on a national basis will, in due course, help in this respect.

Second, but rather more informally, schools have attempted to come up with more contextualised evidence on the ranges of performance *within* the institution. This might involve comparisons of 'similar' pupils in comparable subject departments (boys, for example, or higher/lower attainers) or different areas of the curriculum in primaries. Where data have been available, trends over time have also been of interest. The overriding purpose, of course, has been to provide a firmer grounding for tailored action.

The introduction of more rigorous procedures for self-evaluation takes time (MacBeath, 1999; Ofsted, 1998b) and few schools in Special Measures have initially invested much effort in this direction. But a small number of schools do report extending their understanding of their core concerns (notably in relation to aspects of teaching) in this way by, for example, organising classroom observation amongst peers (perhaps using Ofsted's criteria) or tapping into pupils' perspectives on their teaching. In the short-term, most have understandably chosen to concentrate on the problems revealed in their inspections, which have seemed more pressing. The challenge of learning to combine the two approaches, if progress beyond Special Measures is to be sustained, has been left for later.

10. AFTER SPECIAL MEASURES:
MANAGING CHANGE & CREATING CAPACITY

A school is taken off Special Measures when the HMI monitoring it are satisfied that it has made the necessary progress in 'the areas that need to be remedied' including those featured in its action plan. In addition, the 'school must also show that it has the capacity (that is the commitment, strategy and systems in place) to secure further improvement' (Ofsted, 1997b: 2).

At this stage in the school's journey the most readily-available evidence will be related to whether it has, by one means or another, successfully addressed major issues in its action plan. But concerns about the ways in which it has secured these gains will begin to be relevant. Does the fact that specific actions have been taken signal the initiation of an 'improvement culture'? Unfortunately, the 'cultural dimensions' of an institution are more difficult to grasp than issues about whether particular 'success criteria' have been met. Has, in short, 'the way we do things around here' really begun to change or is much of it window dressing? HMI are relatively skilled and experienced in probing beneath the surface features of an institution but, ultimately, this is a judgement call, made on the balance of probabilities.

In *Change Forces* Michael Fullan explores some of the dilemmas encountered in reforming and improving schools. 'Smoothness in the early stages of a change effort', he warns, 'is a sure sign that superficial or trivial change is being substituted for substantial change attempts' (Fullan, 1993: 26). Nonetheless, bearing in mind Stoll and Fink's observation that 'ineffective' schools appear to be 'controlled by change rather than controlling it', the pursuit of some relatively unproblematic changes may help in the early stages. Watling and colleagues (1998) comment:

> "Changes to the school environment, attendance and uniform, while short-term changes, can result in tangible gains. Following a period of low morale, visible changes demonstrate that things are to be different in the school.....early indicators of a climate change in the school are important in sustaining further improvements. They have a symbolic and a real function in that they show that change is taking place and that a new and different school culture is emerging".

The major challenge emerges when these 'minor' changes have been implemented. Now that some needed reforms have been put in place, will the whole thing start to unravel?

Stages of Development?

It is not unusual for schools engaged in rapid change to have launched upwards of a dozen initiatives. Indeed, individual staff members may be able to refer to three or four in which they themselves have been closely involved. In drawing up plans for the next stages of their development, Gray and colleagues (1999: 145) suggest that schools need to take stock of the ways in which they have managed the change process itself. They offer a three-category framework for this purpose which focuses on the mix of 'tactics', 'strategies' and 'capacity-building' which schools have employed.

Nearly all the schools they studied had been operating at the level of 'tactics'. They had focused on the outcome measures and identified some 'obvious' things they needed to do to improve their pupils' performance. They had engaged, for example, in 'more monitoring of pupil performance, had entered at least some pupils for an extra exam and had focused rather more on providing support for 'borderline' candidates than in the past' (Gray *et al*, 1999: 145). In the process they had begun to respond to what more than one head referred to as 'the improvement game'. However, as the study shows, 'responding simply at a tactical level proved to be demanding of staff energies, time, and to a lesser extent, resources....after two or three years their effects seem to have waned'.

Some schools had moved beyond tactics to demonstrate more 'strategic' thinking. They had undoubtedly pulled most of the tactical levers but were more aware of their limitations. 'They focused more systematically on particular areas of weakness, encouraging and working with certain departments to help them get back on track.....Their agendas had begun to include some of the links between classroom practices and pupils' learning' (*ibid*: 145). Hardly any of the schools Gray and colleagues studied had, however, reached the 'capacity-building' stage and those which had were, almost invariably, schools which were already 'more effective'. They were: 'knowledgeable about the problems to be faced, believed that they had engaged with issues of teaching and learning for some time and were able to put forward fairly confident rationales for the next steps' (*ibid*: 146).

No *systematic* attempt to evaluate the ways in which schools in Special Measures have tackled the 'cultural dimensions' of the change process has yet been undertaken. A superficial reading of the large number of accounts which are now available might attribute the changes to little more than a change of leadership, a (re)kindling of teachers' enthusiasm and plain 'hard work'[15]. In telling their 'stories' those most intimately involved sometimes do a disservice to the sophistication of their insights and efforts. A more systematic reading of these 'single-case' studies (of the kind undertaken for this review) points to the heavy use of 'tactical' approaches to get things moving. If these turn out to be the main foundations of the schools' improvement, then their prospects shortly after being removed from Special Measures are likely to be poor - underpinning will shortly be required. Such schools can be expected to 'plateau' and reports that they have 'hit the wall' are likely to follow.

It is not yet obvious how many schools have engaged at the 'strategic' or 'capacity-building' levels or to what extent. Such limited evidence as is available on the 'stages' of schools' development suggests that for schools which are still comparatively 'ineffective' these might be rather ambitious objectives which could only be contemplated at a later date. However, there are some indications from the case-study evidence which confound too simplistic a reliance on sequential and linear-based approaches to school improvement. Leaders of schools emerging from Special Measures will take some wry satisfaction from the second of Fullan's eight 'lessons' about change. 'Change', he observes, 'is non-linear, loaded with uncertainty and sometimes perverse' (1993: 24). In

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[15] The frequency with which the phrase 'hard work' appears in these accounts, whilst undoubtedly reflecting participants' experiences, is both informative and worrying. Studies of organisational change suggest that participants can boost their commitments for short periods of time but then tend to relapse if this is the sole or main contributor to increased performance.

short, some schools show signs of having developed elements of a more 'strategic' approach whilst Special Measures were still in force.

The longer-term prognosis for these institutions is more optimistic. Schools which have, for example, given small groups of teachers some collective and strategic responsibility for developing an area of policy or which have encouraged staff to engage actively in discussions about classroom practice, are probably already operating part of the time at the 'strategic' level. There again, schools which have begun to find more systematic ways of drawing upon external support (from their LEAs and others), or who have been learning to take pupil 'voices' more seriously as contributions to the improvement of teaching, are almost certainly at the threshold as well. What all these approaches share in common is that they depend on a measure of co-operation and trust for their successful implementation; they can be 'lead from the front' but other forms of leadership may eventually be more rewarding.

Concluding Thought

Those who work in schools 'causing concern' (or who take up the challenge of working with them) know that there are few easy answers. They will make mistakes and pursue blind alleys; only stubbornness and sheer determination will get them to their destinations. It would be unwise, however, to ignore the fact that some progress is being made. A few years ago there were simply travellers' tales about how to get from A to B; the footpaths were not well-marked and sometimes petered out. There are now some minor roads and well-worn tracks to which this review of schools' experiences may serve as a rudimentary guide. Some of the major roads to improvement for schools in difficulties are, however, still in the process of construction.

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