



Education and Training Inspectorate

A Second Evaluation Report on The Specialist Schools' Programme 2008-2009

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Providing Inspection Services for
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SECTION 1

1. PURPOSE OF THE INITIATIVE

1.1 The Department of Education's (the Department's) Specialist Schools' pilot project was established with the aim that specialist schools will:

- identify and build on their particular curricular strengths;
- by sharing good practice, secure whole school development;
- contribute to the development of good leadership in schools; and
- take forward a community dimension, such as with other schools, Further Education (FE) colleges, business and industry and the wider community.

The Department's stated intention is that this will help to move schools from an environment characterised by competition to one of co-operation and collaboration.

1.2 The core objectives of the project are to:

- provide opportunities for pupils to benefit from wider learning experiences and to ensure maximum impact of the available expertise and resources, by promoting co-operation and collaboration among schools and between schools and other providers of education and training for 14-19 year-olds;
- provide parents with greater choice among a range of schools, which have differing areas of focus;
- raise standards and realise performance improvement for all young people; and
- develop links between schools, their local communities and the economy to ensure that all young people are given a strong foundation for lifelong learning and work.

1.3 School improvement through self-evaluation and the application of aspects of an existing curricular strength as a whole school development process are at the heart of the specialist school concept.

1.4 It is important that the range of specialisms selected, including vocational areas, will enable schools to be innovative and to develop strengths that are relevant to the emergent needs of Northern Ireland as well as the needs of the pupils in the local area served by the school.

2. SCHOOL FUNDING

2.1 Specialist schools have, until this year's designation, received additional recurrent resources of £100 per pupil for each year of a four-year period and a one-off support grant of up to £100,000. In addition, they have been required to raise unconditional private sponsorship of £25,000 to demonstrate their commitment to the concept and to developing and sustaining links with the business sector. These arrangements have changed for the designation of the fourth and final cohort of specialist schools (see para 5.1 below).

3. PLANNING AND REPORTING

3.1 Specialist schools are expected to demonstrate that they have stable or rising standards of attainment within their chosen specialism. They must produce:

- a four-year School Development Plan (SDP);
- a four-year Community Development Plan that involves developing partnerships with at least five partner schools. These should be a mix of primary and post-primary schools, including at least one post-primary school; and
- an annual report to the Department on progress against the targets set.

4. CRITERIA FOR EVALUATION

4.1 The purpose of the project is to enable the Department to identify a model that best meets the needs of pupils, the education sector and the wider economy.

4.2 The primary objectives of the project are to consider:

- the role of specialist schools in helping to increase and improve choice for pupils and parents and drive up educational standards in Northern Ireland;
- the application process;
- the range of specialist subjects; and
- the impact on schools with a range of different characteristics.

4.3 The Department recognises that *“it will take some years to assess the full impact of a specialist approach on providing greater choice and raising standards.”* However, *“in the short to medium term, surveys of schools to gauge pupil, teacher and parent reaction, together with ETI evidence, could inform the roll-out of the programme.”* The Department acknowledges the key role that the schools' self-evaluation plays in the whole school improvement process and that it should contribute to the evaluation of the project.

4.4 All of the schools are required to take part in the evaluation process and are subject to inspection throughout the project and will be evaluated against criteria concerning their ability to:

- demonstrate that the specialism proposed is an area of clear curricular strength, which has stable or rising levels of attainment;
- demonstrate how the strengths in the proposed specialist area have the potential to promote good quality teaching and learning and whole school development;
- demonstrate how they will use the specialism to develop existing links with the other schools, FE colleges and the wider community, including business and industry;
- demonstrate their capacity to take on the challenge of specialist status;
- have viable and sustainable enrolments; and
- be in a robust financial position – specialist school status is dependent upon a financial plan considered and approved by the Board of Governors and endorsed by the Department.

4.5 The Department's original intention was that designation as a specialist school would be for a four-year period. A school's failure to meet the majority of its targets or to fail to produce effective plans to sustain improvement, could lead to specialist status being withdrawn during this period. At the end of the four-year period, a school's designation as a specialist school was to end.

5. THE CURRENT STATUS

5.1 In 2008-2009, there were 34 pilot specialist schools in three cohorts. On 22 April 2009, the Minister for Education announced the award of specialist school status to a further ten schools from September 2009 bringing the total number of Specialist Schools to 44. However, as a consequence of pressures on the 2009-2010 budgets, she further announced that the designation for cohort 4 would be curtailed to two years from four and the designation for cohort 3 reduced from four to three years. Furthermore, cohort 1 would have the opportunity to apply for an extension of their designation for a fifth year, "*subject to the school demonstrating that there has been improvement since their designation began in September 2006*". This will result in all 44 specialist schools reaching the end of their designation on the same date in August 2011. The Minister has also indicated her intention to draw on the evidence and experiences from the existing specialist schools to develop a more inclusive model with a sharper focus on:

- raising standards;
- tackling the barriers to learning that too many of our young people face;

- sharing and learning from one another; and
- ensuring that the voice of pupils is sought and listened to in schools.

SECTION 2

6. THE EDUCATION AND TRAINING INSPECTORATE'S EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT

6.1 The role of the Education and Training Inspectorate (the Inspectorate) in this project is to audit and assure the quality of the self-evaluation process in the schools and to report to the Department and to stakeholders. This is the second such report, the first was provided in April 2008.

6.2 The Inspectorate carries out its role by conducting:

- a baseline inspection in the first year for every school awarded Specialist School status. Some of the baseline inspections were conducted as part of a standard inspection of the school. The baseline or the standard inspection reports are published on the Inspectorate's website;
- an audit of the annual self-evaluation reports produced by the schools for the Department and, based on a risk analysis, identifying those schools which require a monitoring or a follow-up visit; and
- monitoring and/or follow-up visits and, where appropriate, issuing a further written report.

7. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FROM 2007-2008 (APRIL 2008)

7.1 In April 2008 the Inspectorate issued a report on the project for 2007-2008 in which it concluded that a very good start had been made. Strengths were evident in nearly all of the schools, in most aspects of the project. In a very small number of schools, there were some significant areas for improvement.

7.2 A range of recommendations was made for continued improvement in the management effectiveness of the project in schools, the use of value-added measures, the school plan, the community plan, the financial plan and in networking and these were drawn to the attention of the schools in all cohorts and to the Specialist Schools project's stakeholders¹.

7.3 Furthermore, the Inspectorate recommended to the Department in 2008 that staff development needed to be provided for all specialist school co-ordinators in the process of self-evaluation. In response, the Regional Training Unit (RTU)² provided a course (two days separated by a nine-week gap) in April and June 2009. The Inspectorate contributed significantly to the course by providing evidence-based

¹ A Survey Report On The Specialist Schools' Initiative 2007-2008. April 2008. Education and Training Inspectorate. Rathgael House. Bangor.

² The RTU website indicates that the RTU assists schools seeking designation through workshops and seminars to prepare for specialist School status, to this end; RTU has agreed memorandums of understanding with the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT) and Youth Sport Trust (YST).

feedback to the school coordinators. Two inspectors met separately with the Specialist Schools' Principals' Forum to discuss the findings and one inspector attended a conference organised by RTU on behalf of the Specialist Schools in June 2009.

8. THE INSPECTORATE'S FINDINGS FROM 2008-2009

8.1 The findings of the evaluation report for 2008-2009 are based upon an audit of the annual reports submitted to the Department by the twenty-five cohort 1 and 2 Specialist Schools in September 2008, as well as on the ten formal follow-up visits conducted in 2009 to those schools where the annual reports indicated possible causes for concern.

8.2 Many of the recommendations made by the Inspectorate in its April 2008 report remain valid for the majority of the schools, as reported here.

8.3 A brief summary of the findings of the baseline inspections for the nine cohort 3 schools are included later in this report.

8.4 This report uses the table immediately below as a basis for the evaluative comments which follow.

almost/nearly all	more than 90%
most	75%-90%
a majority	50%-74%
a significant minority	30%-49%
a minority	10%-29%
very few/a small number	less than 10%

9. THE SCHOOL PLAN – THE SPECIALISMS (COHORTS 1 AND 2)

9.1 There is evidence of continued improvement in the specialism in the majority of schools. This is more apparent at General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) level, less so at General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advanced (A) level. However, school reporting is far from consistent and a majority of schools are not reporting progress clearly enough in their annual reports.

9.2 In a minority of cases, schools have missed specialist targets. This is more so where schools specialise in a large number of related subjects; for example, a few schools have up to six subjects contributing towards the specialism, whilst others have four and five. Ensuring progress and managing the monitoring and self-evaluation process is more demanding in these cases.

9.3 Where underachievement in the specialism has been identified, the schools have set out to address the contributory factors through a variety of approaches including: the early identification of underachievement, mentoring of individual pupils and by evaluating aspects of teaching and learning. The schools describe the actions taken to address these issues, but have not evaluated adequately the success of the strategies adopted.

9.4 The upward trend in the numbers of pupils studying the specialisms is being maintained in the majority of schools and has led to the introduction of a range of innovative courses. It is important that such courses will be viable over time and, where appropriate, will be able to contribute to the emergent local area learning community. In a small number of instances, the low numbers of pupils currently studying the specialism at post-16 is not viable and schools report their dependence on Specialist Schools funding to sustain these courses.

9.5 Factors, such as difficulties in recruiting specialist teachers, illness or accommodation problems have hindered the ability of a small number of schools to deliver their key targets. Schools need to be aware of their responsibility to deliver outcomes; contingency plans should be in place to manage such risks.

9.6 Although a small number of the annual reports to the Department are incomplete, a general picture of improvement within the specialisms is evident. Where data is incomplete, schools should be mindful of their responsibility to the Department for this additional investment and ensure that appropriate action is taken to improve the quality of their reporting.

10. THE SCHOOL PLAN – WHOLE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT (COHORTS 1 AND 2)

10.1 Sharing, across the whole school, of the approach to teaching and learning inherent to the specialism, together with self-evaluation of progress, is central to the effectiveness of the Specialist Schools.

10.2 At Key Stage 3 (KS3) most schools met part or all of the targets for improvement. Targets were achieved more consistently in English than in mathematics.

10.3 At GCSE, there is definite improvement in standards with approximately two-thirds of schools achieving their targets and a further one-quarter at least partly achieved; a small number of schools missed their GCSE targets.

10.4 For those schools which set whole school targets at GCE A level, there is evidence of improvement in most cases. As a result of their self-evaluation a small number of schools have added GCE A level targets which were not in the original plan. The inclusion of more discriminating and demanding targets, such as this, is to be welcomed.

10.5 There has been continued progress on the integration of Specialist School planning into whole school planning. Schools link their work in the specialism with other aspects of school development, for example, the implementation of the revised curriculum, or staff development through Performance Review and Staff Development (PRSD). This joined-up approach brings coherence to teaching and learning across the whole school.

10.6 There is evidence in a few schools that engagement in the project is contributing to the development of good leadership, in contrast however, a small number of schools do not demonstrate the same effective leadership.

10.7 In the majority of schools teachers are becoming increasingly familiar with, and developing their capacity in the process of self-evaluation and this contributes to the potential for school improvement. However, it remains a trend that action planning to effect whole school improvement is less effective at whole school level compared with that within the specialism.

10.8 There is evidence of unrealistic targets being set, with, for example, schools anticipating a regular year-on-year improvement, rather than adopting an approach which adds specific value to each year cohort. Schools targets must show improvement which reflects the added investment, when benchmarked against similar (non-specialist) schools.

10.9 A small number of schools are not providing evidence of having fully and thoroughly analysed the available performance and benchmarked data, both at whole school and subject level. This reduces their capacity to demonstrate improvement. More rigorous mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating both the available data and the impact of actions taken need to be implemented by these schools.

10.10 A small number of schools are setting process, as well as outcome related targets, with appropriate focus being given to aspects of learning and teaching and the dissemination of good practice across the areas of learning. This approach is having a positive effect on standards.

10.11 In their annual report to the Department, two-thirds of the schools had action plans with actions that were of good or better quality. One-third of schools had plans in which some of the action points:

- were not SMART³;
- were repetitions of actions taken in the previous year, with minor edits, but with no evidence of their impact;
- failed to give adequate focus to literacy and numeracy; and
- in the case of high attaining schools, contained targets which were insufficiently discriminating.

11. THE COMMUNITY PLAN (COHORTS 1 AND 2)

11.1 There is a variety of innovative links being made between the specialist schools and local partners. The evidence, while largely anecdotal, indicates that partners are appreciative of the support provided by the specialist school. A small number of schools have failed to provide a thorough evaluation of the community plan in their reports.

11.2 Very good links with primary schools have been established by the majority of schools and in best practice, pupils have gained from improved transition and progression. In a small number of schools, cognisance has not been taken of the work with primary schools in baselining or modifying KS3 teaching plans.

11.3 In the best practice, primary teachers gained from professional development afforded by the teachers from the specialist school. In the least effective practice, schools have delivered services to the primary school which have not empowered the primary teachers.

11.4 The links between Specialist and other post-primary providers including FE colleges are less developed. While there is evidence of schools working together, for example, the sharing of good practice, developing assessment activities and joint staff training, more solid and sustainable links aligned to area-based planning need to be established.

11.5 A small number of schools have developed meaningful links with business or industry partners. In the context of the Careers Education Information Advice and Guidance strategy⁴ much greater priority needs to be given to develop links with the business community.

³ SMART (Specific, measureable, achievable, realistic and time-bound)

⁴ Preparing for Success: Careers Education Information Advice and Guidance Strategy. DE and DEL, January 2009

11.6 The community dimension of the project is the weakest aspect of the Specialist school initiative. There is some evidence that working with community partners has enhanced the standing of specialist schools within the community. There needs to be a greater emphasis on evaluating the outcomes for this aspect of the project in order to improve further links for the benefit for all in the community and to demonstrate how the actions in the community plan are intended to raise standards in the specialist school.

12. SUMMARY OF COHORT 3 BASELINE INSPECTIONS

12.1 Nine schools were awarded Specialist School status with effect from September 2008. Following the practice adopted for cohorts 1 and 2, the Inspectorate conducted a baseline inspection in each school during 2008-2009, three of which were conducted as part of a standard or formal follow-up inspection.

12.2 Most of the schools were found to have identified appropriate and measurable targets for improvement to demonstrate:

- that their specialism was an area of clear curricular strength, which has stable and rising levels of attainment and in which almost all of the teaching was good or better;
- how they will use their specialism to develop existing links with other schools, FE colleges and the wider community, including business and industry; and
- viable financial planning to allocate funding.

12.3 For the purpose of showing improvement more clearly, the Inspectorate identified that:

- a minority of the schools needed to review some of the attainment targets set in the specialism itself; and
- a significant minority of the schools needed to review their targets to make better use of relevant qualitative, performance and benchmarking data in order to show how the strengths in the specialism would promote high quality teaching and learning through whole school development.

12.4 The Inspectorate will continue to monitor the work of these schools and audit their annual reports as part of the Specialist Schools programme.

13. THE DEVELOPMENT OF A SPECIALIST SCHOOLS 'MOVEMENT'

13.1 One of the Department's original intentions was that Specialist School status would help to move schools "*from an environment characterised by competition to one of co-operation and collaboration*". The Principals' Forum refers to the emergence of a Specialist Schools '*movement*'.

13.2 There is evidence of growing and worthwhile co-operation between Specialist Schools and the sharing of insights, expertise and approaches.

13.3 More opportunities should be created in the final years of the programme as currently constituted to:

- extend this shared practice across all of the teachers in the Specialist Schools; and
- provide opportunities for pupils to benefit from wider learning experiences and to ensure maximum impact of the available expertise and resources, by promoting co-operation and collaboration among schools and between schools and other providers of education and training for 14-19 year-olds.

14. RECOMMENDATIONS

14.1 Arising mainly from the findings in cohorts 1 and 2, the Inspectorate recommends that the Specialist Schools should consider and address a number of areas for improvement.

14.2 Particular weaknesses, which need to be addressed, are evident in almost all schools in:

- evaluating outcomes, as opposed to describing enabling actions;
- the identification of indicators to measure improvement, and
- where necessary, clear action to address problematic aspects.

14.3 All schools need to continue to develop further their expertise and their arrangements for planning, monitoring, evaluating and reporting on improvement, including identifying specific success indicators.

14.4 The targets being set need to reflect more closely the pupils' current and predicted levels of performance, take greater account of attainment by the pupils on transfer, of benchmarked examination performance data, of national datasets available for comparative analysis and be linked more explicitly into the school's overall improvement agenda.

14.5 The rationale for adjusting any targets which the school has set for itself needs to be set out clearly and supported effectively, especially where the attainments are below, or risk falling below, performance in schools of a similar type.

14.6 The need, through whole school staff development, to help all teachers in the school to understand how the specialism is used consistently to bring about whole school improvement.

14.7 Specialist Schools, and the Department, through area-based planning, need to be planning for the long-term sustainability of viable and effective courses and successful developments which are dependent on Specialist Schools funding.

14.8 In a minority of schools, the staff responsible for co-ordinating specialist school status need to work more closely and effectively with senior management, heads of department, the School Information Management System (SIMS) co-ordinator and the co-ordinator for staff development to strengthen commitment to improvement across the whole school.

14.9 In the majority of the schools, there is scope to improve considerably the clarity and consistency of their annual reporting, with greater continuity over the years for which status has been awarded.

14.10 The evident benefits which arise when Specialist Schools share their insights, approaches and expertise with each other need to be extended to the benefit of all of the teachers in the Specialist Schools and to those in schools beyond.

15. CONCLUSION

While progress continues to be made in the majority of schools, the evidence of beneficial improvement is clearest across the specialist subjects. Improvement is less consistent in the whole school plans and least apparent in the community plans. Specialist schools are expected to take responsibility for showing improvement directly arising from the investment which they receive, especially where their attainment is falling below the standards of schools of a similar type which are not specialist schools.

NAMES OF SPECIALIST SCHOOLS AND THEIR SPECIALISM

Cohort 1 Specialist Schools, designated from September 2006

Ashfield Girls High School, Belfast	ICT
Belfast Model School for Girls	ICT
Glengormley High School	ICT
Ballyclare High School	ICT
St Cecilia's College, Derry	Performing Arts
St Louise's Comprehensive College, Belfast	Performing Arts
Limavady High School	Performing Arts
St Mary's College, Derry	Science
Lumen Christi College, Derry	Science
St Malachy's College, Belfast	Music
Shimna Integrated College, Newcastle	Languages
St John's High School, Dromore	Business & Enterprise

Cohort 2 Specialist Schools, designated from September 2007

Hazelwood Integrated College, Newtownabbey	Arts
Portora Royal School, Enniskillen	Arts
Carrickfergus College	Business & Enterprise
St Patrick's and St Brigid's High School, Claudy	Business & Enterprise
Grosvenor Grammar School, Belfast	Languages
Belfast High School, Newtownabbey	Languages
St Columb's College, Derry	Mathematics & Computing
Loreto College, Coleraine	Science
St Patrick's Comprehensive College, Maghera	Science
St Mary's Grammar School, Magherafelt	Science
St Colman's College, Newry	Science
Dromore High School	Science
Cross and Passion College, Ballycastle	Sport

Cohort 3 Specialist Schools, designated from September 2008

Carrickfergus Grammar School	Science
Downshire School, Carrickfergus	Business & Enterprise
Slemish Integrated College, Ballymena	Humanities
Ulidia Integrated College, Carrickfergus	Arts
Bangor Academy & Sixth Form College	Humanities
St Patrick's Grammar School, Downpatrick	Humanities
Holy Trinity College, Cookstown	Sport
St Paul's High School, Bessbrook	Science
Thornhill College, Derry	Maths

Cohort 4 Specialist Schools, designated from September 2009 (with different funding arrangements)

St Louis' Grammar, Kilkeel	Technology
Antrim Grammar School	Maths and computing
Victoria College, Belfast	Science
Rainey Endowed School, Magherafelt	Maths
St Patrick's Academy, Dungannon	Science
St Mary's High School, Newry	Maths
Assumption Grammar School, Ballynahinch	Music
St Dominic's High School, Belfast	Humanities
St Ciaran's College, Ballygawley	Business & Enterprise
St Patrick's College, Bearnagheeha, Belfast	Humanities

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