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# *Evaluation of Pilot Beacon Schools*

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# **1. INTRODUCTION**

## **1.1 Pilot Beacon Schools**

The Beacon Schools initiative is one of the many related but distinct initiatives forming part of the DfEE's school improvement agenda. The plans for implementing the Beacon Schools initiative – as centres of excellence committed to raising standards – were announced by the then Minister for School Standards in summer 1998: '[Beacon] schools represent a cross-section of the best in education practice which we want to spread out to other schools.' (Hackett, 1998.)

The 75 schools selected for DfEE funding during the pilot phase from amongst 150 applicants (themselves identified through OFSTED inspection evidence) began operating as Beacon Schools in September 1998. The Secretary of State for Education and Employment felt sufficiently confident about progress so far to announce, at the end of 1998, that the initiative would be expanded to include a further 125 schools from September 1999, although the selection criteria would be more elaborate than for the first 75 (GB. DfEE, 1999b). Central government support for the initiative is expected to continue at increased levels in 2000-01 and 2001-02. Similar developments are being taken forward in the further education sector through the Further Education Standards Fund.

Beacon Schools are one dimension of a DfEE drive to base strategies for school improvement in schools themselves – related initiatives include specialist schools and early excellence centres, the primary sector SCITT (school-centred initial teacher training) consortium, sports and technology colleges and, of course, the city technology college scheme (now nearly a decade old). This 'site-based' model is complemented by a partnership principle; that is to say, these schools are intended to play a formative role for other schools in identifying, celebrating and – crucially – disseminating and promoting good practice in key areas like leadership, teaching and rigorous monitoring of pupils' progress. In the words of the then School Standards Minister: '[Beacon Schools] will help prevent less successful schools foundering on the rocks of failure. They will also act as a guiding light for others to follow, by representing examples of best practice in areas such as numeracy, tackling disaffection or overall performance' (TES, 1998a).

To assist the implementation of the initiative, the pilot Beacon Schools received about £1.8 million extra funding, distributed between all 75 schools through grant-funding. Their responsibilities have included dissemination and promotion activities, varying from the development of curriculum and/or training materials which may be published in booklet form or through the electronic media, to provision of in-service training (INSET) for colleagues in neighbouring or partner schools, to participation in conferences and contributions to research (see, for example, GB. DfEE, 1999a). Given the versatility afforded by electronic media, 'partnership' activities may not

necessarily be restricted to a particular geographic locality. Eligible activities for expenditure out of each school's grant include supply cover for teacher release, provision of seminars, outreach activities, teacher training and consultancy to local schools (GB, DfEE, 1998). Beacon Schools are required to produce an annual report on their activities for promoting good practice, and to indicate the level of expenditure on those activities.

The Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to undertake an evaluation – starting in March 1999 and finishing in September 1999 – of the pilot phase of the Beacon Schools initiative.

## **1.2 Aims and Methods of the Evaluation**

The initiative was therefore in its very early stages and the evaluation needed to reflect this in its aims and design. Moreover, a key feature of the Beacon initiative is that its success (or otherwise) is predicated not only on the capacity of Beacon Schools to deliver appropriate and effective provision but, just as crucially, on the capacity of the non-Beacon partners to translate and implement the lessons learned from Beacon provision. The fact that only the Beacon Schools are in direct receipt of DfEE funding should not deter us from understanding the initiative as having an essentially 'diffused' nature.

The project aims were accordingly to evaluate:

- ♦ the range and quality of Beacon School activities to support good practice;
- ♦ the use made by Beacon Schools of resources;
- ♦ the perceived value of Beacon School activities to their 'target audience' of non-Beacon Schools, local education authorities (LEAs) and providers of teacher training;
- ♦ the likelihood of Beacon School activities leading to school improvements, especially raised standards, in non-Beacon Schools.

The main phases in the project design were:

- 1. Analysis of, and a written report on, annual report questionnaires** completed by all pilot Beacon Schools. The questionnaires contained detailed information on such areas as which topics/types of provision each school had been working on, how staff were being deployed to manage and deliver them, how they were developing ways of working with other institutions, how relationships with LEAs were being built, and how funding and other resources were being utilised.
- 2. Qualitative fieldwork with eight case studies**, to reveal the critical factors supporting or inhibiting the Beacon Schools initiative as it developed in different circumstances and with different objectives. A core set of activities was undertaken in each case-study, consisting of interviews with key players; and, where possible and appropriate, relevant documentary analysis; scrutiny of training and support

materials; and, where possible and appropriate, observation of selected training sessions. Around 90 interviews were conducted and recorded.

The criteria for the selection of the eight case studies, consisting of Beacon Schools and their partner institutions, are described below.

- ♦ *Mode of dissemination.* Although it might have been expected that the case studies should be chosen to illustrate ‘good practice’, the team had no prior view (i) of what constitutes good practice in Beacon initiative terms (this was to be explored and defined by the evaluation) nor (ii) about which schools – or rather networks of Beacon and non-Beacon Schools – were displaying good practice. Instead, because the Beacon initiative is testing out approaches to school-based dissemination, we thought it was important to ensure that, at least in principle, the case studies covered as broad a range of dissemination as possible. Another, pragmatic, reason for using ‘mode of dissemination’ as the primary criterion was that we had accrued detailed information at school-level on this from the questionnaire returns. The modes of dissemination were broadly grouped as follows:

1. mainly *via* INSET with a limited number of schools
2. mainly *via* teacher training providers and/or LEAs
3. mainly *via* the use of information and communications technology
4. mainly *via* ad hoc/opportunistic dissemination

In addition to this primary criterion, a number of secondary or contextual criteria were used:

- ♦ *Sector of education:* to reflect the overall spread of pilot Beacon Schools.
- ♦ *Geography:* to ensure, for example, that rural and urban schools were included.
- ♦ *Performance patterns:* to take some account of school performance, by including a ‘low performing’ Beacon School as well as higher performing ones.
- ♦ *LEA context:* to take account of the involvement of LEAs, by including Beacon Schools both with supportive and with less supportive LEAs.

A grid was constructed with ‘mode of dissemination’ as one dimension and ‘sector’ (primary/secondary/special) as another. All Beacon Schools were placed within the relevant cells of the grid according to their predominant mode of dissemination (as given on their questionnaire return) and their sector. Final selection of schools from within the cells then took account of the other contextual criteria. Four primary schools, three secondary schools and one special school – together with their partner institutions or end-users – were chosen on this basis for case-study work. For more detail, see Chapter 3.

### **1.3 Structure of the Report**

The report consists of three kinds of findings:

- ♦ a report on the findings from, and issues raised by, the questionnaire survey (Chapter 2); we have reproduced here the executive summary written earlier for the DfEE;
- ♦ a report on the fieldwork evidence emerging from the eight case studies (Chapters 3 and 4);
- ♦ a conceptualisation and an assessment of the Beacon initiative in its pilot phase, as a key approach to site-based school improvement (Chapters 5 and 6).

The report concludes with some recommendations for the key players (Chapter 7).

Other relevant information is contained in the Appendices.



## **2. EVIDENCE FROM THE SURVEY**

### **2.1 Background**

The evidence summarised here<sup>1</sup> is based on information provided by Beacon School staff in the form of responses to an Annual Report Questionnaire issued to schools by the DfEE and completed during spring 1999. Sixty-seven Annual Report Questionnaires were received in time to be used for the analysis. Given the inconsistent nature of some of the data, NFER would urge caution in drawing authoritative conclusions from these findings, particularly those relating to financial data.

### **2.2 Beacon Areas and Activities**

#### **2.2.1 Beacon areas**

In summary:

- ♦ the range and diversity of Beacon areas and activities was considerable;
- ♦ the most popular area, INSET, itself contained a considerable range of events, courses and activities;
- ♦ numeracy and literacy (on their own or together) were identified as Beacon areas by 12 of the 67 schools;
- ♦ the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT), along with use of the Internet or Intranet, was identified as a main area of activity by 14 of the 67 schools;
- ♦ initial teacher training, along with training for newly qualified teachers, was an important dimension of the initiative – 25 schools identified these as Beacon areas;
- ♦ school management and leadership formed another important dimension of Beacon work – 14 schools mentioned either of these areas;
- ♦ of the 247 items or areas identified, 31 related to individual subject areas, with the most frequently cited subjects being mathematics (six schools) and science (five schools).

#### **2.2.2 Frequency and nature of Beacon activities**

Qualitative analysis of the responses to questions about the frequency and nature of activity revealed that Beacon activities could be:

- ♦ annual events (like conferences or seminars);

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<sup>1</sup> A detailed report, together with an Executive Summary (reproduced as this section), was submitted to the DfEE in July 1999.

- ♦ regular events (like weekly or monthly visits to or from schools, or regular training courses);
- ♦ daily events (like the use of ICT or the Internet);
- ♦ *ad hoc*/continuous in their availability (as in offering advice, schemes of work, management policies or examples of departmental good practice).

### 2.2.3 Information and dissemination

The range of types of information disseminated was considerable. On the questionnaire, each school could identify up to five types of disseminated information: many schools indicated more than one type and in all 210 items were coded. The six most popular methods of dissemination comprised interpersonal, face-to-face methods, such as meetings, visits and discussions involving Beacon and non-Beacon staff. Written media and the electronic media were also used for disseminating Beacon information, but not to the same extent as interpersonal modes.

### 2.2.4 Areas of difficulty

Around two-thirds of schools identified at least some difficulties or problems; the difficulty most frequently expressed by respondents related to what they saw as the potentially detrimental effects of Beacon-related activities on their own school's good practice. There was a keen awareness that the Beacon initiative put pressure on staff by thrusting some individuals very much into the spotlight.

Another area of particular difficulty expressed by Beacon Schools was in relation to meeting (or failing to meet) the expectations or demands of other schools. In some cases, respondents noted that partner schools' expectations were simply unrealistic: *'some people [who] request help/advice are seeking a fast and easy solution and are frustrated when we cannot supply a "miracle" answer'*. More typically, however, schools reported they simply could not cope with the sheer volume of requests for help: *'courses are over-subscribed and demand for our specialism is overwhelming'*. School staff were conscious of the sensitivities of working with non-Beacon colleagues.

Another area of difficulty expressed by respondents related to difficulties in initiating and developing relationships with other schools, as a slow and (frequently) labour-intensive process, sometimes with little result.

Some schools had also experienced difficulties in working with their LEA, and many expressed their frustration at the failure of particular LEAs to react constructively to the initiative and schools' programmes of work related to it.

## **2.3 Resources, including Staff, Deployed for Beacon Activities**

### **2.3.1 Beacon staff numbers and characteristics**

The number of teachers reportedly involved in the Beacon activities of a school ranged from one to 38; the number of non-teaching staff involved in Beacon activities ranged from zero to 16. It is evident that there was less involvement of non-teaching staff in Beacon activities than of teachers.

Much Beacon activity was being carried out or supervised by headteachers, their deputies and their relevant heads of department or co-ordinators, i.e. senior and middle managers. The role of secretary or administrator was also an important one in many of the Beacon Schools.

Around two-thirds of the Beacon Schools (44 out of 67) indicated that two or more of their staff had some level of contact time reduction in order to carry out Beacon activities. A further 11 schools indicated that one member of staff had some contact time reduction.

### **2.3.2 Time spent on Beacon activities**

There were difficulties summarising the responses here into a standard format, but some patterns were apparent. One fairly common format seemed to be for a headteacher or a deputy headteacher to manage Beacon activities for half a day or a day per week and for one or more classroom teachers to spend an average of a half to one hour a day on Beacon work. It also appeared that there were very few designated Beacon co-ordinators or staff with a large non-contact time allocation for co-ordinating the Beacon activities.

### **2.3.3 Cover for Beacon staff**

The majority of Beacon Schools had made provision for teachers' lessons to be covered in order to enable staff to carry out their Beacon work. Schools had used both supply teachers and permanent staff to cover lessons. In addition, staff had been appointed to deliver Beacon activities or to provide cover and/or administrative support. It is worth noting that Beacon Schools had provided cover for their own staff and for staff from partner schools.

### **2.3.4 Resources**

Forty-four of the 67 Beacon Schools had allocated other resources within the school's own budget to support their Beacon work. Almost a third of schools had allocated equipment such as ICT or office equipment, 18 identified extra resources as coming from their budget (for example, to cover supply costs) and ten schools were using teaching resources. The most frequently mentioned use of resources was to support the management and operation of the Beacon initiative. Eleven schools were using resources for training purposes and six schools reported that they had allocated resources to prepare materials.

A high proportion of Beacon Schools, 54 out of 67 schools, reported that they had committed resources to partner schools. The most frequently mentioned resource committed to other schools was budget-related; for example, payment for teaching cover for staff to visit the Beacon School, travel expenses, etc. Twenty-two schools were also allocating teaching resources to partner schools.

## **2.4 The Development of Partnerships**

### **2.4.1 Development of new and existing partnerships**

There is some evidence to indicate that Beacon Schools had developed new partnerships with other institutions, particularly with non-Beacon Schools, but also with LEAs, other Beacon Schools and teacher training providers. A larger proportion of Beacon Schools already had partnerships which they were developing further.

### **2.4.2 Relations with LEAs**

The majority of LEAs, according to Beacon Schools, were at least mentioning Beacon activities in their Educational Development Plans. In some cases, it seems that Beacon Schools' relationships with LEA personnel were still being developed and were sometimes informal rather than formal. On the other hand, there were several examples of positive relationships between Beacon Schools and their LEAs which were interactive and went beyond a mention in the Education Development Plan.

## **2.5 Evaluation by Beacon Schools and Their Partners**

Almost two-thirds of Beacon Schools were currently evaluating their activities, with a further quarter planning to do so. The process of assessing Beacon work took the form of both written and verbal evaluations by partner schools, Beacon Schools, LEAs and also external organisations such as higher education institutions. The main evidence used was therefore perceptual in nature, and not directly related to improved standards of teaching, learning or performance. This is understandable from the Beacon Schools' point of view, since they would wish to get formative feedback to help improve their own activities. Schools mentioned that *'many of the benefits will only be seen in the medium to long term'*.

Evaluations of Beacon activity had also taken place within Beacon Schools, most frequently at whole-school and departmental levels. In addition to school staff, governors had sometimes been involved in the process of reviewing and assessing Beacon activities. Beacon Schools additionally mentioned the role of LEAs in evaluating their work.

The majority of schools were planning to use their evaluation to redefine or refine their Beacon role at least to some extent.

## 2.6 Issues Involved in Disseminating Good Practice

### 2.6.1 Learning about the dissemination of good practice

A number of key dissemination lessons emerged from the data which were common across all school types.

- ♦ Many respondents stressed that dissemination should be regarded and, more importantly, promoted as a two-way learning process, with mutual benefits for both the provider and receiver.
- ♦ Schools emphasised the benefits of a model of dissemination which allowed visiting staff to see theory being put into practice, and which had an element of follow-up support built in.
- ♦ Schools considered that the training and support they offered should be based on an assessment of the individual needs and requirements of partner schools, with a clear focus and specific, agreed objectives on both sides.
- ♦ Many schools pointed to their LEA as having a ‘*vital role*’ in the dissemination process.

### 2.6.2 Beacon Schools’ Advice on Disseminating Good Practice

Proffered advice on dissemination fell into two key areas. Respondents advised that, within a Beacon School:

- ♦ Beacon status should be regarded as a whole school issue. All staff should understand, and be kept properly informed about, all related activities, even if they personally are not involved with them.
- ♦ Beacon School-related activities should be kept manageable and should not be overly-ambitious. Respondents frequently recommended that Beacon Schools should ‘*start small and build up*’ with an aim of ‘*quality, not quantity*’.
- ♦ Resulting workload should be shared, ideally, by a number of staff so that no individual was over-burdened: ‘*the ‘Beacon’ teacher [is] your ambassador – do not overload them*’.
- ♦ Most importantly, Beacon Schools should keep sight of their own school’s needs, and the effect of Beacon status on the needs of staff and pupils should be monitored.

Outside the Beacon School, respondents advised that:

- ♦ Publicity materials should be of a high quality and should clearly state what the Beacon School could and could not offer to partners.
- ♦ All Beacon School promotional material, in the words of one respondent, should ‘*acknowledge the mutuality of benefit*’.
- ♦ Schools should seek advice from other Beacon Schools on the dissemination of good practice. They should build on networks already in

- ♦ Partner schools should be treated with sensitivity: positive achievements (especially in ‘failing’ schools) should be accentuated and built upon.
- ♦ Beacon School staff visiting other schools should have the ‘*right qualities*’ (‘*effective inter-personal skills are a must*’) and appropriate staff development skills.
- ♦ Disseminated good practice should, as far as possible, be tailored to the receiver.
- ♦ Evaluation should be built in to any type of dissemination activity to inform quality control.

## **2.7 Identification of Issues to be Followed up through Fieldwork**

It was thus evident from the analysis of the questionnaires that the Beacon Schools initiative had produced some early lessons about the sharing, disseminating and supporting of good practice for a ‘site-based’ model of school improvement.

The analysis also raised a series of questions and issues which were used directly to inform the fieldwork. These could be broadly grouped under the following headings:

- ♦ Identifying good practice
- ♦ Disseminating good practice
- ♦ Transferring good practice
- ♦ Identification of and support for ‘consumers’ or ‘target audience’
- ♦ Development of partnerships
- ♦ Use made of resources and ‘value for money’
- ♦ Impact of Beacon Schools on raising standards
- ♦ Unintended consequences

A series of semi-structured interview schedules was then produced (see Appendix B) to elicit information from, and views of, participants in relation to each of these key areas.

### 3. EVIDENCE FROM THE FIELDWORK: LEARNING BY BEACON SCHOOLS

Chapters 3 and 4 pull together the fieldwork findings from the eight case-study schools. Chapter 3 looks at *learning by* Beacon Schools: in other words it examines the experience of the Beacon initiative from the perspective of the Beacon School itself. There is a particular focus on the ways in which Beacon Schools identified, disseminated and transferred ‘good practice’, and also on the development of partnerships with LEAs, non-Beacon Schools and higher education institutions (HEIs).

The subsequent chapter draws upon the fieldwork findings to examine *learning from* the Beacon Schools. In other words, the emphasis in Chapter 4 is upon the experiences of the client or recipient institutions: how did non-Beacon Schools (and Higher Education Institutions) learn from their Beacon associates and what were the benefits of such partnerships for these institutions?

The bulk of the evidence from the fieldwork is presented in these two chapters, though further illustrative material is used in Chapters 5 and 6 to illuminate, respectively, some possible models of Beacon work and some of the major issues and problems arising from the findings.

As was said in Chapter 1, the eight case-study schools were selected on the basis of representing a range of modes of dissemination. (We did not know from the questionnaire findings whether or not the Beacon Schools were displaying ‘good practice’ and in any case there are problems in defining *a priori* what constitutes ‘good practice’.) We found, however, that the focus in several of the schools had changed when we came to visit them.

A loose distinction was also made between intensive and diffuse forms of dissemination. For example, we hypothesised that INSET would tend to involve intensive, sustained relations with the recipients of Beacon activity, whereas the use of ICT would be more widespread and diffuse.

The four generalised categories of dissemination listed in Section 1.2 were developed from the Beacon Schools’ reporting of their activities in the Annual Report Questionnaire. They were used primarily to ensure that a range of dissemination forms was covered. It was acknowledged from the outset that this was a simplification and that Beacon School activities could cover a considerable range of areas and also could evolve and change over time.

In addition to these primary criteria a number of secondary criteria were used. For example, the eight case-study schools chosen were selected to reflect the current spread of educational sectors within the Beacon initiative (four primary schools – identified below as case-study schools **A**, **B**, **C** and **D**; three secondary schools – identified as **E**, **F** and **G**; and one special school – case-study **G**). We also ensured that there was a suitable geographical spread of

schools and took some account of relations with LEAs, for example, including one school with a supportive LEA and one with a non-supportive LEA (based upon evidence supplied in the schools' questionnaires).

For each case-study school interviews were carried out with the headteacher and other relevant staff in the Beacon School (also, where possible, with non-Beacon staff within a Beacon School), with the headteacher or relevant members of staff of some of the partner schools (or HEI), and with an appropriate LEA officer or adviser. In addition, documentary evidence was collected from the eight schools for analysis and, in some cases, researchers were able to observe Beacon meetings or activities taking place. From all of these information sources a case study was written up for each school and the evidence presented here was drawn from these case studies.

### **3.1 Becoming a Beacon School: Setting Up the Systems**

What was evident from the discussions with staff about the setting up of Beacon work was that several, if not all, of the eight Beacon Schools saw Beacon activity as being a continuation of, an extension of, or a building upon, what the school was already doing. The description of the process of setting up by the headteacher of *School A* was fairly typical: she said that for some time the school has had a committed, caring staff, working as a team. A strong culture of sharing professionalism was already in place and these achievements formed the basis of becoming a Beacon School. A special staff meeting was held and the headteacher gained agreement from the staff to go ahead with the Beacon application. The staff were '*very proud*' of being awarded Beacon status.

The case-study schools did not report any major difficulties with the process of applying for Beacon status. The difficulties that were mentioned were one, the short time-scale between notification of Beacon status and actually setting things up for the start of the autumn term; and two, some uncertainty about the amounts of Beacon funding the school would be receiving.

### **3.2 Identifying, Disseminating and Transferring Good Practice**

For several of the case-study schools, as suggested in the previous section, there was a degree of continuity, based upon the existing strengths of the school, that made the identification of areas of 'good practice' relatively straightforward. For others, it was not easy to make this identification and some reflection was required before Beacon dissemination was put into place.

*School H*, the special school, is the best example of the former situation. Much of its Beacon activity is an extension of its pre-existing outreach work with staff responsible for special needs children in mainstream cluster schools. Much out-of-school delivery of Beacon activities consists of the headteacher going out to give support to local mainstream schools – a role he has had previously as an inspector and an adviser. The head of lower school is also very active, but other staff involvement is largely limited to covering lessons when outsiders visit *School H* to make observations. Customised support



material is sent to other schools as they need it, but this is developed from existing material. In fact, there is so much continuity that sometimes the dividing line between Beacon and non-Beacon work is not always clear: for example, an existing partnership with an Early Years Centre has been expanded (see Section 3.5 below). Neither is it clear that any radically new work with schools has been undertaken as a result of the acquisition of Beacon status; rather, Beacon funding has enabled previous work to be extended.

Another example of a school where Beacon work has been largely continuous with previous activities is *School G*, a large secondary school serving a catchment area which includes a housing estate with high levels of social deprivation and where some families are second, or third generation unemployed. In this challenging social context, the provision of personal, social and health education (PSHE) has for some time been one of the school's strong points. The most recent OFSTED report for *School G* identified several areas of good practice and the senior management team chose two of these for Beacon dissemination: PSHE and target setting (including the use of value added data). In an interview the headteacher indicated that the school has experienced continuity of leadership and that the pastoral system and PSHE provision had been developed over a considerable number of years. Form tutors teach the PSHE programme and the course is accredited. There is a strong house system and a well-established reward system, which has credibility with the students. Home-school contracts, based on face-to-face meetings with parents, have been in place for three years. Teachers from other schools have been encouraged to visit *School G* to observe these aspects of the school for themselves. The headteacher explained that '*we decided early on not to offer courses. The approach was – come here and see what we are doing and then talk to us about it*'.

*School D* is another case-study school that used its own OFSTED report to identify its strongest feature. It received Beacon status in recognition of its nursery provision (in particular the development of literacy skills with nursery-age pupils). Prior to the Beacon initiative, local schools were already being encouraged to seek literacy guidance from *School D* because of the strengths of its Key Stage 1 test results. These results are thought to be good in a 'value-added' sense; children arrive in the nursery well below the baseline national average, leave the nursery at the national average and leave the school above the average national standard.

In *School A*, also, Beacon activity was developed from existing work within the school. The areas that were specifically agreed for Beacon work were training in literacy and numeracy, target setting and assessment practices and professional development (for other headteachers) on management and school ethos issues. Beacon work in this school was not a whole-school initiative; rather the school has distinct 'Beacon teachers'.

In addition there are some schools where a refocusing has taken place as the experience of Beacon work has progressed and the needs of client institutions have been clarified. This has happened, to an extent, in *School D* – as described previously, this school's official Beacon focus was literacy

provision at nursery level – but it has also, more recently, ‘*branched out*’ into the dissemination of more general literacy ‘good practice’ advice.

*School C* also provided an interesting account of how it had refocused its Beacon work and adapted its dissemination materials to fit the needs of client institutions. The experiences of this school may be instructive for consideration of forms of dissemination in future Beacon work. The activities offered by this primary school included a programme for newly qualified teachers (NQTs) and professional development for headteachers. The early approach to identifying client schools involved the use of a detailed website, telephone contact and mailing. These were easy methods of sending out information – it was possible to contact a considerable number of schools quickly and cheaply. However, this ‘diffuse’ approach to dissemination has now turned into a more ‘intensive’ one involving more face-to-face contact. The original approach was only having a minimal effect because it was not focused on individual needs – schools received the information passively and out of context. Partner schools were receiving information, but not the necessary skills and understanding. It was for this reason that more face-to-face meetings were arranged and visits were tailored to meet the needs of partner schools: such an approach was seen as being more likely to influence the development of the partner school. This new approach has been taken even further with the development, in conjunction with *School C*’s LEA, of a new benchmarking exercise with a focus on professional development. The first phase of this will be based on LEA-provided (and funded) INSET. This training will be geared to preparing the partner school for a visit to *School C* and helping to identify for the school what it wishes to find out. The second phase will involve each partner school developing a set of questions for staff at the Beacon School.

On a general point, the question of accreditation for Beacon School staff, through continuing professional development, had not received much attention at this stage, but clearly has potential.

### 3.3 Identifying the Market and Supporting End Users

**Identifying the market.** For most, if not all, of the eight case-study schools there was no need to spend large amounts of time looking for potential partners or clients for Beacon activity: several reported that potential partners came to them and that they were inundated with requests for help. None of the case-study schools actively carried out ‘market research’ to identify possible recipients for Beacon activity, partly because they did not feel they had time to do this, but also because other ways of making contact were deemed to be more appropriate. Predominant amongst these, as can be seen from the summary below, were the sending of fliers or letters to local schools and the use of local ‘word of mouth’ networks, though there was also some use of electronic communications in this respect.

#### *Predominant forms of contacting potential clients*

<i>School A</i>	Advertised training courses through use of a flier
<i>School B</i>	Letter sent to all other primary schools in the LEA
<i>School C</i>	Services advertised on website, plus use of LEA publicity

<i>School D</i>	Page on LEA website, plus flier issued by LEA
<i>School E</i>	Flier sent out by school to all schools in LEA area
<i>School F</i>	Page on own website, plus some LEA promotion
<i>School G</i>	Flier sent out by school to all secondary schools in the LEA
<i>School H</i>	Presentation by headteacher at local cluster meeting

From this summary it can be seen that four schools sent a flier or a letter to potential clients; at least two schools made use of contact via a website and the Internet/e-mail; by the end of the first year, for six of the eight schools the LEA was playing a significant part in helping to identify needs and to make contact with potential end users.

The involvement of the LEA in six of the schools reflects the fact that communications between Beacon Schools and their partners, at least at this relatively early stage of the initiative, are predominantly local.

- ♦ The headteacher of *School B* used her local contacts and she wrote to every school in the LEA offering seminars on management or curriculum issues – ‘*there was a strong local factor*’.
- ♦ The LEA for *School D* issued a flier about the initiative last September. This was sent out with information about local staff development courses. More significantly, it has done a considerable amount of ‘*word of mouth*’ or ‘*grapevine*’ promotion on all of its visits to other primary schools.

There is a strong pattern of initial contact and subsequent delivery at a local level and, indeed, there was talk by many Beacon respondents of further LEA involvement and coordination.

*School E* put together its Beacon bid and identified the needs of potential partners in consultation with the LEA and another local school applying for Beacon status. A flier was subsequently sent out by *School E* to recruit a consortium of schools from within the LEA area. Its original plans for work on initial teacher training, the other main area of focus, proved unviable and had to be changed; the root cause may have been a lack of market research on the end user’s (in this case, a higher education institution’s) needs, and an inadequate understanding of the institutional constraints under which they worked.

Some schools did have visits from teachers from neighbouring LEAs or from further afield, stimulated by the use of a website, but even these were also involving the LEA. The headteacher of *School C* reported that, initially, the school advertised its services on its website, but in the second half of the year the inspection and advisory service began to publicise what the school had to offer.

*School A* advertised its services directly through professional development material, but also made use of the LEA’s coordinating and publicity roles. The headteacher of this school correctly recognised that there was plenty of demand from other schools for help with numeracy and literacy as the primary level. Courses for coordinators of these areas were organised for groups of up

to eight teachers, with demand easily outstripping the availability of places. Staff in two of *School A*'s partner schools (visited by our researcher) felt that the Beacon School had correctly identified their needs – '*they were quite shrewd*'.

**Supporting end users.** The importance of locality is also evident from the way in which modes of dissemination were sometimes adapted to meet the ongoing needs of end users. Another common theme here, evident in several of the case-study schools, was the move from documentary dissemination towards more intensive face-to-face forms of dissemination as the needs of partner institutions were further clarified.

For example, the headteacher of *School A*, the one providing courses for literacy and numeracy coordinators, emphasised that as a result of the initial courses, schools have requested much more individualised training, and materials for this 'follow up' work are much more tailored to the schools' needs as identified by negotiation between the Beacon and the partner school. There was also evidence that the Beacon staff modified their presentations once it became clear that visiting staff knew more than they had said they did about numeracy and literacy!

Similar modifications took place in the ways in which *School C* supported end users. In the first term the school responded to enquiries via telephone conversations with the headteacher and by sending documents through the post. More recently, however, there have been visits from other schools and other headteachers and there are plans for the provision of INSET, arranged by the LEA, for partner school staff.

*School D* also tried to keep its Beacon support activities flexible. The head of the nursery at this school had primary responsibility for the delivery of resources, the latter consisting of a document pack. Beacon delivery subsequent to the issuing of this pack has been based upon staff from partner schools visiting *School D* to observe the nursery at work, with follow up discussion on any aspects of the school's practice which are of particular interest to the visitors. The approach has been to take the lead from the visitors on the issue of which aspects of practice they would like '*personalised*'. The headteacher of *School D* noted that one or two headteachers from the end-user institutions had made '*on the quiet*' requests, prior to the visit, that certain staff should be '*pushed in the direction of* experiencing particular aspects of the Beacon School's work. In general, however, this headteacher stressed that schools might not know precisely what they needed or wanted from a visit until they had actually seen what was happening in the school. *School D*'s Beacon work assumes that visiting staff can take as much or as little from the visit as they wish: '*some will extract, some will take lock, stock and barrel*' (headteacher); '*they come for fresh ideas and take what they need, perhaps adapted or modified*' (head of nursery).

### 3.4 Managing Involvement with the LEA

Findings from the Annual Report Questionnaire suggested that relationships between the Beacon Schools and their LEAs ranged from non-involvement or the very negative through to very positive, supportive relationships. The evidence gathered from the case-study school interviews supports the view that LEAs have responded to the Beacon School initiative in diverse ways. However, there was a very strong sense from most of the case-study schools of a ‘warming up’ of relations with the LEA as the initiative has progressed. This kind of improved relationship over the first period of the Beacon initiative was evident, to at least some degree, in six of the case-study schools. In particular, many of the Beacon staff saw positive developments in the role of the LEA as a kind of ‘broker’ of Beacon services. The LEA, with an overview of schools in the locality and knowledge, had a much better picture of which institutions might benefit from Beacon dissemination, than the Beacon School had as a single entity.

This move towards a more positive role for LEAs, together with the progressive ‘warming up’ of relations between Beacon Schools and their LEAs, was a strong theme in a number of the case studies. The best example, detailed below through the use of interviewee comments, comes from *School B* that was chosen as a case study partly because of a reported ‘hostile’ relationship with its LEA.

Originally, one of the difficulties for *School B*, said the headteacher, was ‘*initiating a partnership with [the] LEA*’. This has been a major issue, though relations are now somewhat better. ‘*The LEA would not have chosen us – some consultation might have made things better. The silence has been deafening. There was some embarrassment about other schools [i.e. other ‘good’ schools that had not been selected as Beacons]. The CEO has never mentioned Beacon status. The CEO had an attitude of scorn and derision... We [however] saw it as extra funding for the LEA. The LEA didn’t like the Beacon School idea. They didn’t know about it. They chilled us out, but things are now improving. I rang the LEA to say I saw them having a role and I stressed the breadth of the curriculum [as something worth disseminating to other schools within the borough]. Things are working through now and the LEA are better*’. The Chief Education Officer had now visited the school ‘*and it was he who suggested pairing off with a school in special measures*’.

Similar views about the relationship between the LEA and *School B*, but expressed from a slightly different perspective, were articulated by the LEA Primary School Adviser: ‘*We had to be very careful and sensitive to other schools. At first it caused angst in the authority. It caused a feeling of resentment. It took us some time to build up relationships. They [Beacon headteachers] might have thought the LEA was not supporting them*’. Now initial scepticism and cynicism have been replaced with movement towards a closer relationship. ‘*We have moved forward since then...we’re now more open. We’re talking with the Beacon Schools. We are now able to talk about quality...Where are the really good teachers? People often ask ‘do you know anybody who is good at...?’*’

*'The question now is 'how can the advisory service support the initiative?'...We have moved forwards'. The main way of moving forward has been to identify 'weak' schools and to pair these up with the Beacon Schools in the borough. This was only possible, said the adviser, because the Beacon headteachers have been 'incredibly sensitive'. 'We now have a productive relationship. The LEA didn't want to impose anything – it was a school-based initiative'. 'Now everything goes through the LEA. We do have a brokerage role. We felt we had a late start, but it now seems to be evolving'.*

*What the Primary team at the LEA has been doing is 'to encourage the sharing of good practice generally, we want to promote good practice wherever it occurs'. 'It is a two-way thing. I find it annoying that it [the Beacon initiative] is promoted as a new idea. We've always spread good practice. I don't see what's new...except perhaps the funding'.*

This story of 'improving' relations between a Beacon School and its LEA is repeated in some of the other case studies, as are the sentiments of this particular adviser regarding the sharing of good practice. The LEA interviewee in *School C*'s authority described how from September 1999 there is to be a more planned and targeted approach to Beacon School activity, with the LEA acting as broker and partner. Up to six primary schools will be identified by the LEA inspectorate and will be invited to take part in INSET activities. The LEA, together with the Beacon School, has developed a benchmarking exercise – where the partner school's area for development is benchmarked against the Beacon School's provision and a development plan is produced, incorporating the necessary new ideas. This Chief Inspector commented, *'The 'Beacon Schools' term may be misleading. Are we not talking about Beacon practice?'* Beacon Schools have expertise in certain areas and they should also have the skills to share this and to help other schools to develop in that area.

The LEA officer with responsibility for *School D* talked in a similar vein. The LEA *'tended to see the initiative as part of a continuum – special measures school to Beacon School...We've got a whole range and we disseminate from a lot of them [regardless of where they are on the continuum]...'.* This LEA regarded the Beacon status as *'an accolade – a very positive comment on the quality of education in such a small authority'*. The interviewee added *'We've been amazed by the reception schools in other authorities have had – from grudging acceptance to being totally ignored...It's about celebrating good things, they should be supporting and lauding them'.*

The strongest, most positive LEA-Beacon School relationship was that between *School A* and its LEA. At first, LEA personnel were unsure as to how involved they should become in the initiative, but following invitations to assist from the Beacon Schools in the county, it soon became quite clear that their involvement would be considerable. The LEA has been instrumental in brokering relationships between the Beacon and the partner schools. Both the partner schools that had used *School A*'s services (and which had been visited by our researcher) had made contact via the LEA – they had not directly made contact with the Beacon School themselves. The LEA has also established a 'Beacon network' for all the Beacon Schools in the county: there are regular

meetings with the headteachers and a Beacon newsletter has been published. The LEA is also looking at the possibility of linking these schools with schools 'causing concern'.

LEA personnel are very aware of the potential problems facing *School A* and other Beacon Schools. They describe it as an '*ongoing battle*' for schools to strike a balance between helping other schools and '*keeping an eye on the ball*'! Beacon activity does tie in with the LEA's aims. They are keen to use the Beacon work to enable schools to become more responsible for their own school improvement work. They are clearly frustrated with their [the LEA's] isolation and believe that their expertise could be used to help coordinate Beacon work, for example, arranging conferences, providing venues and producing publicity. These practical aspects of Beacon work are currently undertaken by individual schools; however, the LEA feels that this is not a good use of Beacon funds. This LEA interviewee saw Beacon Schools as being '*catalysts for change*', challenging schools, rather than '*exporting ideas*'. It was also hoped that in the future Beacon work would produce the next crop of advisory teachers. It is, of course, understandable that LEAs would like to recruit advisory teachers from Beacon Schools. However, the strength of the Beacon initiative for all of the staff interviewed lay in the fact that the teachers sharing the good practice were classroom teachers working on a daily basis in schools at that time. This could be lost if these individuals left their schools to become advisory teachers.

Even *School E*, which was a grant maintained school when it was awarded Beacon status, had managed its relationship with the LEA in a way that brought the two partners closer together. There had been some initial manoeuvring and then the LEA was approached to help with coordinating the Beacon bid with another local school. Involvement after this point has been ongoing and has led to a closer relationship, with a LEA adviser retained by the school on a consultancy basis. This adviser has also '*steered*' schools in need of support on pupil tracking into a consortium with the Beacon School: he was full of praise for *School E*, but had some reservations about the Beacon project in general.

The two schools where relations with the LEA had not appeared to move on in the ways described above were *School G* and *School H*, though there may have been special reasons for this in each of these cases. In *School G*, the headteacher expressed a view that the LEA had not done much to publicise Beacon status and that the local adviser did not seem to know much about the initiative. The LEA interviewee attached to *School H* is a special educational needs specialist and she saw the school's activities predominantly from this perspective. This authority already had a culture of SEN outreach and the Beacon initiative appears largely to have been seen as an opportunity to acquire further funding for these outreach activities at a time when mainstream schools need further support in this area.

### **3.5 Developing Partnerships and Networks**

The case-study interviewees made many positive comments about developing and learning from partnerships – usually these were references to either the

enhancement of an existing partnership or to the development of completely new inter-institutional relationships. It is quite clear that the Beacon Schools and their partner institutions were grappling with a number of issues to do with how best to develop mutually advantageous relations. The themes of 'mutual respect', 'openness', 'sharing' and 'sensitivity' were raised by a number of respondents in discussions about networks and partnerships. In several cases the partnership appeared to be primarily between the headteacher of the Beacon School and the headteacher of the 'recipient' institution, though there were also indications that, in terms of personnel, the partnership went beyond this.

- ♦ When the headteacher of *School B* was asked about partnerships, she said '*They will develop...they are very much sharing, open relationships*'. This headteacher said that the school's relationship with a local university (with a teacher training cohort) '*has definitely improved...it is now much more concrete. The university greeted us with open arms...We have a very positive relationship*'. This school was also developing a positive, open relationship with another local primary school on special measures, based mainly upon personal contact between the two headteachers. The LEA interviewee commented upon this relationship as follows: '*The two headteachers have built up a very good rapport. They are very open with each other...The next stage is for teachers to work alongside each other*'.
- ♦ *School E* had been particularly successful in developing a network of schools, through the setting up of a consortium. Working individually, yet together, in a consortium appears to have created warm, mutually supportive relationships, even between 'unequal' schools. In fact, most members of this consortium have voluntarily chosen to continue meeting, although now with only minimal Beacon funding, and have begun to forge links with the second Beacon consortium established by *School E*.
- ♦ Staff at *School C*, a junior school, stressed the role that the Beacon initiative had played in enhancing its relationship with the adjoining infant school. There was now a much better, mutually supportive, developing relationship with the infant school. In addition, further links with a local secondary school, which takes around a half of *School C*'s pupils, are being developed. This Beacon headteacher was certain that the school's staff were learning from these experiences: '*we have learned to question ourselves, to think and review*'.

Frequently, positive comments such as these were qualified with warnings about some of the difficulties arising and some of the sensitivities needed for the development of these types of relationships. These warnings were especially prevalent where the partnership consisted of 'unequal' schools (for example, where a Beacon School was matched with a failing school) or schools with different types of intakes or catchment areas. There were also warnings, as in the following example, that this type of relationship could only be taken so far: assistance for partner schools should not be at the expense of Beacon staff and students.

- ♦ Some of *School G*'s partnership activities have consisted of visits to and from other schools to make lesson observation. Staff here commented that the strategy of visits to and from individual schools has facilitated the



process of building partnerships, even though this has been time consuming and labour intensive. The headteacher warned, however, that *'we cannot give long-term sustained support, we feel that our staff would be 'sucked in' to the other institution. This is not like the AST [Advanced Skills Teacher] initiative. Our staff, first and foremost, work in this school for our children'*.

- ♦ *School H* had very good relations with a number of local mainstream schools – the local cluster was already in regular contact on SEN, literacy and behaviour management issues. In addition, an existing relationship with an Early Years Centre had been developed further. However, the headteacher seemed to feel that, to an extent, these relationships would be in place whether or not the school had Beacon status. One of the staff at a 'recipient' school echoed this when he said that he felt that the contact was not with 'a Beacon School', but specifically with *School H*. It was also evident that relations had to be managed in a way that would prevent a situation of 'dependency' (on the part of the partner schools) developing. The danger here was that *School H* was being drawn into resolving immediate, existing problems, rather than enabling partner schools to solve these problems for themselves now and in the future. It should be noted, however, that this situation was due as much to the attitudes of the partner schools as it was to *School H's* approach.

In the responses to our questions about the development of partnerships, the issue of geographical proximity was raised once again. In relation to *School D*, for example, all but one of the visiting schools saw the Beacon initiative in local terms, that is, geographical proximity was a decisive factor in making a Beacon visit, both on cost and familiarity grounds. *School A* staff said that there were no plans to extend the Beacon programme beyond the boundaries of the LEA. The Primary Adviser for *School B* claimed that *'Beacon work is bound to be local'*, though she did also acknowledge that there might be future opportunities for using the Internet – *'good practice is good practice, wherever it occurs!'* Obviously, this issue needs monitoring.

### 3.6 The Role of ICT in Beacon Delivery

The use of Information and Communications Technology has been an important dimension in the Beacon initiative. It attracted the second highest reported expenditure total for any Beacon area and was, numerically, the fourth most popular Beacon area – having been identified as a major focus by 14 of the 67 schools returning the Annual Report Questionnaire. In addition, the DfEE has a Standards website which lists all 74 Beacon Schools, identifies their areas of expertise, and provides details of where they are and how they can be contacted. In August 1999, a discussion forum on Beacon Schools was launched within the Standards site webpages.

NFER researchers have carried out an investigation on the extent of the use of electronic communications, for all 74 Beacon Schools and, in more detail, for the eight case-study schools. Internet searches for school websites and e-mail pages were carried out in December 1998, July 1999 and September 1999 so as to discover whether there were any indications that use of electronic

communications by the 74 schools was increasing during the time span of this evaluation (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Beacon Schools' uses of electronic media**

Information on 74 Beacon Schools' use of electronic media	Publicly-available e-mail address	Webpage	Specific mention of Beacon work on webpage
December 1998	6 schools	8 schools	-----
July 1999	17 schools	16 schools	10 schools
September 1999	18 schools	23 schools	13 schools

(1) *These figures are based upon NFER attempts to find webpages for the 74 Beacon Schools using standard search engines and lists of school websites. The e-mail addresses were located via the school webpages.*

(2) *Information supplied by the schools direct to the DfEE suggests that the numbers of schools having these electronic communication facilities may be greater than those given in the table: at September 1999, 27 schools gave details of websites and 38 listed e-mail addresses.*

It is apparent that there has been a steady increase in the use of e-mail communications and website information, but even so (as at July 1999) only about one in five of the Beacon Schools had made use of these facilities. The quality of websites varied considerably: the best had several pages devoted to Beacon activity including, for example, examples of schemes of work, lesson materials or details of training offered. One even had an e-mail address exclusively for Beacon enquiries and a contact page with a booking form for training courses.

There is some evidence, then, that the new technologies have been used to facilitate Beacon contact and dissemination (see the examples given below), but, at this stage, there may still be something of a gap between the 'ideal' of widespread and frequent use of electronic communications and what actually happens in practice.

The following notes give a taste of what has actually been happening in the ICT domain in some of the case-study schools.

*School B:* The school had been on the Internet for one week at the time of the main fieldwork visit, though this had not yet been used for any Beacon communications, and more computers had been ordered.

*School C:* Has a very well developed website, giving details of the range of Beacon services on offer. Beacon funding has been used to train staff in using the Internet and ICT. The website has been used to communicate with other schools and to inform the outside world about the Beacon programme.

*School D:* Information on a website page (provided by the LEA) led to this school being contacted by a school from a LEA some distance away. This, however, was something of a one-off, because most of *School D's* work to date has been with same-LEA institutions.

*School F:* An interview was carried out with the ICT coordinator who said that the school has used Beacon money to create Internet and Intranet facilities

in the school. This interviewee believed that money from the National Grid for Learning initiative would have been insufficient to provide the school with the same coverage, and they were able to set up the facilities a lot quicker than would have been the case had they waited to use the NGfL funding. Staff interviewed in the Beacon school expressed frustration at their reliance to date on more traditional methods of communication (letter, fax and telephone) which, it was felt, made negotiations with other schools unnecessarily protracted and labour intensive for busy teachers (this was confirmed by interviewees in end-user schools) and had already led to a missed opportunity to work with colleagues visiting the LEA from overseas. There is now a school website which mentions its Beacon work relating to pastoral and curriculum organisation, but without an explanatory introduction or any contextualisation. Moreover, because the website is still ‘under construction’, visitors to it cannot yet correspond with the school electronically. From next year, however, there are plans to use e-mail to deal with other schools’ Beacon enquiries by giving each member of staff with a Beacon role their own e-mail address. It is felt that this will make the initiative more manageable for *School F*’s staff in that they will be able to deal with queries and make arrangements for visits directly and in their own time.

*School G:* Since Beacon status was awarded the school has widened its uses of ICT. The school has a computer room and all departments are networked – there is an administrative network and a curriculum network. Target-setting processes are being developed and there will soon be a computer-based system for these. An identified teacher has responsibility for the website and Internet use. The deputy headteacher commented, ‘*We would like to use ICT more – the school website will be ready next term*’.

The use of ICT for Beacon dissemination is obviously going to expand as schools become used to the technical requirements and the communication possibilities of the new technology (including the National Grid for Learning) and find the time and staff to organise their electronic communications. This is an area that would clearly merit further investigation.

### **3.7 Identifying and Managing Problems Associated with Beacon Work**

Previous sections of this chapter have described, on the basis of the fieldwork carried out, how staff at the eight case-study schools have encountered and dealt with problems associated with Beacon work. This section, using illustrative material from the case-study respondents, summarises what the main difficulties were and gives some examples of how these problems were managed. These problems can broadly be categorised under four main headings.

- ♦ Effects of workload on Beacon School staff
- ♦ Potential disruption for Beacon School pupils
- ♦ Managing relationships with partner schools
- ♦ Establishing and managing relationships with the LEA

Problems relating to the latter two categories – managing relationships with the LEA and with partner schools – have been reported in sections 3.4 and 3.5 respectively, so discussion here has been confined to the first two types of difficulty.

### ***Effects of workload on Beacon School staff***

The most frequently mentioned problem in interviews with Beacon School staff was that of being ‘inundated’ with extra work or having too many requests for assistance. The headteacher of *School G*, for example, said that the demand for Beacon services had been very high and his two deputy heads had to review applications and decide which schools they could most usefully help.

For *School B* there was a problem in that the school could not accommodate all the requests for help. The headteacher commented: ‘*we knew that it was going to be hard work. We had to think on the hoof as it were. It evolved*’. Another member of staff supported this with the statement that: ‘*We didn’t know what to expect [and] a lot of preparation was required*’. The essential point for the headteacher of this school was that ‘*your own school must not drown underneath it all. I’m constantly monitoring the morale of the staff*’. It was also noted that ‘*some parents had to be reassured – this could be a down side*’.

All three staff interviewees at *School D* made passing reference to the fact that the additional workload associated with being a Beacon School had, at times, been tiring and a pressure. The headteacher noted that ‘*Staff are acutely aware of the pressure to be a Beacon at all times and this may be stressful...*’

For *School H*, Beacon work had generally had a positive effect on staff morale. However, this has been offset to some extent by the problem of obtaining suitable supply teachers. This is always more difficult for a special school, because some pupils find it hard to cope with change: one day’s supply cover, said the headteacher, can cause a week of upsets and some staff have felt ‘*bogged down*’ by all the preparation needed to smooth the process of leaving their class. In another school (*School A*) Beacon staff continuity was also raised as a potential concern – one Beacon teacher will be leaving for maternity leave and no other member of staff has the experience to continue to establish partnerships with non-Beacon schools.

The case-study schools managed the extra workload demands for staff in a number of ways. It was quite common, for example, to try to spread the load by involving as many staff as possible. In many cases there were reductions in contact time, or supply cover was used, to enable Beacon staff to do the extra work required. Several schools ‘rationalised’ the requests for assistance, as in the example of *School G* described above, by making decisions about which other institutions could most usefully be helped.

Another approach was to make sure that the Beacon staff themselves saw the benefits of the work. The headteacher of *School D*, for instance, felt that it was vital that her staff should ‘*get something developmental*’ out of the

Beacon initiative and so all staff were released to visit another school. She felt that the value of the initiative lay in allowing practitioners to make ‘*guilt free*’ visits to other schools, ‘*giving time for un-rushed dialogue, time to absorb, reflect and mull over*’.

### ***Disruption for Beacon School pupils***

In some of the case-study schools there were worries about the possible detrimental effects of taking Beacon staff out of the classroom on the progress of pupils within the Beacon School. In the primary schools, in particular, there were some concerns about a possible lack of continuity and about the effects of the children experiencing lessons covered by a variety of supply teachers: ‘*there are some children who can’t cope with supply teachers, they need to know we’ll be there every day*’ (School A).

Two of the headteachers noted that parents had expressed concerns along these lines and that they had needed to provide reassurance (Schools A and B). The headteacher of School A, in addition, said that she would be monitoring Key Stage 2 results to see if there was any decline in pupil outcomes – if results at Key Stage 2 did deteriorate, then the Beacon strategy would be reviewed.

There was evidence that the case-study schools had been quite adept at achieving a balance between continued ‘good practice’ for their own pupils and the dissemination of ‘good practice’ for the benefit of other institutions. For example, the headteacher of School D has tried, where possible, to restrict visits from partner schools to one per week, so as to minimise disruption to the school’s routine and the degree of upset to pupils. Elsewhere, Beacon staff who are class teachers tried to spread their Beacon work over the week or the term in order to minimise its impact.

## **3.8 Evaluating Outcomes for Own and Partner School Staff**

Evaluation was taking place at a number of levels within the case-study schools, ranging from the almost non-existent to moves towards the use of regular self-evaluation strategies. There was evidence, however, that in the first year of the Beacon initiative, the schools had been preoccupied with putting their Beacon activities into action and that now, some months into the programme, they were starting to give further serious thought to processes of evaluation.

A common initial approach was either to carry out brief informal evaluations by telephone or to issue an evaluation sheet for partner staff to fill in after a school visit, meeting or other Beacon activity. Some of the interviewees felt that it was still too early to carry out formal evaluations, but ideas were being put into place for future evaluation activities. The headteacher of School G, for example, said that she had not had any feedback yet, but there were plans to evaluate both formally and informally – and follow-up advice is offered over the telephone. In addition, an LEA adviser has been employed as a consultant to undertake an evaluation of the school’s Beacon activities.

With respect to *School D*, where the development of literacy skills in nursery-age pupils was the main thrust of Beacon activity, the LEA representative felt that it was a little early to evaluate the impact of the initiative thus far, but Beacon Schools are part of the authority's Education Development Plan and an over-arching success criterion would be an increase in the percentage of early years classes gaining excellent or very good inspection ratings in the authority.

The headteacher of *School B* indicated that even small-scale evaluations could stimulate staff into thinking about wider self-evaluation issues – visitors from partner schools were given an evaluation sheet and the initial feedback from these was positive. The feedback had encouraged and helped the school to start looking at the way it was operating. *'The school has developed a kind of self-evaluation model. We question ourselves and always try to move on. It forces you to look wider. Very seldom do teachers get the opportunity to look at classroom practice in other schools. It has increased [our staff's] confidence and competence'*.

### 3.9 Summary

This chapter has used qualitative interview evidence to examine the experience of being a Beacon School from the perspectives of the headteachers and staff within the eight case-study schools featured in this evaluation.

It was soon evident from the interview responses that there was considerable demand for assistance from partner and potential partner institutions – several of the Beacon Schools reported being *'inundated'* with requests for help. The usual way of notifying potential recipient institutions of the activities available was to send out a letter or a flier, though at least two schools made use of website-based communications.

There was some continuity from previous work to the extent that several of the schools saw Beacon activity as building upon, or developing, aspects of 'good practice' that had already been identified, either by the school staff themselves or through external reports. Beacon funding allowed many of the schools to extend their activities and to look at new ways of disseminating their 'good practice'. Understandably, in some cases, there had to be a refocusing or modification of the activities as the needs of partner institutions became clearer or were developed further. Indeed, a strong theme of this chapter has been the Beacon respondents' acknowledgement of the need to adapt as the initiative has progressed and initial, broad ideas about dissemination have started to crystallise into more specific aims.

Another theme emerging from the interviews was that of the relationship between the Beacon School and the LEA improving as the initiative progressed. Such improvement, over the period of this evaluation, was evident in six of the case-study schools. Many Beacon staff looked forward to enhanced involvement of the LEA, particularly in coordinating or brokerage roles, matching the potential needs of partner institutions to the strengths and services offered by the Beacon Schools.

The comments made by the interviewees related to the issues of how best to develop mutually advantageous relationships with partner institutions were very interesting indeed. Although much Beacon work builds upon previously existing partnerships, the drive to develop new relationships has provoked much thinking for staff in both sets of institutions. The Beacon headteachers, particularly, were strongly aware of the need to develop relations based on sharing, sensitivity, high standards of professionalism and mutual respect.

The methods of dissemination used by the case-study schools were very varied and, to a large extent, dependent upon the nature of the activity providing the Beacon focus. The general use of new technologies, including e-mail contact and webpages, by the Beacon Schools, is increasing, but there is still considerable scope for expansion in the use of these methods of dissemination. A number of respondents reported a movement from documentary dissemination towards more interpersonal, face-to-face forms of communication. One respondent summed this up by stressing a belief that there was a need for close links with a small number of partners and '*in-depth*' dissemination: a reliance on '*arms length dissemination*' alone will only produce limited results.

The experience of being a Beacon School was clearly not without challenges – in particular, many respondents talked about the difficulties created by the extra workload involved and expressed concerns about the possible effects of dissemination requirements upon the needs of the Beacon School pupils. The Beacon staff, however, were monitoring the impact of these new demands and were already putting into place strategies to manage and alleviate these difficulties. The case-study schools were also planning enhanced evaluation strategies.

What stands out from the interview material as a whole, however, is that for many respondents the first year of the initiative has been not only a challenging experience, but also, in many respects, a rewarding one. The year has been a rapid and, at times, intense, learning experience for these Beacon participants.

## 4. EVIDENCE FROM THE FIELDWORK: LEARNING FROM BEACON SCHOOLS

The focus of this chapter is to explore the experiences of the client or partner schools and institutions; to consider how they have been learning from the Beacon Schools and what the benefits and problems of such partnerships have been for these institutions.

It is worth noting that new partnerships developed as a consequence of the Beacon initiative were still in their early stages. A number of the client schools did not anticipate an ongoing relationship between themselves and the Beacon School, whilst other schools were planning further work.

### 4.1 Identifying the Problem or Area of Need

It was evident from discussions with partner schools that the most common pattern was for non-Beacon Schools to identify the problem or area of need themselves, prior to seeking external help from a Beacon School. An example of this was illustrated by a partner school of *School A*. Staff in the school had identified a need to improve their teaching of literacy and, particularly, pupils' or teachers' questioning skills. Similarly, non-Beacon Schools working with *School H* approached the school having already identified a range of problems such as literacy and behaviour management issues.

Non-Beacon Schools' ability to identify accurately an area of need and the importance for Beacon Schools to understand particular problems were raised as issues by staff in a number of the case-study and partner schools. The fieldwork findings suggest that an inability on behalf of partner schools to identify correctly their needs could potentially inhibit the dissemination of relevant information or good practice. The experiences of a new partner school of *School H* suggest that, partly as a result of the distance between themselves and the Beacon School, the Beacon School had only been able to offer a general rather than a tailored response.

Interestingly, one of the case-study schools, *School D*, did not perceive a lack of clarity on behalf of partner schools' requests for help as an obstacle in the dissemination of good practice. The school invited potential partner schools to an initial 'standardised' visit, taking the view that non-Beacon Schools may not know precisely what they needed or wanted from the school until they had seen what was happening there. The work of *School D* assumed that visiting colleagues could take as much or as little as they wanted from the visit: '*we don't mind what they do with [the document pack] once they've got it*'. Following on from the visit, partner schools were invited to approach the Beacon School for further assistance if required. At the time of the fieldwork, none of the client schools had chosen to follow up the visit with more specific requests, although two were planning to do so.



Having identified a particular area of need, one partner school of *School D* and another of *School A* reported that they believed that contextual similarities between themselves and the Beacon School were important. A teacher at a partner school of *School A* felt that the catchments of the two schools were comparable and that they shared similar pupil characteristics. These shared backgrounds were seen as useful for visiting schools to decide whether or not particular aspects of policy or practice would be transferable or if they ‘worked’ because of the particular circumstances or culture of the Beacon School.

In addition to consideration of contextual factors in the development of partnerships with Beacon Schools, one partner school reported some practical difficulty in finding a Beacon School that could most appropriately meet their needs. This school, which had sought help from *School H*, was critical of the lack of detailed information relating to schools’ characteristics available from sources other than the Internet.

Interviews with staff from partner schools revealed that non-Beacon teachers often had high expectations of what they would see at Beacon Schools. It was clear however, that for some, these expectations were not always fulfilled. The criticisms expressed were generally broad in nature and perhaps reflect to some extent a misconception of the nature or intended purpose of Beacon activity.

Teachers who had visited *School D* commented that the Beacon School was not that different to their own school. Evidence from interviews with staff working with *School A* illustrated that although they were enthusiastic in their evaluation of ‘Beacon teachers’ who they described as having ‘*a spark*’, they did not see it reflected across the whole school. Interestingly, *School A* had organised its Beacon work around three teachers and the headteacher and, in this sense, its Beacon activity was confined to particular staff and was not therefore a whole-school initiative. Despite these criticisms, teachers reported that the visit gave them the confidence to take literacy teaching forward in their own school; ‘*it’s much easier to teach if we feel confident with the resources*’.

## **4.2 Managing the Beacon Input: Learning How to Learn from Other Schools**

What became evident from discussions with staff from partner institutions was that the ‘site-based’ model of the Beacon initiative required an attempt on the part of the non-Beacon Schools to understand how they could most effectively learn from another school. They needed to develop an understanding of what the issues might be which help or inhibit the transfer of ‘good practice’.

It became apparent from the fieldwork that visits to Beacon Schools to observe lessons were greatly valued by staff from partner schools. A teacher from a non-Beacon School working with *School D* explained that ‘*Any opportunity to visit other schools is valuable, much more valuable than a lot of INSET...real classrooms and real practice are worth their weight in gold*’. A teacher from another partner school, again working with *School D* also

stressed the importance of observation and 'face-to-face' contact, rather than the receipt of stand-alone documentation: '*you need an understanding of the rationale, to see practice in place, not just to hear about it, to fully understand what they do*'.

In an effort to maximise the potential for observing 'good practice', Beacon Schools organised their work in a variety of ways, ranging from general standardised tours of the school to tailor-made observations of particular classes, such as *School A*'s work with staff from a partner school who wished to see how the literacy hour was taught.

In a number of schools, the observation session had taken place as part of a structured (to a greater or lesser extent) programme. Having observed work in the classroom, staff from partner schools or institutions visiting three of the case-study Beacon Schools were afforded the opportunity to discuss what they had seen.

Visits to *School D* to observe the nursery at work had also been followed up by discussion between Beacon staff and those from the partner school. This phase of the visit had included an explanation of how the observed practice in the nursery related to the documentation. The head of nursery was released to enable her to host the visit and discussion.

An example of a structured approach to observing good practice is illustrated in the plans of *School C* for Beacon work commencing from September 1999. In an effort to ensure that partner schools' specific needs are met, *School C* is planning, as part of its work with the LEA, to ask partner school to produce a set of questions or an agenda prior to focused visits. Observation will be followed by discussion between the Beacon and partner schools about what has been seen and how it might be applied to their own school. Partner schools will then be expected to produce action plans, which will be monitored and evaluated. Interestingly, this joint venture by the Beacon School and the LEA includes a recognition that schools may need support and encouragement before they will accept the concept of learning from another school. In this example, the LEA has been, and will be, very much involved in helping schools learn how to learn from one another.

Interviews with staff from a partner school of *School G* suggested that they felt equipped to adapt the principles they had seen in the Beacon Schools for use in their own school, despite differences in the structures of the two schools. Visitors to *School A* also felt that not all the materials were transferable without being modified to 'fit' the culture of the partner school. In these two examples, staff appeared to have felt able to transfer at least some aspects of practice and policy from the Beacon School, although with a degree of adaptation to fit their own context.

Sometimes more fundamental changes were assisted by Beacon involvement. This was the case, for example, for partner institution staff working with *School D*. The headteacher in this partner school knew that what the school needed was a '*significant overhaul of what we were doing previously*', but had not found a way into the requisite changes. Visiting *School D* as a group

enabled the staff to identify more precisely, and then to implement, the changes they wanted in their nursery organisation because *‘what they [the Beacon School] offered reflected the ethos we were aiming for’*.

In discussing how a partner of case-study *School D* had managed the input from their Beacon School, a member of staff commented that the partnership with the Beacon School had acted as a catalyst for change within the partner school: *‘[The visit] provided a catalyst for debate, a chance for us to think whether there was something else, something better we could do’*. In this sense, Beacon work (access to see how another school works) has enabled the partner school to review their own practice in addition to extracting ‘good practice’ from the Beacon School: *‘it opened up an opportunity for self-evaluation, looking in-depth at why we did things in a certain way and what could be developed’*.

In these examples, the changes being made by partner schools as a result of visits to Beacon Schools, have addressed two separate issues: adapting Beacon practice and materials to a different school culture or context (as in the *School G* and *A* examples); and recognising the need for radical changes to practice (as in *School D*).

### **4.3 Developing Partnerships and Networks**

Partner schools and institutions described their relationships with Beacon Schools in a variety of ways. This to some extent reflected the kinds of work they had been engaged in or the amount of time they had been involved in Beacon activity.

For some schools, partnership with Beacon Schools at the time of the interview was in its early stages and activities were still being planned. For others, the partnership had had little chance to develop as a result of practical constraints. An example of this was illustrated by a partner school of case-study *School A*; dates had been set for staff to visit the Beacon School to observe literacy teaching and target setting, but these were cancelled by the Beacon School, apparently due to a lack of time. Given these problems, a teacher at the partner school had difficulty in anticipating how the partnership between the two schools would develop: *‘I’m not sure what we’re going to get’*. This example highlights the importance of planning by the Beacon Schools if partnerships are to be enabled to develop.

Both the above-mentioned school and another partner of *School A* described their relationship with the Beacon School as that of a ‘consumer’. They did not anticipate that the work would necessarily be as on-going as the notion of ‘partnership’ would imply. One teacher commented that the visit they had organised with the Beacon School was part of a programme of visits to local schools and that the ideas and resources they had collected was only *‘one piece of the jigsaw’*.

A further example of this short-term link between a Beacon and partner school was illustrated in case-study *School D*; the headteacher of the partner school

had not considered the possibility of a more permanent link following an initial visit, on the grounds that the Beacon School was '*probably inundated*'.

In contrast, the fieldwork also revealed examples of two Beacon Schools that had more established partnerships or networks. *School H* had been working with its partner schools before the Beacon initiative began. A local cluster of schools had been in regular contact and Beacon funding helped facilitate these relationships; the Beacon project was described by another partner as '*this magic word which seemed to open the cash box*'.

Since the start of the initiative, *School E* has channelled its main Beacon effort through a consortium of local schools which it recruited by means of a flier. Although the schools identified their own areas of need in an effort to raise achievement, the other network members supported them in their work. Two such networks have now been set up and staff have reported that progress has been rapid and that the network provides a mutually supportive environment.

Practical constraints on the development of partnerships were raised by a number of partner schools and institutions. Partners of *School A*, for example, would have preferred their Beacon School to have been more local so as to facilitate after-school meetings. A lack of time to devote to Beacon partnership was reported by a teacher training institution working with *School E*.

Generally, the links with HEIs were relatively limited within this study; no strong conclusions can be drawn except to say that such relationships needed careful preparation and nurturing.

## **4.4 Evaluating Outcomes**

It was clear from discussions with the clients of Beacon Schools that any evaluation of outcomes of the partnerships between non-Beacon institutions and Beacon Schools was either only just being planned or, where it had been implemented, was in its early stages. Much of the evaluation which partner institutions had engaged in comprised of feedback on their experience of visits to, or materials from, Beacon Schools, rather than of the work implemented within schools as a result of Beacon work. A member of staff in one partner school claimed, however, that Key Stage results were already showing improvement.

On an informal, anecdotal level, work with Beacon Schools was described by one partner institution as providing a measure of reinforcement, confirming that the work that they were already doing was not that different from that of the Beacon School which had been identified as illustrative of 'good practice'. Having visited *School D* one teacher described the experience as positive insofar as the '*sense that we're going in the right direction was a nice feeling...we came back with a certain sense of pride*'.

*School A* and *School E* provided useful evidence of attempts by Beacon Schools to put into place a formal evaluation of the outcomes of Beacon activity for partner schools. *School A*: the 'benchmarking exercise' planned in

partnership with the LEA includes provision for a formal evaluation process. Once schools have completed their action plans, these will be implemented, together with a two-fold evaluation process. LEA link inspectors will undertake an immediate evaluation of schools' action plans and will monitor progress; in addition, a formal evaluation will take place after one year. *School E*: evaluation is tied to the release of money to consortium members; an LEA adviser has been retained to conduct an independent evaluation.

## 4.5 Managing Improvement for the Longer Term

There was only limited evidence from the fieldwork of ways in which non-Beacon Schools and institutions were managing improvement in their schools for the longer term.

A partner school of *School A* provided some indication that new ideas were being incorporated into whole-school policies. The school was particularly interested in improving pupils' questioning skills in literacy and of making learning intentions more explicit. Following visits to the Beacon School, staff were involved in cascading the learning throughout the school *via* feedback sessions with colleagues, during which experiences and resources were shared. New ideas were then trialled in classrooms by individual teachers. Having implemented ideas in a rather '*ad hoc*' way, the school had begun to attempt to incorporate them into a whole-school approach.

Concerns were expressed by a partner school of *School C* relating to the potential for managing improvement over the long term. Funds were being spent by the Beacon School to enable staff in both the Beacon and partner schools to observe lessons in Years 2 and 3 in an effort to improve the transition from the infant to the junior school. While staff in the partner school were supportive and hoped that the practice of releasing teachers to observe lessons would become normal practice, they were unsure how this would be managed in the longer term without Beacon money.

## 4.6 Summary

Evidence from the case studies suggests that there were many perceived benefits for partner schools in working with Beacon Schools. The opportunity to visit schools and observe lessons was greatly valued, often explicitly over and above other kinds of in-service training; the follow-up discussions which some Beacon Schools also offered were appreciated. Changes to their own practice had often been implemented by staff in non-Beacon Schools as a result of what they had heard and observed; in a few cases, these were radical and/or whole-school changes.

These benefits had not come about without learning on both sides, however. Some partner schools wanted to be sure that their context (represented by catchment area and pupil characteristics) closely matched those of the Beacon School when choosing whom to work with. This underlines the importance for potential partners to have access to quite detailed information about Beacon schools, not just their areas of expertise.

Second, non-Beacon schools often held high expectations of their Beacon involvement and some prior negotiation and familiarisation helped in managing these expectations on both sides. Some schools, however, seemed not really to want or expect much beyond a 'look-see' at another school's practice: in which case, perhaps a fuller specification of the objectives for such visits would have been a good idea.

Third, partner schools frequently found that they needed to engage in self-review either prior to, or sometimes as a consequence of, their involvement with a Beacon school. For partner schools to have an accurate view of the problem they needed to work on was seen as an important foundation for Beacon-related work by both Beacon and partner schools. Beacon School staff were sometimes actively engaged in this process of needs analysis.

Fourth, the issues of follow-through and evaluation of impact in the partner schools had only just begun to be addressed. There were some examples of follow-through work which was structured and supported within partner schools; sometimes this was being developed in conjunction with the LEA. But there were only a few examples from the case studies of any planned, longer-term evaluations of the impact of Beacon-related work on school practice and pupil outcomes. It is arguable that this is an important area to get right if partner schools are to manage improvement for the longer term.

## 5. TOWARDS MODELS OF BEACON-BASED LEARNING

### 5.1 Introduction: Conceptualising Beacon Activity

The evidence presented in the previous chapters indicates how diverse the pilot phase of the initiative has been, in terms of themes/topics focused on, modes of dissemination utilised, degree of integration with school development planning and professional development strategies, range of issues encountered and types of reactions experienced.

At this stage – as the next tranche of Beacon Schools is signed up – it may be timely to develop a more explicit conceptualisation of the Beacon initiative, in terms of the defining characteristics which distinguish it from other forms of site-based school improvement. This would help to clarify what is intended and feasible to be achieved by Beacon activity, and by what means.

If this inference is valid, then probably some additional work needs to be done to take account of what is known – through both empirical and theoretical research – about such areas as:

- ♦ professional knowledge-creation amongst teachers and its management;
- ♦ transfer of practice from ‘donor’ to ‘host’ schools (if that is the right metaphor) *via* shared, site-based continuing professional development;
- ♦ the context, in terms of funding mechanisms, partnership structures and LEA support, which promotes or inhibits such developments.

Useful sources for such an investigation, which could lead to a clearer description of Beacon activity and what, if any, are the appropriate models/types of continuing professional development provision to act as Beacon comparators, include Showers *et al.* (1987), Beale and Kogan (1998), Cordingley (1999), Hargreaves (1999), Rudduck (1999).

To take just one of the above sources, the review by Showers *et al.* of approaches to staff development argues that:

*the first message from training research is that the important components of teaching practices are cognitive in nature... Thus the purpose of providing training on any practice is not simply to generate the external visible teaching ‘moves’ that bring that practice to bear in the instructional setting but to generate the cognitions that enable the practice to be selected and used appropriately and integratively.*

They go on to suggest:

*Combinations of four components (theory, demonstration, practice and feedback) appear necessary to develop the levels of cognitive and interactive skills that permit practice in the classroom. For most teachers, even combinations such as demonstrations along with the study of theory do not appear to produce high enough effects to sustain classroom practice, unless they also have the opportunities to practice in the training setting... For a complex model of teaching, we estimate that about 25 episodes during which the new strategy is used are necessary before all the conditions of transfer are achieved.*

If this is true, its implication is that professional development through Beacon-related activity probably needs to consist of more intensive and interactive approaches than simply ‘dissemination’.

Another perspective on the transfer of professional knowledge can be gleaned from Fullan (1999). Although he does not discuss Beacon Schools or their equivalent as such, Fullan makes the following points about the difficulties of transfer and dissemination in educational provision generally:

- ♦ the ‘products of people’s reform efforts’ may hide many of the subtleties of the reform in practice, including the implicit values and tacit knowledge which are enacted on a day-to-day basis;
- ♦ successful reforms are partly a function of good ideas but largely the function of the conditions which allowed them to be spawned and flourish;
- ♦ reform on a large scale depends on the development of local capacity to manage multiple innovations simultaneously;
- ♦ ‘reculturing’ (which gets at the core of teaching and learning) is much more difficult than restructuring;
- ♦ large-scale transfer of complex good ideas is almost impossible ‘in the absence of intimate personal contact’ (quoting Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995) and without a longer time-scale than is often accorded to initiatives.

He concludes that:

- ♦ reformers need to develop a *theory of action* to address local contexts as well as a *theory of education*;
- ♦ transfer is more a question of *inspiration* (to insight and action) than of *imitation*;
- ♦ therefore, ‘you have to directly work on changing the context of *recipient organizations*’.

However, it seems reasonable to infer that the role of systematic, cumulative knowledge in teachers’ professional development also needs to be strengthened if Showers *et al.*’s concept of ‘cognitive skills’ is to be meaningful. Hargreaves has presented a number of challenges to educators



(practitioners as well as researchers) about the role played by such knowledge in the practice of teaching. In his 1996 lecture to the Teacher Training Agency, for example, he characterised teaching as a profession which relies heavily on traditional, personal and anecdotal, rather than evidential, systematic and cumulative, learning. Incidentally, the possibility of educationists learning from models of evidence-based practice in medicine and healthcare – a point made throughout his lecture by Hargreaves and since taken up by many other commentators and policy-making bodies – was mentioned by a headteacher we interviewed, who said that the Beacon School principle should be much more like that of ‘teaching hospitals’.

The issue of how, and with what rationales, teachers and teacher-educators construct and transmit professional knowledge is obviously a contested area, and further investigation lies outside the scope of the present report. In the meantime, the team has devised, mainly from the fieldwork evidence in the case studies, (i) a notional framework for understanding Beacon activity; and (ii) a set of provisional models which attempt to characterise different approaches in Beacon activity, and of which we have tried to bring out the defining strengths and weaknesses.

## 5.2 A Framework for Understanding Beacon Activity

The framework given below is, of course, provisional: it arose out of discussions amongst the NFER team in making collective sense out of what had been observed in the different case studies, and thus might change if new case studies brought a different set of issues to light. The main points to note are that the idea of ‘dissemination of good practice’ needs unpacking; that there are blocks and risks at every stage; and that a relationship of trust is crucial to changing practice.

	<b>BEACON SCHOOLS</b>	<b>NON-BEACON SCHOOLS</b>
<i>Level 0</i>	Identifying and understanding ‘good practice’	Identifying and understanding the issue or problem to work on
<i>Level 1</i>	Networking	Making contact
	<i>What gets in the way at this stage?</i>	
<i>Level 2</i>	Disseminating information/ materials	Receiving information/materials
	<i>What are the risks and pitfalls at this stage?</i>	
<i>Level 3</i>	Supporting practice in a negotiated context	‘Owning’ and practising on own territory
	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;"> <i>This can be achieved only if the social context in which the transfer of knowledge takes place is taken into account, and then by establishing trust and taking risks.</i> </div>	
	<i>What are the problems and inhibitions at this stage?</i>	
<i>Level 4</i>	Feedback: changing the approach and focus of Beacon work	Feedback: changing the environment in which one teaches/manages
	<i>What are the difficulties at this stage?</i>	
<i>Level 5</i>	Creating the conditions for sustainability of relationships	Creating the conditions for sustainability of improvement
	<i>What are the key risk factors at this stage?</i>	

One of the implications of this framework is that the public focus of the Beacon initiative needs to shift, to include the policies, processes and practices in non-Beacon Schools. In other words, it perhaps needs to be made clearer that the success of the Beacon initiative depends as much on the quality of learning by staff in non-Beacon Schools in making use of Beacon materials and support as on the quality of materials and support provided by Beacon School staff. The framework above provides the broad areas within which inputs, processes and outcomes on both sides would need to be identified and evaluated.

### **5.3 Some Provisional Models Arising from the Fieldwork**

The models presented below are for the purposes of discussion and debate: they are not intended to be definitive or exhaustive. Taken together, they represent a kind of progression from the basic model of ‘dissemination’ to what we might want to call the mature or developed model of ‘improving together’. For each model, we have compiled the following features:

- ♦ defining characteristics
- ♦ strengths
- ♦ weaknesses

and we have also provided some brief illustrations from the case studies of what we mean. Further detailed analysis of each of the case studies can be found in Appendix A.

As might be expected, none of the schools in this study fits neatly into a single model. Most of the schools’ Beacon activities have exhibited the characteristics of at least two models. For many, the first year as Beacon Schools has been one of evolving their practice through reflection on their experiences of how schools learn from one another.

#### ***MODEL A. ‘DISSEMINATION’: A SOLUTION LOOKING FOR A PROBLEM***

##### *Defining characteristics of model*

- ♦ Focus on policy/practice in the Beacon School, what it is and what is good about it
- ♦ Product-oriented, i.e. emphasis on materials, written or electronic

##### *Strengths of model*

- ♦ Systematic presentation, often as a ‘package’
- ♦ Relatively manageable in terms of demand on the Beacon School

### *Weaknesses of model*

- ♦ Assumption that receiving schools have correctly identified their needs
- ♦ Material/support not customised to different needs/contexts of individual schools
- ♦ Relationship is mainly one-way
- ♦ Follow-up not built in

### *Examples from case studies*

Four of the schools studied employed what could be referred to as dissemination model, though none retained this approach as their sole strategy.

*School A* offered expertise in the teaching of literacy and numeracy, on target setting and assessment, and on school councils. Staff produced materials on these topics and offered courses to all schools in the county. The materials were in a standard form, modelled on the LEA's format for INSET materials. Numbers were restricted to eight per session because of restricted space and a high demand obliged them to select course members from the applicants. This was done on the basis of representing schools from across a relatively large shire county, in an attempt at fairness. No attempt was made to explore the needs of the schools attending these courses.

The courses were developed as packages. Teachers who presented at these courses had developed a standard presentation to be used at every session but they found that they had to modify them in the light of the audience's prior knowledge and experience. In the light of their experience of the courses some schools have requested more individual training. Staff at the Beacon School have consequently been developing materials for these follow-on sessions with individual schools, thus developing the model into a form of consultancy in response to demand.

As the staff preparing the materials and leading the courses were identified as 'Beacon' staff by the headteacher and paid for the extra work, they appear to have accepted the extra workload, considerable though it was. They also saw the experience as valuable professional development, though they felt that they had been under-prepared for the role having received no training in the techniques of presentation to adults.

This school has also worked with two other schools on a consultancy basis. This is discussed later in this chapter.

*School F* began its Beacon activities offering sessions on '*the role of middle managers with respect to managing change*'. At this stage, no attempt was made to modify these sessions to suit the requirements of individual schools. The management team of *School F* did not see how this could be done, as it would involve drawn-out communications with schools by telephone and conventional mail. The school plans, however, to facilitate the publication of its own activities and engage in increased dialogue with potential partner schools using the Internet. Forty per cent of its Beacon funding has been used

to upgrade its Internet and Intranet capabilities. The school went on-line in June 1999 and the use of the Internet for Beacon-related activities should expand during school Year 1999-2000. The school has also been working with a school-centred consortium of schools, an HEI and its LEA advisory service to develop a proposal to the Teacher Training Agency to provide initial teacher training.

*School C* began its Beacon activities by advertising what it could offer to other schools on its website. Before becoming a Beacon School, the school had produced many documents, including some relating to its Beacon 'offer' – the professional development of teachers, initial teacher training, governor training and school management. These materials, unmodified, were sent to schools, which had contacted *School C* in its first term as a Beacon School. The headteacher also gave advice over the telephone. There was no attempt made to determine how schools used the materials which they had received or how useful they had found them to be. The relationship was effectively one-way, with no records kept of these transactions with 'client' schools. This approach developed into some face-to-face meetings, and in collaboration with the LEA, the school's Beacon activities will involve planned in-depth working with other schools next academic year (1999-2000) as discussed below in the section devoted to Model C.

*School D* adopted the approach of having schools visit, observe, and receive a document pack, following a standard format. This school's approach bridges Models A and B as it is based on a standard package though at the same time involving an element of face-to-face contact, with the opportunity to obtain specific guidance related to their needs. This could take the form of a second visit to *School D*. Interview data suggests that headteachers of some schools telephoned before the visit to request that certain members of their staff should experience particular aspects of the school, thus ensuring some form of specific targeted support. The headteacher of *School D* felt that the standardised visit to her school was sufficient first time around, as in her view, other schools did not know what they wanted from them until they had seen what was available. One school, situated some distance away, requested the document pack without a visit because of the amount of travelling involved. The headteacher agreed only reluctantly because she did not think that the documents were totally 'stand alone'; she preferred them to be seen in their actual working context.

Although schools which had visited were welcome to telephone and ask for further information or arrange a second visit, none of the schools had done so far. Evidently, some headteachers felt that they had received their fair share of the Beacon funding for some supply costs or that the Beacon School would be overwhelmed by other demands.

Headteachers and other staff were interviewed in several of the schools which had sent staff to visit *School D*. Most appeared to view their visit as a single event, and were not planning further contacts. Often staff had returned from their visit, not unimpressed, but also reassured that they themselves were '*getting it right*' for a lot of the time. They also picked up useful ideas or 'tips' to use in the classroom. This type of short, standardised visit did not

appear to inspire the client schools to greatly change their practice in the area in which the guidance was being offered (literacy).

None of the headteachers of Beacon Schools in the study advocated dissemination as the sole way forward, though some saw it as a possible first step to give colleagues in other schools a chance to find out about their schools and the type of exemplars and advice being offered before proceeding to some form of closer ‘consultancy’ relationship.

### ***MODEL B. ‘CONSULTANCY’: A CUSTOMISED APPROACH TO AN IDENTIFIED PROBLEM***

#### *Defining characteristics of model*

- ♦ Focus on policy/practice in the receiving school
- ♦ Process-oriented, i.e. emphasis on face-to-face input
- ♦ Builds relationship over time

#### *Strengths of model*

- ♦ Capable of being differentiated according to needs of individual receiving schools
- ♦ Helps receiving school to clarify needs and priorities
- ♦ May contribute to building longer-term capacity in receiving school

#### *Weaknesses of model*

- ♦ Potentially problematic for Beacon School to manage demand
- ♦ May encourage dependency by receiving school
- ♦ Beacon School may find ‘exit strategy’ difficult
- ♦ Sustainability hard to develop

#### *Examples from case studies*

All of the schools studied offered some elements of the ‘consultancy’ model at some point in that they attempted to focus on the policies and practices in the receiving schools and there was an element of visits involving observation and face-to-face meetings. There were fewer examples of Beacon Schools trying to build up relationships over time with ‘client’ schools.

As mentioned in the ‘Dissemination Model’ section above, *Schools A, C and D* had progressed from disseminating their good practice in prepared packages of documents or structured visits, to attempting to address identified needs in individual schools. Two other schools, *School G and H* employed a consultancy model from the outset.

Staff in *School C* worked closely with staff in two other schools during their first year as a Beacon School. These were the infant school from which *School C* received pupils in Year 3 and the secondary school which took the largest number of its pupils at Year 7. While these links proved to be beneficial to the relationship between the schools and to their classroom practice and provided good experience for the teachers involved, this was not strictly a Beacon School activity as it could be argued that all primary schools ought to be undertaking such activities with their partner schools. *School C*, however, is planning involvement in the form of what we might call ‘brokered consultancy’ (see below) which is intended to lead to the ‘improving-together’ model discussed in the next section.

In *School D*, the visiting staff observed the nursery at work and then had discussions with the head of the nursery who was released from teaching in order to host the visit. The discussion included an explanation of how the documentation provided related to the school’s practice and also addressed any aspects of *School D* which were of particular interest to the visitors. There was, however, no attempt to assist the client schools with identifying their needs. The assumption was that the visiting schools would take from the visit what they wanted.

From the outset, the emphasis in *School G* was on visits by teachers tailored to the needs of the client school. The headteacher of *School G* explained this decision, saying that courses or packages of materials were of restricted value not only because they were not suited to the individual needs of client schools, but also because they would be open to negative responses from teachers who would claim that this would never work in their school or that they had seen it before and it did not work then. He believed strongly in teachers coming to his school, seeing what they had to offer, speaking to a range of staff and students, and then discussing how the principles might be applied to their school.

LEA schools contacted *School G* having received a flier which explained what the school had to offer. Once it was realised that the school was receiving more requests than it could cope with, the two deputy headteachers responsible for Beacon activity prioritised the requests, selecting those which they felt they could best help and informing the others that they would contact them again later on. Their view was that they should work with a restricted number of schools, but give them a high quality service. They quickly came to the decision that they would work most effectively if they dealt with one school at a time. Before each visit, some time was spent in determining the situation in the client school, by telephone and from documents. The schools, most of whom were within a few miles, were encouraged to send a large number of staff to *School G* – for example, a whole department was sent in groups of one or two if curriculum development was being addressed, and heads of year and form tutors, if PSHE and the pastoral curriculum were the focus. One school sent 17 members of staff in total. This had several advantages – there was a greatly reduced need for cascading of the lessons learned to other staff (a strategy which interviewees in the Beacon School had found generally to be unsatisfactory), there were enough people with first-hand knowledge of *School G* to engage in discussion of what they had seen

and apply it to their own planning, and there was a 'critical mass' of people who did not need much convincing of the advantages of adopting and adapting the practices which they had seen.<sup>2</sup>

However, as the programmes were prepared for individual school needs, although a school situated 70 miles away could send only one person, the deputy headteacher, the activity was considered very beneficial by the client school. In the deputy headteacher's view, this was due to careful discussion with *School G* of their requirements beforehand (the area being addressed having been carefully considered in the client school and being a part of its School Development Plan), the visit programme being tailored to their needs, and the willingness of *School G* staff to share their experiences openly, both successes and challenges.

As regards continuing support following the visits of staff from the client school, *School G* tries whenever possible to send one or two staff to the school to discuss the visits and where possible to advise on developments in that school. However, *School G* is unwilling to engage in on-going support as they fear that their staff would become too involved in the other school and their work must be first and foremost for their own pupils.

*School H* was working with a small group of schools in a local cluster. As a school for pupils with Moderate Learning Difficulties (MLD) in a situation where there was a policy-driven move towards inclusive education (that is, the education of more pupils with special needs, often with attendant behavioural problems, in mainstream schools), *School H* had longstanding links with local schools, which had become more structured. As a Beacon School, *School H* had not attempted to work with a wider range of schools, though it had taken the opportunity to extend its link with the local Early Years Centre. However, the fact that most of the activities undertaken as a Beacon School were a continuation of existing outreach work need not negate the value of this school's experiences to this study.

The local schools were having to cope with many pupils who would formerly have been passed onto *School H*. The support provided by *School H* was individual to each school, consisting of providing customised material based on existing *School H* material, observation at *School H* and in-school support from the headteacher of *School H* (a former inspector/adviser) and another teacher. These cluster schools were being provided with valuable support, though their relationship with the Beacon School appeared to be very dependent. This is perhaps not surprising, as the *School H* staff, being special school teachers, were perceived as experts. Rather than the cluster schools becoming more self-reliant, the level of support required appeared to be expanding. It appeared that *School H* was solving existing problems rather than enabling colleagues in the cluster schools to solve them for themselves in the future. This must in part be due to the attitude of dependency in these schools. It should be acknowledged, however, that these schools were in a situation where they were obliged to accept more MLD pupils in an area

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<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere, interviewees in smaller schools commented on the value of sending more than one member of staff at a time to a Beacon School since this allowed them to compare and contrast their experiences as a first stage in generating change.

where the proportion of pupils with special needs in mainstream schools was already high – in some cases over 50 per cent.

The headteacher of *School G* was aware of the risks of his staff becoming too involved in on-going support and there also appeared in *School H* to be a potential for the on-going support work to have a negative impact on the work of their own school. Perhaps such situations could be avoided by adopting a strategy whereby a group of schools worked together on a more reciprocal basis. This is investigated below in the discussion of the final model. However, before moving on, we shall examine briefly the situations where the LEA has acted as an agent bringing schools together and where a Beacon School is working on a consultancy basis with a school identified as having serious weaknesses.

## **B.2 ‘Brokered consultancy’**

This version of the model is where an outside agency, the LEA for example, may act as a broker for bringing Beacon and non-Beacon Schools together; in which case, some of the weaknesses may be able to be anticipated and addressed. The main risks this version poses are one, whether the LEA can be accurate in pairing schools appropriately and two, if the LEA is selecting the non-Beacon Schools for ‘treatment’, whether it can effectively manage the sensitivities or even potential resentment involved.

### *Examples from case studies*

There were some examples of this kind of activity among the schools studied though none had as yet progressed very far. The impression given in most of the areas visited was that, at the outset, the LEA had received no information about the Beacon Schools initiative and about the Beacon Schools in their area directly from DfEE. Initially this produced a degree of resentment in some areas and in some gave rise to concern. For example, one LEA was concerned that the Beacon initiative might pose a threat to their own school improvement programme.

These issues appear to have been resolved. Even the LEAs which appeared to resent the Beacon initiative were, by the latter half of the year, approaching schools which they felt might benefit from working with the Beacon School and suggesting that they explored the possibility. Others quickly overcame their doubts and began working with the Beacon Schools early on. One LEA, which contained several Beacon Schools, had assisted them over concerns about Beacon contracts, had inaugurated termly meetings of Beacon School headteachers and a Beacon activity newsletter and were offering to facilitate conference arrangements. This LEA saw Beacon Schools as catalysts for change, challenging schools rather than just providing good ideas.

In one area, where the Beacon School (*School E*) had set up two successive consortia of local schools to initiate changes, the LEA was ensuring that schools, who in their view most needed the kind of development on offer, applied in good time for membership of the second consortium. The LEA, in whose area *School C* is situated, had worked with the headteacher for some



time providing training for other schools in areas such as professional development for headteachers and governor training. For academic year 1999-2000, a more planned, targeted approach to Beacon School activities will be implemented. The LEA and the school have together developed a benchmarking exercise in which selected schools will work together learning from each other, and the Beacon School will provide support for the other schools in terms of individual consultancy, visits, observation, discussion and guidance. This is explored further in the section on Model C.

Part of the LEA 'brokering' role as envisaged by LEA interviewees can be that of fostering schools' abilities to learn from one another. Staff in a school may well need support and encouragement before they will accept learning from another school and they may also need some professional development in how to learn from another school – for example, how to prepare for a visit, what to look for on the visit and how to make use of what they have observed and received.

### **B.3 'The special relationship' (for schools on special measures)**

This version of the model is where a Beacon School works closely with a school identified as having serious weaknesses or on special measures; the LEA may well be involved. There will always be sensitive issues when one school offers help and guidance to another. These may be particularly acute when a Beacon School is working with a school identified as having serious weaknesses. The main risks here are that, unless there is substantial support from the LEA in addition to input from the Beacon School, the demands on Beacon School staff might become overwhelming; and/or that the underlying nature of the weakness has not been sufficiently well diagnosed to allow appropriate intervention by another school. Beacon School staff might themselves need additional training and support in handling the needs for input which may emerge.

#### *Examples from case studies*

There was little developed data to be found on Beacon Schools working with schools on special measures. Three were in this situation, though two of them had only just begun the relationship. However, some indications did emerge as to what this type of relationship entailed for both parties. In some cases, the work with the failing school was at such a sensitive stage that those concerned declined a visit from the NFER team.

*School D* was approached by the headteacher of a primary school, the nursery department of which was perceived to be failing. She wanted some guidance on good practice in nursery education as this was not her speciality (she expressed it as needing '*confirmation that planning and organisation were missing and standards low*'). Following a visit to *School D*, the visiting school adopted some of the ideas which it had seen in practice and began a substantial overhaul of its nursery department. The Beacon teacher had hoped the Beacon visit would be a supportive and constructive experience for the nursery teacher in post at the time by providing clear guidance on what could be achieved within a successful nursery department. However, it would seem

that the teacher concerned viewed the experience less positively; she resigned shortly afterwards. This episode suggests that a consequence of a Beacon School working with a 'failing' school or department may be the need for major restructuring before any further improvement can be made. There may also be the potential for a headteacher to use working with a Beacon School as a lever to hasten this process.

*School A* was working with two schools which were on special measures. The headteacher of the Beacon School reported difficulties in developing the relationships. In trying to meet requests for help with specific aspects, such as PSHE or assessment, her staff found that the problems were more fundamental. They did not have the seniority to address these and she herself did not want to be seen as interfering. She also felt that although she had a good relationship with the LEA, she was in danger of intervening in situations which may have been already within the remit of others. This would suggest that more preparation was needed before the consultancy began with all parties, Beacon School, client school and LEA being involved openly and supportively.

Some of the interviewees – headteachers and LEA advisory staff – felt that while a Beacon School could contribute to supporting and reviving a school which was identified as failing, it could potentially make a better contribution at an earlier stage. They argued that if a school was perceived as in danger of failing, the LEA could offer that school help through a partnership with the Beacon School. This might have greater chance of success as the gap between the two schools might not be too great and the school's difficulties would not be added to by the stigma of being publicly identified as 'failing'.

### ***MODEL C. 'IMPROVING TOGETHER': CREATING A NETWORK OF MUTUAL SUPPORT FOR EXCELLENCE***

#### *Defining characteristics of model*

- ◆ Focus on policy/practice in a group of schools
- ◆ Premised on notion of reciprocal learning and capacity-building, rather than reacting to individual requests
- ◆ Generates mutual support and challenge

#### *Strengths of model*

- ◆ Does not single out one school as 'knowing it all'
- ◆ Helps schools to 'compare and contrast' their own practice with others'
- ◆ Does not create dependency
- ◆ Can (re-)build strong relationships within an LEA or locality
- ◆ Can promote work on pyramid basis
- ◆ Can be an effective means of delivering the EDP
- ◆ Can provide early anticipation of, and intervention in, areas of potential weakness

### *Weaknesses of model*

- ♦ Initiative may dissipate into a number of disconnected activities
- ♦ May create isolationism
- ♦ May be side-tracked or distorted by vagaries in the local political context

### *Examples from case studies*

The two settings which came closest to exemplifying this model were *School E* and *C*. *School E* was involved in working with a group of schools and *School C* was preparing to enter an initiative, planned jointly with the LEA, to set up a group of schools which would work together initially using the Beacon School's practice as a 'benchmark' against which to measure their own activity. Both Beacon Schools will remain available to additional schools which may contact them looking for advice, though their availability to such schools must to some extent be reduced.

The schools working in consortium with *School E* reported that they were making faster and more positive progress than they thought they would have achieved by working by themselves. They also felt that they had experienced lower staff resistance than would otherwise have been the case. An LEA adviser has been working with *School E* since the first consortium was set up and is now retained by the school on a consultancy basis. He was in the process of steering schools deemed in need of support as regards pupil tracking into applying for membership of the second consortium.

The LEA, working with *School C*, aims to foster schools' learning from each other, starting with a group of six schools, both selected from applicants and invited to join by the LEA. Like many of the Beacon Schools visited, the headteacher of *School C* was aware of the risk of becoming the focus of resentment from other local schools as her school was being held up as an example to them, and receiving good publicity locally. The LEA inspector was also aware of this and that this could produce resistance to learning from a Beacon School. Both recognised that there is often an unwillingness among teachers to accept learning from another school which they might see as 'no better than us' or as in a favourable situation in which things can be achieved which could not be achieved in their more disadvantaged school. They have therefore decided that the benchmarking initiative will begin with some LEA-provided in-service training on accepting learning from one another and on learning how to learn from other schools in this cluster situation. It is envisaged that there will be visits by staff from the non-Beacon Schools to *School C*. Before these visits take place, however, there will be a period of careful preparation and needs identification. The process is outlined in more detail in Appendix A.

The aims are to enhance the effectiveness of the schools in the group and to create a situation of schools learning from one another and working together collaboratively in an on-going situation. Once they have learned to support and learn from each other, they may not require very much regular input from the LEA, which would monitor the work of the group, facilitate when needed,

and provide expertise and support at appropriate points, such as the implementation of new national initiatives.

In *School C's* area, the LEA is contributing something to the overall costs. These will not be very substantial funds, but the cluster centred on the Beacon Schools means that funds which might have been insufficient by themselves to influence schools greatly are contributing to an initiative which has the potential so to do. The consortium approach both makes the expertise of the Beacon School available and broadens the range of shared experience and expertise. Interviewees in both areas saw this also as a great opportunity to '*put schools back in touch with one another*'.

At the centre of the Beacon School initiative lies the notion of schools learning from one another. For this to happen, neighbouring schools have to overcome the isolationism and culture of competition which had been a feature of the past ten years and all schools have to change the belief '*it would never work in our school*' to '*we know how to examine that other school's best practice, measure the results and adapt it to our school*' (Tucker, 1996).

This has implications for the Beacon Schools and for those schools which may wish to work with them and benefit from their successful practices. Staff in Beacon Schools need guidance in effective, efficient ways of sharing their practice with others without involving themselves in too much work or presenting the other schools with examples which they do not see as relating to their situations. Staff in the potential partner schools may need to be persuaded of the value of examining good practice in other schools, and to be shown how best to identify what, in their situation, they want to gain from working with the Beacon School. Both partners may well need guidance as to how to learn from one another.

An LEA could be in a powerful position to facilitate this process, if it has advisory personnel with a good working knowledge of its schools, with the experience and skills to provide inservice training, and with the status of a critical friend with no specific allegiance to any one school. At the start of the Beacon Schools initiative, LEAs were largely not involved or consulted by Government or the Beacon Schools. This may initially have caused some unease or even resentment. However, as regards the case-study schools at least this appears to have disappeared or at least to be fading.

The developing situation in some of the case-study areas illustrates the role which the LEA could play in bringing schools together in local consortia with a Beacon School at least initially occupying a pivotal role. Such mutual support groups have the potential to provide practical solutions for schools' problems in a setting of mutual respect. A key role of the LEA at the outset would be to ensure that the participants remained focused on a limited number of key issues, that the process was sustained, and that over time more schools would be drawn in to similar support groups. The LEA could also be in a strong position to encourage schools which might otherwise slide into failing situations to join such a group and perhaps begin successfully to address their problems.

## **5.4 Conclusions**

The notion that different models of Beacon activity, as a form of site-based school improvement, can be derived from the fieldwork seems to be valid. The relative strengths and weaknesses of each model would need to be tested out by further empirical research, however, and probably also complemented by the research literature encompassing more theoretical understandings of the construction of teachers' professional knowledge and how they enact this in practice in institutional contexts.

## 6. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter summarises the main achievements attributable to the Beacon Schools initiative identified through the pilot study, and discusses the issues which have emerged, including that of assessing the initiative's cost effectiveness. It concludes by offering an assessment of the likelihood of the initiative delivering improvements in schools and under what conditions. The evidence used for these conclusions includes the written case studies (Appendix A) as well as the text of the report so far.

### 6.1 Achievements of the Beacon Schools Initiative to Date

The achievements of the initiative to date and insofar as this study has been able to identify them can be grouped in terms of benefits for Beacon Schools, benefits for non-Beacon partner schools and overall achievements.

#### *Benefits for Beacon Schools*

- ♦ According to interviews with Beacon School staff, the initiative has provided them with the opportunity to innovate and experiment. The central funding and resourcing – for example, provision of supply cover – have been central to that innovation.
- ♦ Beacon School staff have appreciated the career and promotion opportunities made available to them.
- ♦ The initiative has increased staff self-confidence, and improved their morale and self-esteem (which was said to be particularly important in the current climate).
- ♦ The profile of individual Beacon Schools has often been raised, with the effect of attracting more and better candidates for advertised posts.
- ♦ The initiative has encouraged greater self-reflection on the part of staff engaged in providing professional development activities for colleagues in other schools.
- ♦ Staff in Beacon Schools have acknowledged that they have learnt from their interactions with other schools; in other words, Beacon-based learning is not a one-way process.

#### *Benefits for partner (non-Beacon) schools*

- ♦ According to interviews with staff in partner schools, they have much appreciated the opportunity to see what happens in other schools during 'real time'. The resources for this – for example, in terms of supply cover – have been essential to making those opportunities available.
- ♦ More specifically, the focus on teaching and learning based on the observable classroom-based practice of other professionals has won wide credibility: '[Beacon activity is] individual INSET from experienced people in a real school'.

- ♦ The initiative has encouraged greater self-reflection on the part of staff who have visited a Beacon School – even if, as a minimum, the result was to confirm a sense that their own practice was already reasonably good.
- ♦ Contact with Beacon Schools has promoted action and led to change (already implemented or planned) in areas as diverse as pupil monitoring, curriculum design and delivery, school systems and structures, pastoral provision.
- ♦ In a few cases, there were claims that standards of pupil achievement had already improved as a result.

#### *Overall achievements*

- ♦ The Beacon Schools initiative has demonstrated the existence of a felt need amongst school staff to learn from each other.
- ♦ The initiative has served to reinstate the value of the principle of collaboration and partnership between schools, and to (re-)establish local networks and consortia.
- ♦ In particular, there was affirmation of what such partnerships could bring in terms of *'mutual respect, sharing, openness and sensitivity – professionals working together'*.
- ♦ The encouragement of reflective practice, an emerging theme in several interviews, chimes well with the general policy focus on enhancing schools' capacities for self-evaluation.
- ♦ The initiative has plainly been a lever for change in several non-Beacon schools, at least partly because Beacon Schools are often themselves examples of 'learning organisations' (which is not necessarily the same thing as being held up as an example of 'achieved excellence').

## **6.2 Issues, Problems and Unintended Consequences of the Beacon Schools Initiative**

Many of the unintended consequences seem to be positive – or, to turn it round the other way, many of the early achievements of Beacon Schools are not ones which were necessarily fully anticipated. For example, the provision of opportunities for school staff simply to visit each other's schools and the re-establishing of local networks of schools were not key aims of the initiative as such, but were clearly very appreciated by participants.

So far as issues and problems are concerned, the initiative was in its pilot phase at the time of the study; the following commentary is therefore intended to identify the key lessons to be learnt from the early stages, rather than to be read as definitive criticism. We have grouped the issues into those which might be dealt with at a 'management and operations' level, and those which are more strategic.

### *Management and operational issues/problems*

- ♦ The main risk identified by staff in Beacon Schools was to the quality of their own provision, due to excessive demands on staff time. It has to be said that this seemed to be more of a fear than a reality, however, partly because Beacon Schools were already taking steps to limit those demands.
- ♦ Some interviewees were concerned about the divisive effect within a Beacon School of identifying individual staff as 'Beacon' teachers; some resentment was apparent amongst a few staff in Beacon Schools who were not themselves involved in the initiative, for reasons both of professional status and of access to extra funding.
- ♦ Links with HEIs were not very far developed or else were in existence already; this is an area which, especially in tandem with accreditation for continuing professional development, could be developed further (see Arnold (1995) for examples).
- ♦ At this stage of the initiative, there appeared to be only limited use of electronic forms of communication: but since this is one of the fastest-moving areas in education, this may quickly change. In some of our case-study schools, there had been delays to installation and operation of hardware and software, which had in turn put back some schools' plans for electronic dissemination and access. There were also problems with accessing some of the websites, and some of the non-Beacon schools said they still relied on conventional modes of communication.
- ♦ It is not yet certain exactly how, and how far, electronic media can contribute to the professional development aspects of Beacon activity – that is, the transfer of professional knowledge – as distinct from dissemination of information. Much of the former type of work was being done *via* face-to-face, on-site sessions. This may be inevitable at this stage of development, partly because of the felt need to re-establish *local* networks around professional development and partly because of an intuitive preference for direct personal observation and contact. Development of more sophisticated technology might address the latter issue to some extent (e.g. *via* the 'virtual classroom').

### *Strategic issues/problems*

- ♦ A perception of the Beacon Schools initiative as prescriptive and élitist was still current amongst some non-Beacon interviewees, although the more involved people became in the activities themselves, the more this was seen to be an artificial and unnecessary *canard*. Some further demystification and refocusing may be necessary, however, as the initiative expands.
- ♦ There is probably quite a lot of work still to be done in building practical theories to help teachers understand and manage the transfer of professional knowledge from one classroom context to another. As we suggested in Chapter 5, this is a complex field and although several Beacon staff were certainly addressing these issues with their colleagues in partner schools there could be duplication of effort and even wrong turnings taken unless the knowledge is systematically built and shared.



- ♦ However, if the four-part process of professional development proposed by Showers *et al.* (see Chapter 5) – of theory, demonstration, practice and feedback – is valid, then the Beacon School initiative is set up to deliver only the first half of the cycle. For Beacon staff to embark on the activities of observing and responding to colleagues’ practice in partner schools would be to court exactly the risk identified above, of creating excessive demands on Beacon staff time. Yet without the second half of the cycle, professional development potential in partner schools may remain unrealised and simply rhetorical. This dilemma suggests that (i) a strategic role of LEAs in the development of the Beacon initiative needs to be negotiated and (ii) the Beacon initiative needs to be firmly and clearly linked to other policies for supporting professional development in the teaching profession.
- ♦ There are three other compelling reasons for looking beyond the Beacon Schools initiative: one is the risk of creating a ‘dependency culture’ where partner school staff become over-reliant on Beacon School staff to solve their problems (mentioned by one or two Beacon School interviewees). Another is the possibility that schools which may be especially in need of improvement through professional development will not make use of the Beacon Schools initiative, for whatever reason. But, whilst the current ‘voluntaristic’ nature of the initiative has its weaknesses, it is equally probable that compulsion would not work any better. The third is the possibility that central funding is time-expired: so how can the advantages and benefits be sustained over the longer term? Thought therefore needs to be given to creating structures and systems which both weave separate national policies together at a local level and create support for sustaining the core processes encompassed by those policies.
- ♦ The whole area of evaluation seemed to be under-developed. Feedback by non-Beacon to Beacon staff was generally favourably couched and asked/given more or less on-the-spot; the following is a typical example: *‘thank you for a very interesting session – your hospitality was wonderful!’* The question of whether, how and by whom longer-term impact is critically evaluated, and what is then done with the information, is an unresolved issue for both Beacon and non-Beacon schools.

## 6.3 Cost Effectiveness and Value For Money of the Beacon Schools Initiative

The issue of cost effectiveness and value for money was raised at the beginning of the evaluation study, and it is therefore timely to review how far in the process of constructing a framework the evaluation has been able to take us.

### 6.3.1 Issues of assessing cost effectiveness and value for money

According to evidence presented by NFER in an earlier paper<sup>3</sup> for DfEE, the issues of assessing the cost effectiveness of a programme like the Beacon

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<sup>3</sup> *Evaluation of Pilot Beacon Schools: Issues of Value For Money and Cost-Effectiveness.* Unpublished report.

Schools initiative are likely to be complex. For example, Holtermann (1998) argued that *'the information requirements for a cost benefit analysis are quite onerous and easily underestimated... [possibly requiring] a special study... with detailed questions'*. She went on:

*If research into effectiveness is to include cost benefit analysis or cost effectiveness analysis, then it is best to include the needs of the economic evaluation in the design of the effectiveness study from the outset. Otherwise it may happen that an effectiveness study has not collected all the information needed on resource use and it may be infeasible to collect it later... Ideally the research team would include an economist...*

Overall, the earlier NFER paper concluded that:

- ♦ Cost effectiveness proper cannot be measured except by comparative means, where one option (which might be a 'nil' option) forms the baseline for comparison with the others. It is not a straightforward exercise and may be very labour intensive; it requires that initiatives are designed, and evaluated, more in terms of 'interventions' than at present.
- ♦ Even so, *'sometimes the process of doing an economic evaluation is as valuable as the outcome: it gathers all the relevant facts within a logical framework, and gaps in knowledge are exposed and conflicts of value are revealed. And this in itself can make a useful contribution to the debate around policy and practice.'* (Holtermann, 1998).

The NFER considers that there are still several issues which need to be resolved if a basis for assessing cost effectiveness of Beacon activity is to be established. The requirements are as follows:

- ♦ the specific **objectives/performance indicators for Beacon activities** will need to be established at national, local and institutional levels;
- ♦ if there are several objectives, some **order of priority** or relative value may need to be assigned, given the limited resources for achieving those objectives;
- ♦ it also needs to be decided whether all indicators should be applied to all Beacon activities: if not, there should be a **core set of indicators** applicable to all activities (otherwise comparisons cannot be made);
- ♦ it needs to be agreed which of these indicators can be **meaningfully quantified**;
- ♦ a **meaningful time-frame** needs to be agreed for different kinds of outcome to become evident;
- ♦ the **unintended outcomes** (positive and negative) need to be identified, together with some way of quantifying them;
- ♦ the **costs**, including costs in kind and hidden costs, of Beacon School activities need to accurately calculated, both at individual Beacon School level and overall;

- ♦ it will also be necessary to calculate, or gather information about, **costs to end-users/partners**;
- ♦ the **key activities** for which money and other resources have been used need to be identified, both at individual Beacon School level and in the programme as a whole;
- ♦ data needs to be collected on the quantifiable outcomes at pre-determined and appropriate point(s) in time, so that they can be **measured**;
- ♦ the quantifiable outcomes – including positive unintended outcomes – in the light of the agreed objectives/performance indicators then need to be **evaluated**;
- ♦ the extent to which the input of resources (including costs in kind and hidden costs) **made a difference**, taking account of negative unintended outcomes, needs to be assessed. Since the initiative and its evaluation were not set up on an experimental basis, we cannot compare what happened *via* the Beacon initiative with what happened in an equivalent population nor with what would otherwise have happened. The assessment will therefore have to triangulate documentary evidence, the perceptions and views of (a sample of) participants and any quantifiable outcomes available within the lifetime of the evaluation.

If this list is accepted as a set of prerequisites, three further observations – one conceptual and the others operational – need to be made. First, as was noted in Chapter 5 above, a more explicit conceptualisation of the Beacon initiative is necessary, in terms of what is intended to be achieved by it and by what means.

Secondly, if it is agreed that the evidence-base outlined above is more or less what is required, then ‘headline’ data in the public domain, for example, on aggregate student outcomes at the end of key stages, is unlikely to be sufficient (and may not even be relevant within the lifespan of the funded initiative) and other kinds of data will need to be created, collected and analysed. Much of the requisite data may well be internal, qualitative/process-related and/or new data. Agreement would have to be reached not only between the researchers/evaluators as contractors and DfEE as clients as to what was feasible but, more importantly, between the DfEE and Beacon Schools and their non-Beacon partners as to what was also relevant – these are the people who would have to supply the data and they must have the means and the will to generate it. Furthermore, the investigation of issues such as transfer of professional knowledge in a Beacon-context (however that is defined) does not easily lend itself to a simple input-output model, in which pre-existing data – such as grant-funding levels used as inputs and student performance data as outputs – would be the appropriate information to work with: a different kind of model for understanding impact and effectiveness may be required.

Thirdly, there needs to be some further development of a realistic ‘audit trail’ model or models to describe how schools deploy funding from various sources to support professional development activities: again, a simple input-output model based only on Beacon grant-funding and Beacon activities as named in schools’ bids is likely to be incomplete and therefore ultimately not helpful.

The view of NFER is that a substantial piece of development work is required, outside the scope of this report, to establish a feasible way of assessing cost effectiveness. We know that work of a more general kind (which may well have implications for the Beacon Schools initiative) is now being taken forward in a number of ways, both at policy level and through individual initiatives.

### 6.3.2 Note on financial issues in the pilot phase of Beacon Schools

The best the team can therefore achieve for this report is a note on the financial issues as we observed them in the questionnaire analysis and from fieldwork.

- ♦ The questionnaire data strongly indicated that Beacon Schools vary in the degree to which they record and can re-access financial information relating to their Beacon activities; some were able to give detailed financial information in line with DfEE specifications in the questionnaire and some were not. Schools probably need clearer and earlier guidance about record-keeping in relation to their Beacon activity.
- ♦ Further investigation in the case-study schools suggested that, whilst some schools had very good accounting systems set up (whilst others did not), most schools did not have either the conceptual framework or the evaluation systems in place to assemble the kind of information needed for an assessment of 'cost effectiveness', which depends on, but is a much more elaborate and complex exercise than, accounting.
- ♦ Some of the difficulty of getting reliable data may be explained by claims made in interviews that the Beacon initiative was at this stage being subsidised, to an unmeasured extent, by school staff – their enthusiasm for a new initiative meant that they expended their own time and resources literally without counting the cost.

Even so, when asked for their *opinion* on the value for money of Beacon Schools, the majority of interviewees said they thought the initiative provided good value for money, especially when compared with other forms of in-service training they had experienced.

## 6.4 Likely Impact of the Beacon Schools Initiative on School Improvement and Raising Standards

Taking all the evidence into account, the NFER believes that the Beacon Schools initiative has potential for school improvement through professional development – and therefore possibly and in the longer term for raising standards of pupils' attainment – under the following conditions:

- ♦ the **site-based, interactive and classroom-focused** nature of activities which seem currently to characterise the initiative are maintained;
- ♦ staff from non-Beacon schools visit the Beacon School(s) and work **in pairs or larger groups** (rather than as individuals), in order to maximise their own learning and its take-up within their school;

- ♦ **appropriate links** are made with other national policy initiatives and local strategies, so that Beacon activity is seen as one element in a whole spectrum of connected work for which provision is planned over a medium-to-long time frame;
- ♦ at the same time, it is recognised that the initiative will necessarily take **different forms** in different local circumstances;
- ♦ the ‘**practical theory**’ of the transfer of professional knowledge from one context to another is collectively developed and built on (which links with the ‘evidence-based policy and practice’ agenda);
- ♦ **evaluation frameworks and strategies** are developed, to help systematise the learning which happens;
- ♦ LEAs are encouraged to play a strategic role in the local management of Beacon activities as part of their own work to further **school self-review leading to improvement**. It must be recognised that the culture of self-evaluation is not yet established in schools; moreover, numerical data alone does not give a sufficiently accurate and sensitive picture of schools’ effectiveness nor of their different and changing needs for support and challenge. It is not suggested that the Beacon Schools initiative can supply all the missing links in the process of establishing the culture of self-reflection and systematic self-evaluation for improvement; but it does seem to have the potential to be one of the key links.

The final chapter now moves to suggest some practical recommendations arising out of these observations.

## 7. RECOMMENDATIONS

These suggestions for action are made with the intention of helping the different organisations involved in the Beacon Schools initiative to think about their next moves as the number of schools is increased over the next phases of the funded initiative.

### 7.1 Recommendations for Action by DfEE

- To consider how to ‘demystify’ the Beacon Schools initiative as an approach to professional development which is – perhaps contrary to some perceptions – inclusive rather than exclusive, built on partnership and mutual respect rather than elitism and is practical and classroom-based.
- To give clear messages to LEAs about the role they can play in promoting and managing mutual classroom-based learning amongst school staff.
- To provide clear, early guidance to schools on financial accounting systems and on evaluation strategies.
- To consider how best to link the policy with other related policies, so as to:
  - develop synergy and minimise disjunctions or possible mixed messages;
  - create mechanisms for sustaining the work done under the Beacon aegis;
  - develop shared understandings about the combination of conditions and structures most favourable to professional development.

### 7.2 Recommendations for Action by Beacon Schools

- To plan how to make the process of transfer of knowledge from one context to another more transparent and accessible.
- To think in terms of ‘capacity-building’ rather than ‘recipes for success’.
- To develop evaluation frameworks and strategies relevant to potential Beacon impact.
- To understand the need to set limits on the initiative *per se* but to work actively with the LEA and/or other schools in building partnerships and networks to secure mutual long-term development.
- To ensure that the initiative is not divisive within the school, by creating the principle of Beacon practice as distinct from Beacon practitioners.

- To consider whether the electronic media can be used more effectively and creatively, not just for dissemination but for interactive working.

### **7.3 Recommendations for Action by Beacon Partners: Other Schools**

- To understand the need for, and to undertake, self-review as a prerequisite of effective learning from other colleagues.
- To think in terms of ‘capacity-building’ rather than ‘recipes for success’.
- To allow sufficient time and resources for teachers to put their learning into practice (which does not happen all-at-once).
- To evaluate the impact of Beacon-based, and other, professional development activities in terms of improved teaching and pupils’ learning.
- To understand the need for limits on the capacity of the initiative *per se* to deliver school improvement, and to seek support from the LEA in building networks to secure longer-term development.

### **7.4 Recommendations for Action by Beacon Partners: LEAs**

- To foster a general climate for schools of sharing with and learning from each other, and to build networks between staff in the LEA’s schools to secure longer-term development.
- To identify and to connect up the different initiatives, strategies and systems – including the Beacon Schools initiative – which have the capacity to deliver aspects of school improvement.
- To facilitate the acquisition by teachers of the ‘cognitive and interactive skills’ which are the major dimensions of learning about teaching.
- To find ways of using the Beacon idea to manage the tension between ‘intervention in inverse proportion to success’ and ‘entitlement of all schools for support and challenge for school improvement’.

### **7.5 Recommendations for Action by Beacon Partners: HEIs**

- To identify ways in which Beacon-related activities can be accredited as part of continuing professional development.
- To help develop the ‘practical theory’ basis of Beacon activities.
- To find ways of using the Beacon idea to manage ‘site-based school improvement’ by involving Beacon staff more proactively.

We hope that these suggestions offer some practical ways forward for an initiative which, although there are clearly aspects which need further thought, research, active management and development, we have found has much to commend it.

# **APPENDIX A**

## **Case Studies**



# Case-Study School A

(as of July 1999)

## 1. Main area(s) of Beacon activity

School A is a junior school with over 300 pupils on roll. Pupils represent the full range of ability and the catchment was described as '*mixed*'. The school is forward looking and 'initiative orientated' and described as '*quite a proactive school, keen to explore new ideas*' – they piloted the Literacy Hour and are involved in the development of the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH).

Beacon activity has focused on providing training in literacy and numeracy, target setting and assessment practices, school councils, and has also included work with other headteachers in the same LEA on professional development (management/ethos issues). Work has been restricted to within the LEA and there are currently no plans to extend the Beacon programme beyond the county.

## 2. Development of Beacon activities: planning, resources, delivery

Beacon activity developed from existing work within the school. No market research to identify the type/level of need had been undertaken. The headteacher is confident that there is a need for training in the literacy and numeracy hours as they are new initiatives. The requirement for help with school management/ethos issues was also not researched; it was felt that there must be a market '*because they [schools] do fail their OFSTED!*' and the DfEE were very keen that this aspect be developed.

The school has distinct 'Beacon teachers' rather than a whole-school Beacon initiative. There was some disagreement about how staff became involved. The headteacher said that she firstly asked for volunteers (who were forthcoming): '*you can't force staff...it came from them*'. In contrast, the other 'Beacon staff' claim that no-one had volunteered and they were then personally approached and asked to contribute. It was an unknown project and the staff were wary of what it entailed.

There was no disagreement among staff about which areas of 'good practice' would become the basis for Beacon activity. Courses were organised for literacy and numeracy coordinators. The numbers were restricted to eight per course due to lack of space; in addition, high demand resulted in teachers being chosen from across the area in an effort to be 'fair'.

Course presentation and teaching materials were modelled on an LEA format to make them look professional. For the purposes of the courses, materials were standard for all visitors. As a result of these initial courses, schools have requested more individual training, and materials for this 'follow on' work have been tailored to schools' needs as identified by negotiation between the Beacon and partner school. There was also evidence that Beacon teachers had modified the presentations as they took place once it became clear that visiting

staff knew more than they had said they did! Beacon staff were given no formal training in presenting to colleagues.

Professional development work has taken the form of on-going individual consultancy work between the headteacher of School A and headteachers of partner schools. The headteacher described herself as '*a facilitator and encourager*'.

Non-Beacon staff in the Beacon School also benefited from the Beacon work. Beacon funds were used to provide cover for them to observe 'good practice': '*It's important that our school shares in the numeracy course otherwise we're not sharing with our own staff*'.

### **3. Partner institutions' involvement**

School A advertised their Beacon activities to schools in the area. Partner schools have identified their own needs and courses were oversubscribed (11-19 applicants for each course and only eight places available).

In addition, the LEA has been instrumental in brokering relationships between School A and partner schools. Both the partner schools visited had contacted the LEA about issues that they had identified, rather than responding directly to advertising. Interestingly, the partner schools had fairly similar catchments and both the partner schools and the LEA felt that this was important. The similarity of the schools avoided any problems of '*that's OK for your school because....etc.*' The LEA are keen for Beacon Schools to work with 'schools causing concern' rather than those on special measures (for whom the 'gap' between Beacon and failing school may be too great).

Staff in both the partner schools visited felt that School A had correctly identified their needs: they '*were quite shrewd*'. The headteacher and deputy headteacher visited one partner school and designed an appropriate programme and 'spoke back' the situation as they read it.

The LEA faces a dilemma insofar as they are unsure how involved they should get in the Beacon initiative. Communication from the DfEE was described as '*appalling*' and everything they knew about Beacon work came from the schools themselves (who provide copies of information/communication). The LEA became involved in Beacon work at the invitation of Beacon Schools in the area and LEA solicitors helped clarify the Beacon contracts.

The LEA described School A as '*working in partnership with the LEA*', and they were trying to overcome any concerns that the Beacon initiative might pose a threat to their own school improvement programme.

### **4. Outcomes for partner institutions**

All of the teachers interviewed were enthusiastic about observing and engaging in a dialogue with fellow teachers: '*there's nothing like a practitioner talking and watching another practitioner*'.

Outcomes to date for one partner school have been largely neutral. This school has undergone many staff changes (including the headteacher) in recent years and now has many inexperienced teachers. The new headteacher is unaware and/or unsupportive of the Beacon initiative. The teacher interviewed is desperate for help in developing whole school policies: *'They have tried to meet my needs...I'm floundering here...home-school agreements, bullying policies...'*.

Following the initial course offered by School A, a day was organised for staff from this partner school to visit for observation and discussion. Unfortunately, the training has been postponed twice. However, some optimism about working with the Beacon School remains: *'I live in hope and keep my fingers and toes crossed!'*. (This clearly raises issues about Beacon Schools' workload and planning; however, neither School A nor the LEA feels that the Beacon School failed to meet partner schools needs.) Information provided by the school indicates that this issue has been resolved and a training session took place in the autumn term.

Despite this, there have been indications of some positive outcomes. Information from the course has been cascaded to other staff who are beginning to try out ideas: *'It's definitely happening in people's heads'*.

The relationship between this partner school and School A was described as that of a consumer and it is unclear whether there will be any longer term partnership: *'I'm not sure what we're going to get'*.

Outcomes for another partner school have been generally positive. The school identified a need to improve literacy teaching and questioning skills in particular. Following the literacy coordinator's course, other staff visited School A (and other local non-Beacon Schools) to observe 'good practice'.

Staff from this partner school felt the Beacon School to be well organised, professional and welcoming. They were enthusiastic about seeing the literacy hour taught in an exemplary school, and that the Beacon teacher would be released to lead a discussion following the observation (some staff in the partner school would have preferred more time for observation). Once again, the school saw themselves as consumers and did not anticipate long term partnership. They were keen not to place too much emphasis on Beacon work: *'it's one piece of the jigsaw'*.

A number of issues were raised, although these did not appear to be serious concerns:

- ♦ Coordinators were chosen from across the county to attend the initial courses, however, this did not facilitate networking between schools.
- ♦ While it was felt that the provision of training by schools makes sense, one of the partner schools is some distance from School A and staff would have preferred working with a more local Beacon School.
- ♦ Not all the materials are easily transferable and had to be modified to fit the culture of the partner school.

- ♦ Is School A a 'Beacon School' or are there 'Beacon staff' within a Beacon School? There was some criticism that staff did not have access to the whole school (including the staff room) although the headteacher of the Beacon School stressed that such access was not requested by the partner school. Expectations had clearly been high: *'you expect to see something and we didn't quite see it'*. However, there was much praise for the Beacon teachers who were described as having a *'spark'*.

Staff from one partner school have fed back their experiences and resources (from all the visits including Beacon visits) at staff meetings and there is now continued evaluation of written and explicit learning intentions which pupils can understand. Teachers have moved on from trialling out their own ideas to developing whole-school policies. In addition, INSET is being arranged to address target setting in maths.

## 5. Outcomes for Beacon School

Outcomes for School A have been mixed; however, it appeared that, on balance, Beacon teachers are enthusiastic about their work.

All the Beacon staff believed that the initiative is beneficial for their professional development *'even if it's been painful!'*. Beacon teachers have been paid for their extra work and this financial recognition has been appreciated.

The distinction between Beacon teachers and other staff within the school has caused some tension. The headteacher was pragmatic about this, feeling that it was her responsibility to encourage those with potential: *'should I deny opportunities to staff because its difficult for others?'*

Beacon status has also affected relationships with local schools, some of which have been reluctant to become involved in the initiative, although partnerships with nearby schools are being encouraged with the help of the LEA. Another school in the locality also put in a bid but was refused Beacon status. This has caused some problems. Again, the headteacher was not unduly concerned, but admitted *'I'm taunted...[by others] "Oh you must be perfect!"'* This is perhaps due to a lack of understanding about the Beacon initiative among schools.

Other staff were also aware of the sensitivities of building relationships and stressed that they were also class teachers and that they would not try to help if they did not feel confident that they could.

Continuity was also raised as a potential concern – one Beacon teacher will be leaving for maternity leave. No other members of staff have the experience to continue to establish partnerships with non-Beacon Schools.

Staff were worried about the effect of Beacon work on their pupils. There are *'some children who can't cope with supply teachers, they need to know we'll be there every day'*. The quality of supply teachers appears to have been a

problem at times; however, class teachers try to spread their Beacon work to minimise the impact. Parents have also been concerned. However, the headteacher said that if results at Key Stage 2 declined they would review the Beacon strategy. Observation was also thought to have benefited pupils insofar as it encourages stronger teaching.

## **6. Support from/involvement of LEA/HEI**

The LEA is clearly supportive of the Beacon Schools in the area, despite concerns about the impact on their own work. They have clearly been unsure about how involved they should be with Beacon Schools.

The LEA has established a 'Beacon Network' with the Beacon Schools in the county. Meetings with headteachers take place once a term and the LEA publishes and distributes a newsletter about Beacon activity to schools. These have a particular focus, for example, the concept of the Beacon initiative and specialisms of schools.

They are aware of some of the potential problems facing Beacon Schools and describe it as an '*ongoing battle*' for schools to strike a balance between helping other schools and '*keeping their eye on the ball*'.

The LEA believed that School A had correctly identified their strengths and that they took evaluation seriously in an effort to meet schools needs. They see Beacon Schools as being catalysts for change, challenging schools rather than '*exporting*' ideas.

Beacon activity does tie in with LEA aims. They are keen to use the Beacon work to enable schools to become more responsible for their own school improvement work. They are clearly frustrated by their isolation and believe that their expertise could be used to help coordinate Beacon work, for example, in helping schools to arrange conferences, find venues and to produce publicity materials. These practical aspects of Beacon work are currently undertaken by individual schools, but the LEA feels this is not a good use of Beacon funds. Administrative aspects of the Beacon initiative could more easily be undertaken by the LEA, which would release money in schools for specialist Beacon work.

Although the LEA had seen the Beacon initiative as a threat, they are now trying to make use of it and they hope in the future that Beacon work will produce their next crop of advisory teachers.

## **7. Financial commentary**

The headteacher of School A had not experienced any serious difficulties bidding for Beacon status. However, she had found it difficult to estimate some costs, for example, photocopying and '*how much office time it really takes to set things up*'.

Staff at School A and partner schools benefited from, and clearly appreciated, having cover paid for: *'it made it possible to go on the course'*. In addition, Beacon staff were paid for their extra work: *'being paid for what they've done has been greatly valued'*.

Although the question of value for money was a difficult one for many to answer, there was support for the opportunity for both NQTs and experienced teachers to observe lessons: *'it seems a superb opportunity to get inexperienced teachers to observe [lessons]...I would say that's good value for money'*. It was also felt that the site-based model would provide better value for money than LEA courses had provided.

The LEA also expected that Beacon work would provide value for money. The link consultant believed that transferring good practice was expensive because of the staffing implications, but was in no doubt that it would impact on teaching and learning in classrooms.

## **8. Strengths and weaknesses of approach in terms of impact on school improvement**

There was a general feeling that the Beacon work could help to raise standards by improving teachers confidence and sharing ideas (*'it's much easier to teach if we feel confident with the resources'*) which would enable pupils to learn better. One impact of the Beacon work, and particularly observation, was that it reassured teachers that *'you are on the right track'*. There was also evidence that teachers were trying out ideas.

Although it was anticipated by some that an improvement would be seen in Key Stage Test results, this was also seen as problematic. One partner school was keen to point out that although they hoped Key Stage Test results would improve, the Beacon work was *'one drip out of many drips'*. The problem of attributing improved Key Stage Test results to Beacon work was also highlighted by a non-Beacon teacher in School A; the results have improved this year, but, at the same time, there are more past papers for pupils to practice and the school has also been running after-school classes.

The LEA is also collecting data from the Beacon Schools in the area, but are concerned that they will not be able to identify trends if funding lasts for only three years. Although they were interested in tracking the performance of partner schools, they believed it would prove to be too complicated.

# **Case-Study School B**

*(as of July 1999)*

## **1. Main areas of Beacon activity**

The main areas of Beacon activity in this large primary school are initial teacher training and school improvement. The former involved work with NQTs and students from two teacher training providers, the latter involved (mainly) conferences on managing the curriculum (but there was also a relationship with another local primary school which was on special measures and this became increasingly important as Beacon work progressed).

## **2. Development of Beacon activities: planning, resources, delivery**

Initial identification of what the school was good at was difficult, but once the staff had a meeting to discuss the issues there was agreement about what the Beacon activities should be.

In terms of marketing, there was no 'shopping around': the headteacher appears to have used her local contacts, but also she wrote to every school in the LEA offering seminars on school management/curriculum issues. Delivery is very much face-to-face, that is, based on meetings, conferences and visits. Training is offered 'direct to the client': there is no documentary dissemination (unless specifically requested). The school had been on the Internet for one week and more computers were being ordered, but this had not yet been used as a mode of dissemination.

## **3. Partner institutions' involvement**

The targets of Beacon activity were:

- ♦ Local primary schools – a letter was sent to all primary schools in the borough. A number of teachers have visited the school and there have been follow-up training activities.
- ♦ Also, at the suggestion of the LEA, a partnership with a neighbouring school on special measures has been set up.
- ♦ Teacher training providers – student teachers from two university departments visited the school (particularly the English department).
- ♦ The LEA – the Beacon headteacher was proactive in trying to secure increased LEA involvement.

## **4. Outcomes for partner institutions**

Schools were given an evaluation sheet and feedback from these was positive. Visitors to the school enjoyed observing lessons and walking around the school. Headteacher visitors, particularly, appreciated the knowledge, skills

and experience passed on by the Beacon headteacher. The relationship with the school on special measures was still developing and although it is currently based mainly on contact between the two headteachers, it is expanding to encompass other staff.

The relationship with [one of the universities] *'has definitely improved...it is now much more concrete'*. *'The university greeted us with open arms. They were very keen. We have a very positive relationship'*. It seems, however, that the benefits were mainly for the student teachers and not for the university itself.

## **5. Outcomes for Beacon School**

School B has a broad curriculum and an experienced management team; being a Beacon School forced the staff to ask *'what is different about our school?'*. The headteacher stressed that *'It's helped us to raise our own standards. Professionally, we've gained from a growing confidence'*. [Note that there is a stable staff and the headteacher has been there for many years]. *'You do have to use all your staff. This makes it more credible'*.

*'The school has developed a kind of self-evaluation model. We question ourselves and always try to move on'*. *'It forces you to look wider. Very seldom do teachers get the opportunity to look at classroom practice in other schools'*. *'It has increased [our staff's] confidence and competence'*. The process has been *'wonderful for team-building'*. *'They [the staff] are very aware of what they've learnt from other people'*. The head of English said that *'One benefit has been talking to each other. We hadn't really realised the quality of what we were doing'*. At a personal level, the headteacher said *'I've enjoyed it tremendously. I do want to continue'*.

There was a problem in that the staff at School B could not accommodate all the requests for help: *'We knew that it was going to be hard work. We had to think on the hoof as it were. It evolved'*. *'We didn't know what to expect [and] a lot of preparation was required'*. *'Your own school must not drown underneath it all'*. *'I'm constantly monitoring the morale of the staff'*. Also, *'some parents had to be reassured. This could be a downside'*.

## **6. Support from/involvement of LEA and/or HEI**

One of the difficulties for the Beacon School was *'initiating a partnership with [the] LEA'*. This has been a major issue, though relations are now improving. *'The LEA would not have chosen us – some consultation might have made things better. The silence has been deafening. There was some embarrassment about other schools [that is, other 'good' schools that had not been selected as Beacons]. The CEO [initially] never mentioned Beacon status'*. *'We [however] saw it as extra funding for the LEA'*. *'The LEA didn't like the Beacon School idea. They didn't know about it. They chilled us out, but things are now improving. I rang the LEA to say I saw them having a role*



*and I stressed the breadth of the curriculum [as something worth disseminating to other schools within the borough]’.*

*‘Things are working through now’ and ‘the LEA are better’.* The CEO had now visited the school *‘and it was he who suggested pairing off with a school in special measures’.* The Beacon School headteacher also felt that her primary adviser has been *‘very supportive’.* The LEA advisor supported this view of an improving relationship and explained why the LEA made a ‘cool’ response initially: the authority had not wanted to offend other good schools in the borough. *‘We now have a productive relationship...we do have a brokerage role. We felt we had a late start, but it now seems to be evolving’*

## **7. Financial commentary**

School B’s questionnaire responses were clear and detailed: this was one of the few accurate and detailed questionnaire responses. The main general item of expenditure had been the costs for providing supply cover, amounting to over £14,000. A further £2,000 was spent on initial teacher training, including the provision of mentors, and over £6,000 was spent on setting up and running School Improvement seminars, including the cost of supply cover for non-Beacon teachers. Of the finances/budget, the headteacher said *‘it’s all on computer – value for money is important’.*

## **8. Strengths and weaknesses of approach in terms of impact on school improvement**

What was particularly noticeable was the way in which the headteacher dealt with the issues in a very open way. A strength of the Beacon work was its positive impact on the school’s own staff, raising morale and encouraging self-reflection.

The headteacher sees involvement in the Beacon initiative not as being a *‘model of excellence’*, but rather as *‘very much a sharing process’.* She is clearly very aware of transferability issues: *‘the main concern [in the relationship with the special measures school] was quality of teaching. This is transferable – it provides an opportunity for joint ventures... [even though] people are coming from very different positions and environments... We have a ‘thinking school’ model – the aim is to give something back to the profession... People have a general look round – it’s a two-way thing’.*

When asked about models of partnership, the headteacher said *‘They will develop... they are very much sharing/open relationships’.* The headteacher pointed out that in dealing with trainee teachers, schools *‘are working with the grass roots – it takes years for the benefits to show’.* What she likes about the Beacon initiative is that *‘it is a direct model, not nebulous. We can look at a school’s practice and it can be funded...the initiative is funding what people want...the initiative should work – but it was a rushed approach’.*

# Case-Study School C

(as of July 1999)

## 1. Main areas of Beacon activity

School C is a 7-11 junior school sharing a site with its feeder infant school. At the time of the visits, there were over 470 pupils on roll. The roll has been steadily rising for some years. Pupils represent the full range of ability, with 19 per cent having some form of special educational need and 10 pupils having statements. Only four per cent of the pupils are from ethnic minorities.

The headteacher has been in post for 17 years and the deputy headteacher has been in the school for 11 years. School C has a well-established relationship with a local teacher training institution and usually has at least one student on teaching practice. The school has also been providing in-service sessions and supporting documents for neighbouring schools for some time before attaining Beacon status. The headteacher has personally led most of these in-service sessions.

As a Beacon School, School C has offered guidance on staff professional development, supporting students in initial teacher training placements, governor training, parental involvement and support, and involvement in the *Investors in People* scheme. To this has been added curriculum development. The school's Beacon 'offer' has been on its website from the outset.

Initially, most of the guidance offered was in the form of documentation sent to schools on request. Increasingly this has developed into visits to the school by headteachers and teachers from other schools. Within the Beacon programme, School C has also developed its relationship with the infant school and with the secondary school which receives the largest number of its pupils.

## 2. Development of Beacon activities: planning, resources, delivery

Initially, the school advertised its services on its own website. In the second half of this school year, the LEA inspection/advisory service began to publicise what the school had to offer. The offer, consisting of what the headteacher and others considered to be the successful initiatives in the school, was made to any interested school. There was no 'market research' exercise.

Resources such as documents on initial teacher training, the professional development of teachers and governor training were already developed or under development in the school – activities led by the headteacher, who appeared to make the major contribution to producing the documents. Initially, once she had gained staff agreement at a special staff meeting to go ahead with becoming a Beacon School, the headteacher appears to have been responsible for much of the Beacon planning and strategy. Specific staff have been involved as required – there are no identified 'Beacon' teachers, the headteacher describing the staff as working as a team, the person fronting an

activity being supported by the others. For example, Year 3 teachers took the lead on the junior/infant liaison project, and the science coordinator the work with the secondary school science department.

### **3. Partner institutions' involvement**

Apart from the infant school and local receiver secondary school, partner institutions identified themselves, contacting School C after viewing the website or from word of mouth. Needs were identified by the partner schools, though these were further refined (and sometimes additional ones identified) over the telephone with the headteacher of School C.

In the first term, the school responded to enquiries through telephone conversations with the headteacher and sending documents by post. These documents were sent as produced with no attempt to modify them for the receiver school. School C had not as yet attempted to find out how the receiver schools had used them. Some receiver schools have subsequently contacted School C and additional sessions had been provided. More recently, there have been visits from headteachers of schools in other authorities, which involved visits to lessons, and discussion with class teachers, subject coordinators, and members of the school management team.

Beacon funding has also been used to support activity developing links with the infant school and with a secondary school which receives just under half of School C's students.

### **4. Outcomes for partner institutions**

Work between School C and its infant school has had positive outcomes. It was felt that the work on transition would have taken place anyway, but that Beacon funding had been a useful facilitator.

As a result of the work by teachers from both schools on assessment, groups of pupils are now being 'tagged' to chart their progression through the infant school. It is hoped that this monitoring will continue into the junior school and eventually through to the secondary school. The focus on transitions has resulted in Year 2 staff observing Year 3 lessons and vice versa. One teacher from the junior school commented that, until this year, junior teachers were not aware if pupils were taught joined handwriting before they started Year 3. The special needs coordinators of both schools are also working together on a more formal basis and children have spent social time together.

Staff of both schools were enthusiastic about the outcomes of working together, feeling that children (and their parents) were less anxious about the transition than in previous years. The schools are planning together for their OFSTED inspection and topics are being taught at the same time to improve continuity.

In addition, the work on transition has been of benefit to teachers' professional development. Staff now have clearer ideas about the different types of work and behaviour to be expected from different year groups. Many teachers had worked for some time with only one year group and had little direct experience of other age groups.

At the outset, there were concerns among staff in the infant school that the Beacon work would become 'junior centred'. However, these fears appear not to have been realised. Teachers also reported in the past having felt like the '*poor relations*' of the junior school, but this no longer was the case. It is hoped that this sharing of information and collaborative working will become normal practice. However, the regular meetings between staff and the mutual lesson observations have been made possible through Beacon-funded cover. How this could continue when the funding ceases was yet to be resolved.

The Beacon work undertaken with one of School C's main receiver secondary schools was also viewed as being part of a '*natural progression*' from work they were already engaged in. Beacon activity focused on improving the transition to the secondary school; this included reviewing and standardising tests which would facilitate pupil tracking from the infant through to the secondary school (the school also anticipates that the LEA will provide additional help in this area in the future). In addition, staff teaching core subjects (with particular emphasis placed on literacy and numeracy) visited School C to observe work in Year 6 and, as a result, the English department is planning to introduce their own literacy hour in Year 7 for lower ability pupils.

There has as yet been no evaluation of the impact of the Beacon initiative within the partner school. Some work is still in its early stages. However, the partnership with School C was described as having '*enhanced thinking*' within the partner school and there are plans to extend the work on transitions to their other feeder primary schools. The '*hands on*', practical approach to sharing ideas was reported by the deputy headteacher as being one of the strengths of their Beacon work.

## **5. Outcomes for Beacon School**

The staff were very proud of being awarded Beacon status. Interviews with teachers revealed that some were involved actively for a sustained period with developing the relationship with the infant school, and in working with the secondary school science department. The headteacher also reported that staff had involvement with developing initiatives such as their approach to initial teacher training and with hosting visits of staff from other schools and from abroad. The headteacher was very closely involved in the planning, development and implementation of the schools' Beacon activities.

The headteacher believed that becoming a Beacon School had made her staff more reflective, self-critical and evaluative, both because some have had more opportunities to meet with teachers from other schools and because all feel

that they have a responsibility towards the schools which look to them for ideas.

The headteacher also felt that since acquiring Beacon status they had received more and better quality job applicants (20 as compared to an average of six for neighbouring schools).

The staff who had been involved in working with the infant school felt that thanks to the opportunity afforded by the Beacon funding, they had a better, mutually supportive, developing relationship with the infant school.

## **6. Support from/involvement of LEA and/or HEI**

In the next school year, there is to be a more planned and targeted approach to Beacon School activity, with the LEA acting as broker and partner. The LEA, together with the Beacon School, has developed what they are calling a benchmarking exercise which will involve the Beacon School, the LEA and selected schools working together as part of a planned programme of individual school development. It is envisaged that up to seven primary schools will be identified, from within the LEA and from neighbouring authorities. Schools within the Beacon School's LEA will be identified by the inspectorate and invited and encouraged to take part.

The benchmarking process as envisaged at the time of data collection will involve LEA-run sessions and school-led activities:

- ♦ Each school will identify its own areas for professional development.
- ♦ Each school sends the Beacon School prepared questions about its activities in the identified areas and the Beacon School responds before the visit, possibly through face-to-face meetings.
- ♦ Staff visit the Beacon School, observe and discuss.
- ♦ Staff return to their own school and talk through what they have seen, and further analyse their needs.
- ♦ Staff make a development plan incorporating the ideas they want to use from the Beacon School.
- ♦ The development plan is implemented and evaluated

Using this model, the LEA intends to develop a project to foster schools' learning from each other. It is expected that schools will need support and encouragement before they will accept learning from another school, and training so that they learn how to learn from another school.

The focus will be on professional development – learning from the Beacon School and from one another. The first phase, which will be LEA provided (and funded) will consist of INSET sessions aimed at preparation for the visit, overcoming resistance or reservations and identifying what they want to find out. The next will be each school developing a set of questions for School C. The headteacher of School C will set an agenda for visits from each of the

other schools. The individual visits will then take place followed by a discussion of what they have seen, an analysis of their needs and of how the Beacon School's experience might be applied to their situation. An action plan will then be written, and implementation set in motion together with an evaluation process. The evaluation will be led by the LEA advisory service on two levels. The first will be an evaluation of the quality of the school action plans, and the second will be ongoing monitoring by the schools' link inspectors and formal evaluation by link inspectors one year later, visiting all schools involved.

## **7. Financial commentary**

The majority of the Beacon grant was used to pay for cover – mostly to release the deputy headteacher to cover for the headteacher and also for other teachers such as the Year 3 staff who worked with infant school teachers.

The headteacher had no difficulties with bidding for Beacon status but felt that the DfEE accounting forms should be revised to better reflect the situation in Beacon Schools. For example, the forms assume that schools have special 'Beacon' staff, though this is often not the case

## **8. Strengths and weaknesses of approach in terms of impact on school improvement.**

The early approach to providing support for other schools was through sending documents by post. By this method, a lot of schools can be reached fairly cheaply and quickly. But this is likely to have only a limited effect as it is not focused on individual needs, and schools receive information passively and out of context, that is, information but no knowledge or understanding. Also, the Beacon School had no information about how other schools used the materials and whether or not they had much effect. The approach is developing more into one of face-to-face meetings, and visits tailored to the partner school's needs – individual INSET from experienced people working in a real school. The headteacher and the LEA inspector felt that this was more likely to influence the development of a school.

# Case-Study School D

(as of July 1999)

## 1. Main area(s) of Beacon Activity

School D received Beacon status in recognition of its nursery provision (in particular, the development of literacy skills with nursery age pupils). The school serves a socially-deprived catchment area (30 per cent of children receive free school meals, social services are involved with many families). Prior to the Beacon initiative, local schools were already being encouraged to seek literacy guidance from School D because of its Key Stage 1 Test results; these are felt to be especially good in a value added sense (children arrive in nursery well below the baseline national average, leave the nursery at the national average and leave the school above the national standard). Thus, although the school's primary (and DfEE approved) Beacon focus has been its nursery provision, it has 'branched out' latterly into more general literacy 'good practice' advice under Beacon auspices. Moreover, the school has made other documents available to visiting schools, on an *ad hoc* basis, if they 'see something they like' during a visit.

School D has aimed to emphasise the socio-economic context within which the school works ('*although good practice is good practice, other schools might wonder why we do things*' [School D headteacher]). Most of the non-Beacon School interviewees commented that they had opted to visit School D because of its catchment similarities, with the assumption that advice they received would be correspondingly relevant ('*you can learn more from those with the same type of child*' was one comment in this respect). In practice, however, several of the non-Beacon School interviewees considered that the similarities between their school and School D stopped here and, as a result, there were limits to how much practice could be readily transferred; for example, pupils in the nursery at School D are a year older than nursery pupils in some of the end-user schools (and see below for further transferability problems).

## 2. Development of Beacon activities: planning, resources, delivery

The head of nursery at School D has had the primary responsibility for the development of resources (a document pack) which have formed the basis of Beacon-related 'delivery'. This has been entirely based in School D (School D's staff have not travelled off-site: their views on whether or not they wished to do this were sought) and has centred on visiting staff observing the nursery at work, with follow-up discussion which covers any aspects of the school's practice of interest to visitors and an explanation of how practice relates to the documentation. The head of nursery's time is released (reportedly) so that she can host the visit. The document packs are aimed at nursery practitioners (teachers and nursery nurses) who are the primary focus of the school's Beacon activities.

Now that School D has 'found its feet' with the literacy hour, it feels able to offer 'Beacon' guidance on literacy. In part, this 'branching out' was

instigated by visiting schools who were seeking ‘*a broader perspective*’ [School D literacy co-ordinator] of the school’s literacy work which explored pupils’ progression from nursery to Key Stage 1 Tests. So far, there appears to be a less formal approach to this dissemination than with the nursery Beacon work; for example, there is no specific observation component, and the English coordinator’s time appears not to be formally released.

School D’s approach has been to present its practice to visiting schools (in a standardised format) and then, in discussion with visiting staff on the day, to take the lead from them on which aspects of practice they would like ‘*personalised*’. One or two headteachers from end-user institutions have made ‘*on the quiet*’ requests, prior to a visit, that certain staff should be ‘*pushed in the direction of*’ experiencing particular aspects of the Beacon School’s work but, generally speaking, School D has not engaged in ‘bespoke’ training. The School D headteacher commented that often, anyway, schools might not know precisely what they needed or wanted from a visit until they saw what was happening at School D. School D’s Beacon work assumes that visiting staff can take as much or as little from the visit as they wish: ‘*some will extract, some will take on lock, stock and barrel...we don’t mind what they do with [the document pack] once they’ve got it*’ [School D headteacher]; ‘*they come for fresh ideas and take what they need, perhaps adapted or modified*’ [School D head of nursery]. Here, there was a strong belief amongst the School D interviewees that practice at School D might not be right for other schools. (The LEA interviewee commented that this approach reflects the LEA’s own approach to in-service training.) Dissemination was also seen as a two-way process, that is, School D believed there was much they might learn from their visitors: ‘*we quiz every visitor*’.

Visiting schools have been invited to approach School D for further assistance if required, either by telephone or by making a second visit to School D. None of those who had visited had yet done so, but two were hoping that they might send further staff to School D, although they felt some concern that they had already received more than their ‘fair share’ of the available Beacon-funded supply costs. Moreover, the headteacher at another school commented that she had not considered the idea of a more permanent link between her school and School D because they were ‘*probably inundated*’.

The LEA interviewee reported that he considered an end-user’s visit to School D should be regarded as a ‘*one-off*’ after which the LEA could take over in providing support. Although acknowledging that this might make Beacon dissemination very localised, he added that ‘*it’s highly unlikely that schools will spend a lot of time travelling*’. Moreover, the LEA has ‘*tended to see the initiative as part of a continuum – special measures school to Beacon School...we’ve got a whole range and we disseminate from a lot of them [regardless of where they are in the continuum] so people have not felt a need to go further afield*’.



### 3. Partner institutions' involvement

In its first year of operation, School D's Beacon work has been conducted almost exclusively with same-LEA schools. One school from outside the LEA has also visited School D (they found the school following a trawl of the Internet). Another school made a request to be sent a document pack but did not make a visit to School D (the headteacher was not 'totally happy' about this because she feels the school's documents are not strictly 'stand alone', that is, it is more helpful if they are understood within the school's working context and can be related to examples of practice which have been witnessed in situ or at least discussed face-to-face). With the exception of the school which had found School D on the Internet and which had made a conscious decision to look beyond its own LEA for guidance, all of the partner schools saw the initiative in local terms, that is, geographical proximity was a decisive factor in making a Beacon visit, both on cost and familiarity grounds: most had been recommended to visit one or both of the authority's Beacon Schools by an LEA adviser, but would have been recommended to make a visit even if the schools had not been Beacon Schools. Thus, there was no evidence that these schools had considered looking 'further afield'.

School D has tried, where possible, to restrict visits to one per week so as to minimise disruption to the school's routine and upset to pupils, as well as the burden on nursery staff (in particular) and other staff (whose classes might also be visited). The bulk of visits were made in spring term (1998/99), with no visits allowed while KSTs were undertaken. The LEA interviewee added that the LEA has been fully supportive of School D's prioritisation of its own pupils' needs even though 'this priority, by definition, limits the quantity of Beacon work'. Visits to School D by end-users were of half a day or a full day in duration.

Visits by two end-user schools had a literacy focus, that is they wished to learn what School D did with pupils to achieve its favourable Key Stage 1 Test results. As one of the interviewees commented, '*they have better KST results so we assumed they would be using different and better methods*'. Visits by four end-user schools had a nursery focus.

### 4. Outcomes for partner institutions

All staff interviewed in end-user schools were careful to emphasise that they had received a warm welcome from staff at School D and that they felt considerable admiration for the Beacon School's brave willingness to subject itself to intense 'peer' scrutiny (as one commented, '*it's a privilege to go to someone else's school*').

Schools' responses to the visits were as follows:

- ♦ One interviewee felt that the ethos and culture at School D was an important factor in its practice. Thus, while she could clearly see what worked for the Beacon School, and appreciated that School D's methods could be effective in her own school, she felt they could only be

implemented if accompanied by a complete overhaul in organisation and working practice which simply would not happen. However, the visit had been useful *'because we realised we're doing the best we can, and as well as [School D], just in different circumstances'*. Moreover, the school had gained a benchmark for its recently modified home reading scheme which was already in keeping with School D's approach – *'this confirmed our own feelings about what was right'*.

- ♦ The English coordinator at an end-user school struggled initially to remember making a visit to School D. Her eventual recollection of the visit was that it was *'prescriptive'*; she had been taken on a tour of classrooms but had not been able to ask questions about practice because staff time had not been released and they were busy teaching – *'in a working school you're not placed to see things, but the head was protecting staff from too much disruption...it was made clear that staff didn't want too many interruptions, although this was something I could understand'*. She noted that much of what School D does was already in place at her own school (*'the sense that we're going in the right direction was a nice feeling...we came back with a certain sense of pride'*) and, moreover, that School D was using methods of her school had tried for itself and rejected as ineffective. Only one of School D's ideas – for word banks – had been taken up at the end-user school subsequently. The headteacher at this school felt that the visit's format had enabled her staff only to *'snatch bits'* of practice and that a number of visits over time might have been more useful. As with her English co-ordinator, she felt that School D's *'standards weren't as outstanding [as their KST results]...not that much better than ours'*.
- ♦ One of the end-user schools, at the time of its visit to School D, had a failing nursery and the nursery teacher was on (related) long-term sick leave. The headteacher believed that the visit to School D might act as encouraging support for this member of staff who, when it was suggested, was enthusiastic about making the visit. The headteacher also wanted some good practice guidance (she felt she needed *'confirmation that planning and organisation were missing and standards were low'* because nursery was not her area of teaching speciality). The headteacher at the end-user school found the visit *'a very positive experience'* and extremely helpful, and the school had adopted some of School D's practice (in a *'personalised'* format), which constituted *'a significant overhaul of what we were doing previously...what they offered reflected the ethos we were aiming for'*. The visit appears to have been less positive for the nursery teacher, who found it difficult to cope with the changes being introduced and the extra work this entailed, and subsequently left the school. The headteacher was keen that other staff, including the replacement nursery teacher and the nursery nurse, should now visit School D.
- ♦ At the time of its visit to School D, one end user had a recently-appointed headteacher who was unhappy with practice in the school's nursery (*'we were functioning at little more than a playgroup level'*). She hoped to revitalise her school's nursery practice in relation to pupil organisation, planning, assessment, differentiation and record keeping by sending the head of nursery and both nursery teachers together to School D, believing that they were *'stuck in a rut'*: *'staff were capable of better but were not*

*being directed and led effectively*'. The head of nursery's reaction from the outset was (reportedly) not positive and, the headteacher believed, she failed to make use of the visit, especially since the nursery teachers returned from School D with a wealth of ideas. Nevertheless, this gave the headteacher *'a way in and opened up the discussion in a lot of problem areas...[the visit] provided a catalyst for debate, a chance for us to think whether there was something else, something better we could do...it opened up an opportunity for self-evaluation, looking in-depth at why we did things in certain ways and what could be developed'*. Since the visit, the head of nursery has been replaced. The new head of nursery has her own ideas for the department and so, the headteacher noted, *'we may abandon the lot [from the Beacon School]'*. However, it was never her intention that her school's practice should *'clone...but it got us moving and was a tool along the road of improvement'*. She noted that the Beacon initiative would provide money only if *'end-users respond to it positively...you need a mindset to see what's on offer, to see its value'*.

- ♦ After an extended period during which the nursery at one end-user school had been managed by a teacher on extended supply, the headteacher (who was herself relatively new in post) appointed a permanent nursery teacher (not the incumbent supply teacher) in January 1999. An OFSTED inspection of the nursery, probably unsurprisingly in the prevailing circumstances, had identified weaknesses. The headteacher believed that the opportunity to visit School D would serve a number of purposes: it would help the new team to work together and, therefore, provide support for the new nursery teacher (who was recently-qualified), would help to raise the professional self-esteem of the nursery nurses (*'I wanted them to see that some of their practices were good'*) and would enable the school to begin to work towards its post-OFSTED action plan. The headteacher reported that her staff had found their visit to School D beneficial in some of these respects: *'it reinforced that a lot of things that are common here were happening at [School D]'*, and that planning procedures implemented by the new nursery teacher (prior to the Beacon visit) were shared by the Beacon School *'which was good for getting the new team behind the new nursery teacher'*. Nursery staff at this end-user school were less positive about their visit, claiming that they had had insufficient opportunity to observe practice in relation to the school's documentation, but they did *'feel more fortunate'* as a result of finding that their nursery was better resourced than the nursery at School D and that much of their practice was already in line with what they were able to observe at School D (as the nursery nurse commented, *'we can't be as bad as we thought we were [after OFSTED] – it boosted us that we're mostly getting it right'*). The nursery teacher noted that nursery practice at her school was already changing anyway as a consequence of having her as a new, permanent member of staff with her own ideas. To this extent, she noted that *'I've not changed anything since the visit because of the way they do it – we'd already begun to change'*. Incidentally, the headteacher from the end-user school had obtained a copy of School D's *'very helpful'* lunchtime supervisors' policy.
- ♦ One end-user school had searched on the Internet for a school which *'looked similar'* to their own in terms of its catchment and pupil characteristics but felt, having made a visit to School D, that the two

schools were very different: pupils in her nursery were younger than those at School D, and School D, reportedly, was not working to desirable outcomes to the same extent as the visiting school, which meant that School D's *'materials were not geared'* to the visiting school's work. Moreover, both the headteacher and her head of nursery felt *'uncomfortable'* with some of School D's nursery ethos and many of its working practices. The end-user school's head of nursery also observed the logistical difficulties being experienced by the head of nursery at School D: *'Can they really do it while they're open?...I felt sorry for them – the nursery teacher was trying to run a normal school day as well'*. However, as a result of the visit, the headteacher commented that she now realised that, in order to achieve similar KST results to School D, *'the shift we needed to make was to teach much more to the test, which we'd been resisting to an extent, but if they're the real criteria...'*. The visiting school had also *'picked up and expanded'* School D's idea for keyword flashcards with *'remarkable'* benefits for children's progression (*'enormous improvement'*). In addition, and as with many of their colleagues elsewhere, these interviewees felt more confident in their own work as a result of having seen School D's: *'it strengthened our understanding of how we wanted our nursery to be...we're more confident in how and why we do what we do, it has been vindicated'*.

## 5. Outcomes for Beacon School

Interviewees at School D commented that Beacon work has been good for the professional esteem and confidence of their nursery staff, and this was confirmed by the LEA adviser who reported that, at School D, *'the staff never realised how good they were despite us telling them...Beacon status has raised their self-esteem and practice'*. However, *'staff are acutely aware of the pressure to be a Beacon at all times and this may be stressful...[but] they have never sought a pedestal so there's not one to knock them off'*. All three interviewees at School D made a passing reference to the fact that the additional workload associated with being a Beacon School had, at times, been tiring and stressful. The LEA adviser also felt that School D staff *'have been amazed that some schools have turned [Beacon] into a full-time industry and have been apprehensive about what DfEE is expecting from them...we're supporting [them] in their belief that they're paid to teach children and that's their prime purpose'*. School D has altered its practice with regards to home visiting in light of learning about an end-user school's practice and is much happier with this new system.

## 6. Support from/involvement of LEA and/or HEI

School D's headteacher believes that the LEA has been very supportive of the work of both Beacon Schools in the authority. The LEA issued a flier about the initiative last September which was sent out with information about staff development courses, and created a page for each school on its Internet website. More significantly, the LEA has done a considerable amount of *'word of mouth'* or *'grapevine'* promotion on all of its visits to other primary

schools; the resulting demand has been a manageable *'trickle'* rather than an *'unreasonable'* deluge. School D has not actively courted clients.

The LEA regards School D's Beacon status as 'an accolade – a very positive comment on the quality of education in such a small authority'. The LEA interviewee added that 'we've been amazed by the reception schools in other authorities have had – from grudging acceptance to being totally ignored...it's about celebrating good things, they should be supporting and lauding them'. LEA staff liaised with the Beacon Schools to establish the extent of publicity they wanted, with the aim of making the initiative manageable and to prevent it from impacting on the quality of provision for pupils. Now that local interest is tailing off, the LEA will be advertising what the schools can offer to schools in adjacent LEAs.

## **7. Financial commentary**

The Beacon School's grant has been used to cover supply costs for visiting schools and to pay for the production of the document packs. The head of nursery has received an incremental salary point, and *ex-gratia* payments were made to the school's three nursery nurses. The headteacher also felt it was vital that the rest of her staff should '*get something developmental out of [the Beacon initiative]*' and so all staff were released to visit another Beacon School. The headteacher feels the value of the initiative lies in allowing practitioners to make '*guilt free*' visits to other schools, '*giving time for un-rushed dialogue, time to absorb, reflect and mull over*'.

The school which visited School D from a different LEA used money from a Standards Fund grant to cover travel, accommodation and expenses costs.

Interviewees in end-user schools felt that the Beacon initiative provided an invaluable opportunity to visit other schools. One headteacher noted that without the Beacon initiative, fewer staff would have been able to make a visit to School D, but she had been able to send all of her Year 1 and Year 2 teaching staff. In the same vein, several interviewees commented that the Beacon funding allowed staff to make visits *together* and, as a result, '*to spin ideas off each other*'. A nursery teacher, speaking for many of her colleagues, felt that postal dissemination of a school's practice, or third party INSET based on it, was always less effective than an *in situ* visit: '*you need an understanding of the rationale, to see practice in place, not just to hear about it, to fully understand what they do*'. Another interviewee noted that, however helpful the documentation in its own right, '*seeing it in practice adds a dimension...you can see it works*'. One headteacher also noted that '*any opportunity to visit other schools is valuable, much more valuable than a lot of INSET...real classrooms and real practice are worth their weight in gold*'.

## **8. Potential for impact on school improvement**

Clearly, staff at School D both hoped, and expected, that their Beacon work would improve standards in those schools which had made Beacon visits; as

the headteacher noted, '*they all came because our results were better...so I would like to think that they will take on a new way of working, different methods or resources and this will lead in turn to higher standards*'. It is true that a few visitors had gleaned some ideas, not specifically related to nursery work, but for general classroom literacy strategies, directly from the Beacon School. Several had come away believing their practice was already as good as, or better than, the Beacon School's and with no intention of making any changes in their own schools. However, the Beacon initiative appeared to have the greatest, but indirect, (potential) impact on standards in the two schools where under-performing nursery staff resigned or were replaced following their visits to School D. Here, it is difficult to assess whether the Beacon School's impact resulted from its Beacon School status or because its nursery provision was simply better (and, therefore, whether the two schools concerned would have benefited as much from visits to *any* better nursery).

# **Case-Study School E**

*(as of July 1999)*

## **1. Main areas of Beacon activity**

School E, a secondary school, has been recognised for raising individual pupil achievement and supporting initial teacher training.

## **2. Development of Beacon activities: planning, resources, delivery**

Development was supported by creating the role of project coordinator, and seconding the deputy headteacher to fill this post on a part-time basis; other staff posts were enhanced to cover his commitments.

Local schools were invited to join a consortium resourced through the Beacon initiative: each is contracted to undertake individually appropriate work related to raising pupil achievement, and to provide both financial and evaluative information on its activities. A second consortium is now in place, but the initial group continues to meet with only minimal Beacon funding; both groups are now sharing experiences and information. School E has both purchased and produced support material, and itself continues to work on developing techniques for individual student monitoring.

School E also offers information and support to any school that contacts it through the Beacon initiative, both welcoming visits and sending staff out; a great deal of material is available, and all documents are supplied free. Work is in progress on a series of booklets on classroom practice, to be distributed free to all schools within the LEA area; there are also plans to market these more widely.

The focus on ITT was chosen in consultation with the LEA, partly in order to coordinate School E's Beacon bid with that of another local school. However, no market research was carried out, and the initial projected focus on teaching and learning brought only a limited response from one of the institutions contacted. The emphasis was then changed to offering fully-funded work on the teaching of PSHE and on student preparation for the job market, areas seen as difficult for ITT institutions to cover thoroughly within a very full syllabus. This was readily accepted by the one institution already in dialogue over Beacon links. Limited work on sixth form subject teaching was also undertaken, but in the event the offers of work on teaching and learning were not taken up.

## **3. Partner institutions' involvement**

Involvement in consortium schools has been far closer than that of the HEI. Each consortium school identifies its own priorities for raising pupil performance and works on these, reporting regularly to and supporting/supported by consortium partners. Working individually yet together appears to create enthusiasm and a warm, mutually supportive

relationship between unequal schools, which most members of the first consortium have voluntarily chosen to continue beyond full Beacon funding.

While evaluation sheets show that the Beacon work related to ITT was enthusiastically received by students, no HEI staff participated in any way; as yet there appears to have been little in the way of dialogue between the institutions. Each admits to a degree of unfamiliarity with the other's institutional processes and, in the case of HEI staff, of the Beacon project itself.

#### **4. Outcomes for partner institutions**

The outcomes have varied in common with their involvement. Consortium schools report faster and more positive progress in chosen areas, with lower staff resistance and higher motivation, than they believe would have been achieved without Beacon. The only major negative effect has been on staff time.

The deputy headteacher of a distant school reported that her one-off visit to School E stimulated her thinking and helped to kick-start a new student log (now in place) tailored to the needs of her own school.

In the case of the HEI, a limited understanding of the Beacon project and how schools were selected may have initially coloured the working relationship with School E. This year's activities can only have influenced the individual students participating, since staff had no direct experience of them and did not conduct a debrief. The declared intention is to develop links further next year, but the time constraints on HEI staff will remain a critical factor in any future collaboration.

#### **5. Outcome for Beacon School**

The outcomes for School E as a Beacon School appear to have been a positive effect on the school's self-image, and career and personal development opportunities for the staff involved. The 'Beacon coordinator' reports that Beacon work and outside contacts have both sharpened staff perceptions and led to the enhancement of School E's own monitoring system. After some initial manoeuvring, the grant maintained school's relationship with the LEA is now far closer. However, with both consortia oversubscribed, there has been some disappointment for unsuccessful schools.

#### **6. Support from/involvement of LEA and/or HEI**

The LEA was approached during bid preparation as part of an attempt to coordinate bids with another local school; subsequent involvement has been ongoing and has led to a closer relationship, with a LEA adviser now retained by School E on a consultancy basis, who has 'steered' schools in need of support on pupil tracking into applying for consortium membership. The two



Beacon Schools have funded and presented a conference for headteachers which was promoted and mounted for them by the LEA. The LEA representative interviewed was full of praise for School E but had considerable reservations about the Beacon scheme in general.

The current relationship with the HEI, although essentially a client relationship at present in that School E is offering fully-funded services under the Beacon initiative as it does to schools, appears to be far less close than its other Beacon links.

## **7. Financial Commentary**

A high proportion of School E's Beacon funding has gone directly to consortium schools to fund the release of staff; in order to receive this they had to demonstrate that contractual commitments to work on specific school improvement areas had been fulfilled. There appears to be a high level of accountability throughout.

The other major expenditure has been the secondment of one deputy headteacher as 'Beacon coordinator' and the salary enhancement of various staff who provide cover and/or support. These moves have provided career opportunities and reduced strain on colleagues.

Consortium schools appear to see School E's work as good-to-excellent value for money, though some have reservations about other less-rigorously monitored Beacon schemes. The LEA interviewee also commented forcefully on a perceived lack of rigour in some areas, though he specifically excepted School E. The distant contact interviewed found that School E gave excellent support at minimal cost, but felt that the Beacon project in general could only deliver on value if properly marketed, with information readily available.

## **8. Strengths and weaknesses of approach in terms of impact on school improvement**

School E's evident success joined with its tactful approach to Beacon status appears to give credibility and earn staff acceptance in partner schools, so that school improvement projects 'get off the ground' more easily. The emphasis on contractual obligation and financial accountability both enhances this credibility and helps to avoid jealousy over Beacon funding. The funding to consortium schools is especially valued by LEA schools with little discretion over expenditure. Since the focus is on system and approach rather than details, schools are free to pursue their own identified issues, but with consortium support in sharing both difficulties and successes as well as information. This broadens the range of shared experience, and 'puts schools back in touch with one another'. A wide range of staff are involved in the work, both at School E and elsewhere, thus spreading ownership of the process, and various interviewees have reported a 'buzz' or energising experience.

However, the decision to coordinate School E's bid with another may have led to a misplaced emphasis on supporting ITT which was based on insufficient market research: at present this appears to be supporting individual students but having little institutional impact on ITT provision, and its further potential is unclear, given the disparity between the relatively short lead time for Beacon activities and the degree of advance planning needed by the HEI.

# Case-Study School F

(as of July 1999)

## 1. Main area(s) of Beacon activity

School F received Beacon status in respect of a number of key areas related to staff development (ITT and NQTs), school management (role of the SMT) and organisation (pastoral and curriculum).

School F has presented its ways of working to others on a 'let somebody have a look, take what they want' basis, choosing to focus on 'what we are, what we do...[because] bespoke training would be unmanageable'. For example, one member of staff, who has been running professional development sessions for middle managers (see below) noted that, prior to each of the sessions thus far, her audience has been 'a complete unknown – I play it by ear and get feedback from the type of questions they ask in the last half hour'. There has been an avoidance by the Beacon School of working with partners 'away from base' out of a concern to be 'fair to our own children'.

## 2. Development of Beacon activities: planning, resources, delivery

Four members of staff were paid to write academic papers over the 1998 summer vacation relating to aspects of curriculum organisation and school management issues. Copies of these were posted on the school's website for access by any interested party (see below). One of the papers, which focused originally on the role of middle managers in pastoral care, 'metamorphosed' subsequently into an in-service training session (an hour and a half in length), offered through the LEA's advisory service but delivered by a member of staff from School F, entitled *The Role of the Middle Manager with respect to Managing Change*. The advisory service, which was running a series of middle-manager training sessions, requested the development of the original paper by the member of staff concerned. She commented that advisory staff had been 'very supportive' in this process; a number of planning meetings were held, and the Beacon School-led session was 'put in the context of the existing programme – it looked backwards and forwards to other sessions in the series'.

A number of NQTs from other schools in the LEA have come to School F to work alongside recently-qualified teachers.

The school has used some of its Beacon funding to release the deputy headteacher's time to work with the School-Centred ITT (SCITT) consortium (which comprises a number of local schools, an HEI and the advisory service) to develop a proposal for the Teacher Training Agency to provide ITT. At the time of NFER's visit to School F, this work was still in the early stages of development, with plans to begin training delivery in September 2000 (assuming the TTA accepted the proposal). However, interviewees at the Beacon School were clear that, without Beacon funding, the school's involvement in the consortium would not have come about.

A key issue for the school has been how it publicises what it has to offer to other schools and how it disseminates information, especially given its relatively inaccessible geographical location. The headteacher commented that, regardless of whether dissemination was conducted ‘long-distance’ or arrangements made for face-to-face work, *‘it hit us immediately’* that busy staff in Beacon and non-Beacon Schools needed to avoid *‘long and tenuous’* communication by telephone and letter. Therefore, so as to facilitate more ready access to information about what it can offer in terms of support and guidance to others, the school has spent a substantial proportion of its first year’s Beacon funding (£10,000, or 40 per cent) on Internet and Intranet facilities. The school went on-line in June 1999, although visitors to the website cannot yet communicate with the school electronically. The IT coordinator noted that, given the school’s efforts to prevent the Beacon initiative from impacting too greatly on staff time and, thus, the school’s own standards, the e-mail facility, once it is in place, will allow a *‘more controllable’* way of managing dissemination, allowing busy staff to deal with queries, provide guidance and make arrangements for visits in their own time.

### 3. Partner institutions’ involvement

School F has not courted clients but has been content for other schools *‘to find us’*, and there has been a number of enquiries about the school’s work (including by a group of teachers from Greece, although with insufficient notice to actually arrange a visit). Although not strictly a consequence of the school’s Beacon status, following the publication of the HMCI’s report last year, a group of headteachers from another LEA made a three-day visit to the county in summer term 1998 which included a visit to School F for a conference on management issues. Around half a dozen NQTs, from local schools, have visited School F since Christmas 1998 to work with recently-qualified teachers (see below). The SCITT consortium has had a number of planning and development sessions. Thus far, the local advisory service has twice run the staff development session for middle managers during the 1999 summer term. The member of staff involved with this activity reported sensing resentment from some of the audience in the first session because they *‘had been told to be there...and it might be that they didn’t think they had problems’*. This had served to reinforce her sense that any good practice guidance should not be *‘a huge task they feel overwhelmed with’*. At the same time, she noted that staff receiving good practice guidance *‘need to go with a completely open mind’* to benefit. Between the first and second sessions, she used feedback from her first audience to modify the introduction to her delivery so as to emphasise further that *‘ours is just one system, which works for us, but maybe not for them’*.

The school believes a number of factors will influence the development of Beacon partnerships: *‘primarily geography’* (and here, the IT coordinator envisaged that ICT would facilitate wider contact with others), but also the reaction to the initiative by LEAs and, importantly, *‘the notion of competition’* between schools. The headteacher reported that secondary schools in the LEA were *‘slowly moving away from the adversarial marketplace...and the residual of non-sharing’*, and in this respect, he felt visits by NQTs to the

Beacon School represented something of a sea-change in local schools' relationships: *'it takes a lot for local schools to come to us, even without Beacon status...there is more collaboration and less competitiveness'*. He believed also that his own staff were increasingly more comfortable with the peer scrutiny resulting from visits to their school by colleagues from elsewhere.

#### 4. Outcomes for partner institutions

Beacon School staff have worked with around half a dozen NQTs from local schools in the course of the first year of the initiative. Those interviewed each expressed mixed feelings about their visits to School F.

- ♦ One of the NQTs had greatly appreciated the opportunity to meet a 'peer': she was the only NQT in her very small school and one of only two members of staff in her department. She had come away from the Beacon School *'with a whole set of ideas to feedback to my head of department'* and the two were in the process of rewriting schemes of work to incorporate some of the ideas gleaned. She had also found it valuable to see and report back on aspects of School F's practice which she and her colleague, in subsequent discussion, were happy to reject, feeling that this enhanced their sense of ownership of their own practice. However, this interviewee expressed disappointment that the Beacon School had not been open to the idea of establishing a longer-term partnership: she had made two approaches to the Beacon School to this effect but these had been *'a waste of time'*. However, she had been able to establish a partnership with a colleague in another local, non-Beacon School.
- ♦ One of the NQTs had found their half-day visit had provided a good, general opportunity to gain experience of how another school operated. However, the Beacon School had failed to meet her request, made prior to the visit, to observe teaching with lower ability pupils (those observed were 'top group' equivalent in her own school) and she felt this represented a missed opportunity – *'more could have been made of [the visit]'*.
- ♦ This had also been the experience of a third NQT interviewed. Prior to the visit, she had discussed with her Beacon School colleague that she wished to observe teaching and learning strategies for lower ability Year 9 pupils, and had confirmed her request in writing. Unfortunately, *'what they call lower ability there is higher than our lower ability...there was complete disparity between what I was expecting – and I thought I had made this extremely clear – and what I got'*. Moreover, despite having negotiated the best time to make a visit to see teaching and learning in practice, her visit had actually coincided with the administration of a test.

Headteachers who had visited School F from another LEA were largely positive about their visit to the Beacon School (and the two others they had visited at the same time), feeling that, since the areas they served had much in common, *'there are a lot of things we could mutually extend and not re-invent wheels'*. However, an invitation made by the visiting headteachers to the three

schools to make a reciprocal visit had not been taken up, and they felt it was unlikely, therefore, that stronger, mutually beneficial links would be established.

## **5. Outcomes for Beacon School**

Involvement with the Beacon initiative has added to the professional development opportunities for several members of staff at School F. In addition, the member of staff who has been running the middle-manager professional development sessions commented that her involvement in Beacon-related work *'made me feel glad I work here because we all pull together as a supportive team...elsewhere, there are colleagues who have less understanding of pastoral care, who regard it merely as a 'bolt-on'...I've got a tremendous lot out of it – the buzz has given me energy. The biggest thing is that people have shown me they believe in me'*. She also added that the school's Beacon status is *'recognition that we give value added, which has been good for our professional esteem'*.

Staff at School F have had an opportunity (or were looking forward to the opportunity) for useful, two-way dialogue with staff from other schools.

The school has made *'bigger strides'* in its Internet and Intranet development (in terms of its technological specification and network coverage), and sooner, than would otherwise have been possible, even, it was reported, with NGfL funding.

## **6. Support from/involvement of LEA and/or HEI**

For the first few months of the Beacon initiative, School F's Beacon-related work progressed without any involvement from the LEA. Noting a belief that his school's experience in this respect was not unique, the headteacher at School F attributed this initial lack of involvement to LEAs being *'side-stepped'* when the Beacon Schools were selected, knowing very little about the initiative and because *'nobody told them how to manage it'*. This was a view shared by the LEA interviewee who commented *'we weren't sure what our role was...[the initiative] was a bolt out of the blue...we had a good relationship with [School F] but not a close working partnership on which to build'*. However, since Christmas 1998, the LEA has been acting as a broker for some of the school's Beacon-related work. For example, recognising that School F was experiencing difficulties in publicising what it could offer to other schools, with correspondingly low take up, the advisory service undertook to send letters to all schools in the authority to publicise the availability of Beacon-funded support for NQTs. As noted above, the advisory service has also been offering a professional development session for middle managers, led by a member of staff from School F, as part of its in-service training provision.

## **7. Financial commentary**

The school received £25,000 to support its first year of Beacon work. Beacon funding is entered on the school's accounting system under its own budget head. As discussed above, a substantial portion of the school's Beacon monies has been used in developing its Internet and Intranet capacity so as to better communicate with, and disseminate to, client schools. Much of the rest of its grant has been used to release time for School F staff to be involved in development work and face-to-face dissemination, and on cover for visiting NQTs.

The headteacher noted that the philosophy underpinning the Beacon initiative should allow schools to achieve Beacon status without *'featuring very highly on very quantitative, published measures [of performance]...many things are not tangible or measurable'*. In this respect, he referred to Beacon monies as having funded a teaching profession *'feel good factor'*. Moreover, the initiative *'has allowed people to relax...ideas were made possible by the resourcing...even a relatively modest sum has had an enormous impact, it has freed us so we're not continuously wondering whether we can afford it'*. In this respect, he felt that a particular strength of the initiative was in funding the Beacon Schools for cover and *'allowing a bit of fat for us to have specialists on tap, the provision of a top class [supply] teacher'* so that regular staff providing Beacon support to others were not burdened by merely *'displaced'* workload.

Two of the NQTs, and the headteachers, who had visited the Beacon School felt the initiative provided an opportunity for teaching professionals to gain a broader experience of other schools, which in itself was intrinsically valuable. One of the visiting headteachers, partly echoing his colleague's *'feel-good factor'* comments, expressed the view that Beacon status, in enhancing schools' professional esteem, facilitated the dissemination of good practice by making delivery more confident. However, the NQT whose experience of the Beacon initiative had been the least positive felt strongly that value for money would only derive from properly targeted, dissemination. She noted also that there were hidden educational costs to poor dissemination: not only had she not benefited from making the visit to School F, her own pupils had *'missed out'* on time with their usual teacher.

## **8. Strengths and weaknesses of approach in terms of impact on school improvement**

There is a firm belief amongst interviewees at School F that the SCITT proposal being developed by the school and its partners represents an opportunity to raise the status of teachers and training standards, with a corresponding *'measurable value-added'* effect on pupil standards, especially in subject teacher shortage areas of the curriculum.

The majority of the Beacon School's face-to-face work has been with individuals (NQTs) or groups of individuals from a variety of schools (headteachers, middle managers) rather than individual schools *per se*. It would seem any potential for impact on school improvement through School

F's Beacon-related work will rely on effective cascading by these individuals when they return to their 'home base'.



# Case-Study School G

(as of July 1999)

## 1. Main area(s) of Beacon activity

School G is an 11-16 comprehensive serving a large housing estate on the edge of a seaside town. The pupil intake is skewed to the lower end of the ability range and the area suffers from very high levels of unemployment and social deprivation.

A 1996 OFSTED report identified areas of good practice. The school management team chose two of these for Beacon dissemination. These were, firstly, personal, social, and moral education and the work of pastoral staff, and, secondly, assessing value added and target setting – cross phase work with local primary schools. As the school developed relationships with others, curriculum development in science and modern foreign languages has been added.

## 2. Development of Beacon activities: planning, resources, delivery

From the outset, emphasis was placed on visits to School G by colleagues from other schools. It was decided early on not to offer courses but to invite colleagues from other schools to come to School G, observe what was being done and discuss it with staff and students. The headteacher explained that they felt they had to counter the inevitable reaction from other schools (*'we could not do this at our school'... the staff room cynics would strangle this at birth*) and that they had to show outsiders that these things could be done in a school with a disadvantaged, challenging intake.

As the Beacon activities would be concerned with both pastoral and curriculum areas, it was decided that the two deputy headteachers with these broad responsibilities within their remits, would coordinate Beacon activities. Planning, resource development and presentation of aspects of the school's practice to other schools were shared with members of subject departments and pastoral teams.

After three terms of Beacon activity, interviewees were able to review their practice and identify how it was developing.

- ♦ Planning was becoming longer-term. For example, it had been decided that the modern languages department could respond to requests for help from two local schools. This decision was made at the end of the summer term of 1999, and the department and senior management decided to schedule the support to begin halfway through the Spring term of 2000. This would enable the department to schedule the Beacon activities within its main work and provide a better, more considered package of support for each school.
- ♦ A more strategic approach should be developed. A number of local secondary schools, members of a group which met occasionally to discuss areas of common concern, had talked for some time about investigating

student views of their schools as part of school review. They had made no progress, partly because no-one had the time to investigate the possibilities and set something up, and because of limited funding. School G decided to assist the process as part of its Beacon School activities, firstly by co-ordinating the process and later with funding. Under this arrangement, eight schools agreed to use a university-developed Pupil Attitude survey over two years. School G paid 20 per cent of the cost to each school, the school finding the rest. School G also paid for cover and provided travel expenses and a venue for meetings of staff from all eight schools to discuss the survey data, discuss good practice and identify strategies for addressing any issues which arose from the findings. This should result in the schools cooperating in ways which they have not done up to now, and working together with a school improvement agenda. For example, if a school's survey results revealed problems with a subject area or year group, schools in the group with strengths in those areas could offer to assist.

While agreeing that such large-scale activities would reduce School G's capacity to assist individual schools, senior managers felt that they would have more impact on schools overall.

### **3. Partner institutions' involvement**

School G sent fliers to all LEA schools stating who they were, what they could offer and inviting enquiries. They reported having been '*inundated with requests*'. A deliberate management decision was taken not to try to fulfil all requests for help, but, instead, to tackle some and do those well. The two deputy headteachers reviewed the requests from schools and identified those which they thought they could best help at that time, letting the others know that they would contact them later on. They then talked to staff from the chosen schools at length by telephone and, in light of this (and any documents which they were sent), staff put together a programme for a visit or visits from each school with accompanying documents. The documents were a mix of existing school documents and were modified to suit individual school circumstances.

Sometimes a whole subject department or pastoral team visited School G – often in pairs on separate days. Activities included informal seminar-style meetings with key staff, lesson observation, attendance at assemblies, talk with groups of students, talk with classroom teachers, receipt of printed materials and end-of-programme discussions with key staff. Attempts were being made to have staff from School G visit the partner school at a later date to provide advice and observe what was being implemented. This has happened in some cases but most of the flow has been from outsiders to School G.

#### **4. Outcomes for partner institutions**

Interviewees from partner schools felt that they had gained a great deal from the process so far. All agreed that the open approach of the Beacon School was a key factor in this: *'they shared their experiences over time, what had worked, what [problems] had arisen and how they overcame them...They were very open and did not present themselves as something special'*. Another reported: *'they were very modest and dispassionate about themselves...and pointed out that what had worked for them may not work for us'*. Interviewees also appreciated the fact that they had not been given a standard 'package': *'there was a package but it was discussed beforehand and adjusted to ensure that it suited us. One programme, in the science department, was set up especially for us. We were well suited'*.

Staff from two partner schools were interviewed in depth. Both reported making use of the experience with the Beacon School in implementing changes in their schools. In both cases, the areas being developed had been reviewed and discussed prior to the visit to the Beacon School and were elements in their school development plans. Sometimes the structure could not be transferred, but the principles could be and staff felt more confident about implementing their own changes in the light of School G's experiences.

There was particular approval for the fact that several staff could take part in the Beacon visits and discussions. This meant that there was a greatly reduced need to 'cascade' the learning (a method which they had found unsatisfactory in the past), fewer people had to be persuaded about the value of School G's approaches, and there were sufficient people with a first-hand knowledge of the work of the Beacon School to put the learning into practice. Interviewees felt very positive about the likely outcomes of the changes they were implementing following the visits to School G, but could not identify measurable outcomes at this early stage. One interviewee, however, did report that following the work with School G, a new academic tutoring system had been put in place for Year 9 and they believed it had already had good effect, even as far as making a perceptible difference to the attainment scores of Year 9 as a whole.

#### **5. Outcomes for Beacon School**

Interviewees at School G reported that the self-esteem and self-confidence of staff has been enhanced by being a Beacon School. They had become more reflective about their own practice and were developing and refining their model of staff development. They also welcomed the opportunity to learn about what was happening in other schools and discuss aspects of their work with colleagues from those schools.

In addition to raising the morale of existing staff, Beacon status was seen to have had a noticeable effect on recruitment of new staff: the school was receiving more and better quality candidates for posts than before. The school also had an enhanced reputation locally through visits by public figures being reported locally, the Beacon status itself having been the subject of local news

reports and the school becoming one which local media would turn to '*when an education story broke*'. However, the headteacher could not report a sudden increase in applications for places. The roll has been rising steadily, but the image of the area from which School G recruits its pupils and the reputation and facilities of a rival school in a more affluent area locally, serve to deter parents from both within and beyond the immediate area from applying.

In common with the headteachers of many of the Beacon Schools visited, the headteacher commented that they were aware of the danger of becoming complacent: '*This school has to keep moving on. If we are not moving we cannot succeed*'. For him, the experience of working with other schools was part of this continuous development.

## **6. Support from/involvement of LEA and/or HEI**

At the outset, an LEA adviser was involved to launch and aid promotion of the Beacon initiative across the LEA; in the view of the senior management of the school, few others had sought a high profile for the Beacon initiative and many knew little about it. In the view of senior managers in the school, their having achieved Beacon status meant that there was a risk that they may not be included within other new initiatives. It was of some concern that the LEA might regard that School G must be doing well, had received extra funding from DfEE, and so they should turn their attention to others. The school decided to develop further the involvement of the LEA by employing an adviser on a consultancy basis to undertake an evaluation of School G' Beacon activities for the first half-year. The LEA interest in the Beacon activity has now increased and an adviser has suggested to some schools that they approach School G for advice.

## **7. Financial commentary**

The headteacher decided to use some of the Beacon School funding to maintain their own infrastructure, by, for example, providing computers for all heads of house. In common with other Beacon Schools, much was spent on providing cover for teachers from other schools so that they could visit School G. As the school timetable had been finalised before Beacon status was conferred upon the school in the summer of 1998, a supply teacher was identified and employed to release the two deputy headteachers from some teaching to undertake Beacon activities. This was not a successful strategy and the two deputy headteachers had to resume their original timetables. It also cost the school financially as the supply teacher took extended leave following an accident and the insurance policy took effect only after four weeks.

For 1999-2000, the school has made a strategic appointment of a full-time English teacher to take classes and release the two deputy headteachers. They have calculated that, as the school roll is rising, by the time Beacon funding ends, they should be able to maintain the post from their own funding. Extra

office and technician time was also purchased so that teachers would not have to carry extra administration duties or spend more time working on resource production and display of work. However, many staff have still had to put in a lot of extra time. Interviewees thought that although the Beacon School activity had not been subsidised directly from school funds, it had been indirectly from people's time.

The partner schools felt that the experience had provided good value for money. They had received excellent staff development in areas of need which they had identified, on a face-to-face basis for a large number of staff, at minimal cost. Interviewees felt that any other source of staff development would have cost a lot more and not been as beneficial.

## **8. Strengths and weaknesses of approach in terms of impact on school improvement**

Interviewees could not identify measurable outcomes of this type at what they felt was still a very early stage, with the exception of the Year 9 improvements described above. The deputy headteacher of another secondary school who had visited School G reported that following the visit they had felt more confident in implementing changes identified as necessary in their school development plan. These had included changes to the behaviour and discipline policy and to the sanctions and rewards system (both undertaken with greater student involvement in the process), a clearer more attractive display of 'rules' in the school, and an on-going working party on these matters. She felt that this would contribute to the raising of standards in the long term.

# Case-Study School H

*(as of July 1999)*

## 1. Main area(s) of Beacon activity

The main focus of the Beacon activity is a specialist resource centre, support centre and outreach roles. School H consciously offers a new model for the role of old-style Moderate Learning Difficulty (MLD) schools within inclusive education.

## 2. Development of Beacon activities: planning, resources, delivery

Much activity is an extension of pre-existing outreach work with fellow mainstream cluster schools and other contacts; the line between Beacon School and non-Beacon school is unclear. No radically new work with schools appears to have been undertaken as a result of the Beacon initiative – however, the work the school was undertaking within its locality was, according to the headteacher, ‘forward thinking’ already. Beacon funding has enabled previous work to be extended and there has in fact been a significant increase in the volume of work done through the Beacon initiative. There is no intention at present to work with a wider range of schools primarily because School H already has 16 partner institutions. Offers of support have been publicised within the locality. Where requests for assistance from outside the locality have been made, the responses have been ‘one-off’, because that is what was asked for.

Customised material is developed as needed, using existing school material as a base, but always tied to other input; the headteacher said he discourages most users from cascading to colleagues themselves, though another interviewee offers support in doing so. Observation at School H is also regularly used as a tool. Work with the local Early Years Centre has led to the joint design of courses for pre-school practitioners and others.

Out-of-school delivery is mainly by the headteacher, a former inspector/adviser, and a senior teacher, three other class teachers have been involved at varying levels in partnership working with other schools. Staff involvement is increasing, but recognition needs to be given to the fact that Beacon staff need ‘training’ in their new roles.

## 3. Partner institutions’ involvement

The local cluster was already in regular contact in relation to SEN, literacy and behaviour management issues (that is, addressing what they see as problems): these schools have always ‘fed’ School H and are now having to cope with many pupils who would formerly have been passed on. One headteacher stressed that the contact was not with a Beacon School but specifically with School H. Beacon lists provided by the DfEE have also brought one-off contacts from distant schools.

Early Years Centre staff appear to have only minimal awareness of the Beacon initiative, except as a source of funding. Links here began through a School H

head of department acting as mentor to their support teacher; further work grew out of a survey to establish needs of pre-school groups (pre-Beacon initiative, though the Beacon initiative has taken it forward into new areas).

The DfEE questionnaire lists NVQ links with the local college as a Beacon activity. In addition to school staff undertaking NVQ training at the college, three NVQ students are on annual placement with School H. Three of the school staff are NVQ assessors.

#### **4. Outcomes for partner institutions**

Cluster schools have received valuable (some say essential) support, especially in coping with a challenging influx of SEN pupils under inclusive education (especially high in this area because of social deprivation, and with a high level of attendant behavioural problems). However, their relationship with School H appears very dependent (perhaps inevitably since they see special school staff as ‘experts’); rather than schools gaining in independence after receiving support, the agenda for support continues to expand. Some work (for example, advice on writing Individual Education Plans) does include an element of training, but in other cases School H seems to be setting out to resolve existing problems now rather than enabling partner schools to solve them now and in the future. This is due as much to the attitude of partner schools as to School H’s approach.

The distant contact investigated reported a general rather than tailored response, possibly because needs had not been adequately pinpointed on either side. This was partly due to difficulty in obtaining adequate non-Internet information from the DfEE on the range of Beacon special schools and what they had to offer.

Work achieved with the Early Years Centre is original, extensive and potentially far-reaching, with other agencies already interested in the training course produced. Beacon funding has unlocked the potential of the Beacon teacher involved and enabled her to reach out beyond the confines of the school. However, in the process the centre itself appears to have lost some element of ownership and control, though as yet this appears to have presented no difficulties.

#### **5. Outcomes for Beacon School**

The school roll reduces in September because more children are entering mainstream; without Beacon funding School H would have had to lose both a teacher and an assistant.

Becoming a Beacon School has had a positive effect on staff morale. However, this has been offset by the problem of obtaining suitable supply teachers, always more difficult in special schools because some pupils (especially autistic) find it very hard to cope with change: a day’s supply cover can cause a week of upsets, and some staff have felt ‘bogged down’ by

all the preparations needed to smooth the process of leaving their class. Supply cover also places a strain on classroom assistants, who have not been entirely happy about the extra burden imposed by the Beacon initiative. Where supply is unavailable, colleagues have lost non-contact time.

These difficulties have been exacerbated by the long-term leave of the deputy headteacher, which has placed an exceptionally heavy burden on the headteacher, (and delayed completion of some Beacon paperwork).

## **6. Support from/involvement of LEA and/or HEI**

The LEA interviewee who deals with School H is a SEN specialist, and confined her comments to this field. The authority already had a culture of structured SEN outreach, but with little available funding: the Beacon initiative appears to have been seen largely in terms of an opportunity to secure this. The headteachers of the Beacon special schools are valued former advisers and well known personal contacts, which may have tended to increase the marginalisation of the Beacon project itself; the LEA interviewee was not aware of Beacon work in any detail. The LEA has serious concerns about whether mainstream schools will continue to use outreach support if they have to pay for it.

The Beacon School headteacher stressed that the bid was based on using Beacon funding to pilot three elements of the school's 'Specialist Support Centre' role – resourcing, support for staff and pupils and training.

## **7. Financial commentary**

Delays in submitting financial details were caused by the fact that data on expenditure had not been collected in the way required to complete the end of financial year report – also the headteacher did not feel that this level of paperwork was appropriate.

School H does not offer funding for cover to participating schools, seeing this as a test of commitment – also, the headteacher feels that there is not sufficient funding to do both what the school wants to do **and** to pay supply cover costs for participating schools. However, materials are supplied free, and the costs of preparing these are heavy.

The Early Years work on behaviour/communication has potential to impact directly on social exclusion, especially if problems are picked up earlier through better training of pre-school providers. Due to the nature of the work undertaken, the significance of value for money judgements will have to be evaluated in the longer term. The headteacher emphasised that there are no 'quick fixes' in the special needs field.



## **8. Strengths and weaknesses of approach in terms of impact on school improvement**

This approach makes expert advice available to mainstream schools struggling to become inclusive, but may encourage dependency rather than growth through the process of finding their own solutions. The Beacon School was attempting to counter this through an acknowledgement that effective inclusion will only come if the special schools develop their specialist support role (which focuses on meeting need) **and** develop the skills of mainstream colleagues. The written agreements linked to partnership working include a maintenance element.

Also, it is not clear where else the partner schools could turn at present: it is not so much a matter of raising standards as of trying to hold them steady in the face of downward pressure caused by inclusion in an area where the SEN population of a mainstream school can be over 50 per cent.

The headteacher is a former inspector/adviser, and the Beacon initiative is enabling him to resume his advisory role while remaining a practitioner: this also means that his school is available for the demonstration of good practice. However, current levels of Beacon activity are clearly placing a strain on the school.

# **APPENDIX B**

## **References**

## APPENDIX B: REFERENCES

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