SPRING 2004

Improving Schools Facing Challenging Circumstances:

Perspectives from leading thinkers

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INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATE PERSPECTIVES

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Author's note

If you stand on the top of the Mullock Heap on the western side of the town of Mount Magnet in Western Australia and look out, you can see before you a flat, featureless landscape stretching to the horizon in all directions. There are no rivers, no tall trees, no hills. Just the flat olive green and brown landscape that covers so much of the inland parts of Western Australia.

Lowering your gaze you get an overview of the town of Mount Magnet itself. You can see its pretentiously wide, perfectly rectangular streets laid out like a chequerboard. Its half-a-dozen grandiose buildings poke out from the morass of prefabricated constructions as memorials to the boom town that Mount Magnet was in times past. In the middle of the chequerboard is the school, a structure consisting entirely of transportable buildings, and painted blue as if to defy its location in the middle of the Australian desert.

The Mullock Heap is a pile of waste rock that has been taken out of the ground over the last 100 years, by miners who, in their search for gold, had come to Mount Magnet to seek their fortunes. Miners know that there is ore (rock with gold in it), and there is mullock. There is about a 'million' times more mullock than gold – and all the mullock is piled up in huge heaps, which can be now seen standing guard over what are now mostly long-abandoned mines.

My great-grandfather was one of those who had rushed to Mount Magnet in search of his fortune, having his own 'show' (a mine) on Poverty Flat, the richest goldfield in the Mount Magnet area. His show turned out to be a dud and he went broke, so with his two sons he journeyed the 450km through the desert on foot to take a 'wages' job on the 'mile that Midas had touched' – Kalgoorlie. My infant grandmother, her four sisters and their mother made the 1300km round trip by train.

It was on top of this mullock heap that, during my first appointment as the headteacher of a school, I started the journey that has led me to writing this paper. I would stride up the mullock heap each morning, arriving sweating and puffing in time to see the sun rising, to reflect on the days before, and the challenges of the day to come. In my daily routine, it was perhaps the only time in the busy round of eclectic tasks that made up my job, that I had a chance to put my head above the parapet and take a broader view.

To me, Mount Magnet was a land of riches. I had always been (and still am) a true believer that I could make a difference and, for me, that had always meant working to give better educational opportunities to children from financially disadvantaged homes. I viewed being appointed to Mount Magnet as a wonderful opportunity to make that difference.

On the mullock heap, I would reflect most often on the immediate: the young teachers' work performance, the students not learning (and often not motivated) or the dilapidated classrooms. There were many things to be concerned about. There were the daily trials of leaking roofs, Mrs Brown's penchant for letting her violent dog escape and bite the kids going to school, the living arrangements for the single teachers who shared houses in the town. Educational issues were difficult — the attendance of children, the type of literacy programme we were running or the complete mismatch of the state-set curriculum to the needs of students destined to stay in the desert for the rest of their lives. Then there were the emotional challenges that had to be met — parents whose only response to problems with their children's misbehaviour was to threaten violence against staff or other parents, or the diplomatic skills required to get a racially divided community pulling in the same direction.

In retrospect, I know that a lot of the stresses that I felt were due to inexperience. I was 31 when I was appointed and the eight more experienced applicants ranked above me had not wanted the job. Many of the tasks and situations that were difficult then I handled with aplomb

as an experienced principal a few years later. However, lack of strategic support, school system problems and community issues also played their part in contributing to the stresses of my work role.

During my three years as the head of Mount Magnet District High School I had worked 70-hour weeks, stretched budgets, counselled parents and staff, and sacked incompetent young teachers (who had spent three years training to get the job). I designed new programmes and filled in a multitude of forms to reassure Central Office that they, or we, were being accountable. Some days it was heartbreaking: the children that you had spent months getting on track left overnight with itinerant parents, children started school without adequate pre-learning skills and never caught up, and teachers in whom you had invested time and money transferred to cooler climates. One of my experienced colleagues at the end of one year tried to dampen my expectations: "Do school development one year and staff development the next," he said. Things could only move one step forward with three-quarters of a step back. "Stuff that," I had thought.

Although it had been challenging work, I had loved it but came away thinking it should not have to be that hard. I understood why my more experienced colleagues had not applied for the position. The reflections that I had during those three years from the top of mullock heap left me with several conclusions:
- being the headteacher was a tough, challenging and largely unsupported job (albeit rewarding)
- the kids on the wrong side of the tracks were getting a raw deal from the system
- there was a need for schools to work more closely with parents – because so much of what they did affected the outcomes that schools could achieve

It is only now, in reading back over my notes of seven years ago, and on the verge of writing the conclusions from my inquiry, in which I spoke to some of the most eminent headteachers, senior educationalists, businessmen and futurists in the UK and Western Australia, that I realise that things have not changed enough. My inquiry into how to improve challenging schools has returned to the same three issues:
- how best to support leaders of schools serving lower socio-economic communities
- the negative impact of school systems structures and policies on schools serving lower socio-economic communities
- the intersection between schools and parents in their communities

Executive summary

Background

Recent years have seen a growth in the level of public and political interest in schools facing challenging circumstances. The twin political expectations of value for money and success for all have put increased pressure on these schools and, in particular, on those that are judged to be under-performing.

For headteachers leading schools facing challenging circumstances, the challenges are disproportionately hard, both in professional and personal terms. It should come as no surprise then to find that headteacher vacancies in challenging schools, and in particular under-performing schools, are among the most difficult to fill.

However, the fact that research has consistently showed the importance of good leadership in ensuring improvement and the sustained success of schools facing challenging circumstances makes the shortage of willing and suitable headteachers particularly disconcerting.

It is against this backdrop that I set out to explore the practical issues affecting the leadership of failing schools in challenging circumstances. In particular I was interested in examining the barriers to ensuring high quality education is provided in such schools and see if there was any consensus about how to overcome these.

In doing so, I undertook interviews with a range of people regarded as successful or eminent in areas relevant to my inquiry. These included recognised experts in schools systems, successful leaders of schools facing challenging circumstances, leaders of public sector reform and individuals who had achieved success in the commercial world.

Phases of development

Interviewees consistently described two overlapping phases in the development of schools that required significant improvement. These were:
- an initial phase of improvement to restore functionality of a school when it had serious weaknesses
- a longer phase of sustaining good performance

Strategies for the early stage of improvement

In the first phase of improvement, the school leadership team needed to implement good systems and processes in the school (eg behaviour, finances, attendance, environment) to restore the effective functionality of the school and with this, improve the culture of the school. In doing so, a number of key actions were highlighted:
- Engage people or organisations with expertise and experience in improving underperforming schools in challenging circumstances, to provide advice and guidance.
- Appoint a new headteacher if possible. This is the best way to bring about the rapid cultural change that is required in this situation.
- Select an experienced headteacher with a demonstrated capacity to improve schools of this nature. If this is not possible, select a headteacher with strong intrapersonal and interpersonal skills who will accept external support and team solutions.
- Conduct a thorough review to identify the school's key weaknesses and to devise strategies to correct them.

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- Monitor the implementation of the plan carefully and hold regular reviews of progress.
- Be clear about everybody's role in the school's leadership team. Have clear behaviours, tasks and targets for all, including the headteacher.
- Consider contracting external service providers to undertake specific tasks and functions, eg financial management, procedures for under-performing staff, curriculum analysis, implementation of new programmes. Be clear that such support should be used to raise the leadership capacity of the school, not replace it.

Strategies for sustaining improvement

A number of interviewees recognised that significant social and educational changes have altered the environment in which schools facing challenging circumstances now operate. These include changes in wealth distribution, family structures and school system environments. Another highly significant issue has been the exposure of schools to 'market conditions', eg greater parental choice and the publication of school performance to guide these choices. Findings suggest that while the performance of schools in challenging circumstances may have broadly improved since the major school system changes of the late 1980s, this has been at a lower rate than elsewhere. As a result, those interviewed felt that the gap between those schools that faced challenging circumstances and those not categorised as such had grown.

The respondents agreed with recent research that showed that leading schools facing challenging circumstances was significantly more difficult than leading comparatively sized schools in less socially disadvantaged areas. Central to this issue was the fact that these schools had greater proportions of students from disadvantaged families and with learning difficulties. These schools also suffered from problems attracting and retaining competent staff, broader issues of accountability and an increase in media attention. Interviewees stated that system-wide processes for recognising and compensating for these issues were required to improve the quality of leadership in all schools of this nature.

There was strong support from the interviewees for the following strategies:
- using external support to make the task of leading such schools more manageable
- introducing additional incentives to encourage leaders to take up leadership positions in such schools
- establishing a body charged with overseeing the provision of consistently high quality external support to these schools
- establishing federations of schools to provide sustainable improvement — this was viewed as one way of ensuring increased co-operation and a healthy level of competition but avoiding the potentially damaging side-effects associated with these
- developing more collaborative groups, including clusters and networks, increased engagement with LEAs, NCSL etc. The aims of this should be to develop effective leadership talent development programmes, which embrace issues of succession management
- establishing of a special category of employment, combined with a network of schools facing challenging circumstances (eg an urban teaching service), for enticing staff to teach in such schools

It should be noted that many of interviewees expressed a view that using a 'norm-referenced' approach to measure the performance of schools was unhelpful. This was because such systems created "good" and "bad" schools. Similarly, the use of standards models of schooling for inspection meant that there would always be less successful schools, as it saw some schools to be under-performing compared to others. Instead they called for a greater recognition of the problems faced by schools in challenging circumstances and an appreciation of how much more difficult it is for them to improve pupil achievement.

Introduction

Background to the inquiry

Since its election in 1997, the government has consistently sought to make education a major policy priority. A central principle within this is the recognising that ensuring access to improved standards of education for all plays a critical role in supporting social and economic reform. In particular, improving educational attainment across all sectors of society can act as major driver in reducing economic inequality and increasing social integration. From this viewpoint then, transforming education and schooling becomes a critical platform for future economic and social success.

There is some argument to suggest that, regardless of this broader recognition of the value and importance of education, the government has found it difficult to provide consistently the increased resources required to achieve these goals.

This has occurred because, in order to create more market-oriented economies capable of competing well in a global economy, western governments have sought to check all areas of public spending. Tight monetary polices designed to keep inflation in check, and create 'space' for the non-government enterprises to flourish, have generally meant constrained spending on big ticket items such as education.

As a result there has been a strong push to improve outputs from the education sector by improving efficiency – a situation reflected in other parts of the public sector.

One of the ways this government has sought to create these efficiencies in the public services has been to create 'market' conditions in which they operate. This aims to stimulate improvements in the effectiveness and efficiencies of public services through competition. Within education, this has involved providing information on school performance to the public through ranked tables of school results, and reports on school 'functionality' produced by the Office of Standards in Education (Ofsted). The provision of this information is intended increase accountability and transparency, and support parents in deciding which school their children should attend.

However, the introduction of league tables and inspection has had another effect — they have enabled the more ready identification of schools facing challenging circumstances (SFCCs). Such schools are now formally defined as those where 25 per cent of students or fewer achieve a minimum of five grades A*-C at GCSE level or 35 per cent or more are entitled to free school meals.

Since the introduction of these measures, SFCCs have been the focus for a considerable amount of attention. Moreover, in instances where levels of attainment have been lower, considerable effort has been made to help support improvements in performance.

Just how concerned school systems are about SFCCs has been highlighted by successive Chief Inspectors of Schools, who point to the growing gap between the quality of schooling provided by struggling SFCCs and that provided by other more successful institutions. And despite mounting pressure from government, school education professionals have been unable to agree on the measures needed to improve the performance of those struggling SFCCs. In England, various initiatives have sought to address this in recent years, including strategies designed to give special regulatory conditions and resource allocations (Education Action Zones, Excellence in Cities 3).

While opinions are divided over the degree of success these initiatives have enjoyed, some commentators do believe that the overall situation for SFCCs has improved. For instance, David Bell, the Chief Inspector of Schools, estimates that the overall number of SFCCs has fallen from around 1600 15 years ago to around 700–800 in 2004.

In reflecting on this trend, Bell noted that the most consistent, observable factor behind this improvement has been increases in the overall quality of leadership in such schools – a finding supported more broadly by educators and commentators. However, two factors need to be recognised in relation to leadership in SFCCs:

1.   Fewer applications for headteacher vacancies in SFCCs are received from individuals with a proven track record in such schools than might be hoped for.
2.   Once successful leaders leave SFCCs, evidence suggests that improvement is often not sustained.

In summary, the following confluence of factors has impacted on schools facing challenging circumstances:
- the view in government that education is a key factor in improving economic and social conditions
- a corresponding lack of sustained growth in the provision of resources to schools in challenging circumstances
- a trend towards greater transparency and providing more information on the performance of all areas of the public services, including schools
- the development of an increasingly competitive market for students between schools
- increased recognition of the 'fact' that the only consistently effective strategy for improving the effectiveness of SFCCs has related to the development of leadership

Aims and underlying assumptions

The purpose of this inquiry is to investigate strategies for supporting successful leadership in SFCCs. It also seeks to determine what supports or inhibits the efforts of school leaders to improve the performance of under-achieving SFCCs.

This inquiry seeks to contribute to discussions on the practical steps that can be taken to support improvement, rather than to add to general or theoretical debates on this issue.

Two assumptions are made in this project's design. These are:

1. The strategies required to improve SFCCs are already substantively known.

There is a considerable body of published work that describes the ways in which headteachers have led schools in England that have been formally 'failed', and restored them to effectiveness (Ainscow, Stanford, West, 2003; Reynolds, 2001; Hopkins, 2001). Additionally, research has also identified the qualities of those who have improved the performance of SFCCs (Reynolds, 1994; Hopkins, 1996; Harris et al, 2001; Leithwood & Steinbach in progress; Harris & Chapman, 2001). Broadly, these analyses have also shown that those school leaders who have been successful have been able to reform SFCCs by exerting enough "leadership capacity" over enough areas of school operations to force an improvement.

2. Provision of quality leadership is the single factor that has been most successful in improving poorly performing SFCCs.

There are numerous examples of instances where the appointment of a competent headteacher has made a remarkable difference to the overall performance and effectiveness of a school. In

reviewing general school effectiveness literature and, more particularly, that relating to SFCCs, leadership is has consistently been cited as the most important factor leading to improvement (eg Hopkins, 2001; Reynolds et al, 2001).

Approach

The inquiry consisted of two broad stages.

The first stage comprised a literature review of:
- strategies that have been consistently effective in improving the leadership capacity of SFCCs
- broad strategies the business sector uses to improve businesses/business units that are under-performing
- child development (brain development) – in particular, those environments provided by schools that optimise children's learning capacity

The second stage consisted of semi-structured interviews with a number of highly respected:
- school leaders who have been recognised as successful in improving SFCCs
- educationalists and school system leaders
- futures thinkers who have written on possible alternative structures and leadership models for the public sector and school systems
- individuals with considerable expertise in public sector reform, alternative models of leadership and public service delivery
- business leaders who have experience in managing business organisations constructed of multiple similar business units (eg banks, supermarket chains)

Amongst those interviewed were:
- David Bell, Chief Inspector of Schools, Office of Standards in Education
- Tom Bentley, Director of Demos
- Professor Mel West, University of Manchester
- Tony Howarth, Chair of Alinta Gas, Australia
- Sir John Jones, Headteacher of Maghull High School

A full list of individuals who supported this work is included in Appendix A of this report.

Findings

In reviewing literature and conducting interviews for this research, it became apparent that there were two 'phases' for improving underperforming SFCCs. These phases are:
- a period of initial improvement to functionality followed by
- a longer period of maintaining functionality and seeking to secure further, sustained improvements in effectiveness

The remainder of this findings section describes these two phases in more detail.

Returning schools to functionality

This first subsection of findings is intended to identify and order the steps that practitioners could use to restore underperforming SFCCs to full functionality. It effectively provides a 'template', or set of guidelines for improving SFCCs with serious weaknesses, while at the same time recognising that no one set of 'steps' will act as a panacea for all SFCCs.

Ensuring leaders are effective

The challenges facing leaders in underperforming SFCCs are often daunting. Factors such as high staff turnover, poor physical environment, family problems and peer effects on children make the leadership of these schools very challenging. Several of those interviewed were very clear about the scale of the task such leaders faced:

> "I used to have to spend 30 per cent of my time just on marketing the school, getting the parents to believe in it."

> "People just don't know how hard it really is."

> "The headteachers I know that have gone into SFCCs would probably not do it again – 'not twice in a lifetime' they would probably say."

The interviewees that had been headteachers of SFCCs identified the 'magnitude' of the job as a key issue affecting the leadership capacity of SFCCs. They stated that if school systems can find ways of recognising this and compensating for it, then the quality of leadership in SFCCs should improve:

> "I thought that my career path would have me leading one of the challenging schools at this stage of my career. But the whole world is against you — Ofsted, league tables, parental choice — who would want to do it? You need a 40-year-old's energy. We need find ways to package the task so that it is attractive."

Given the scale of the challenge, and the relative lack of rewards available to compensate, it is not surprising that the quality of leadership is often viewed as being insufficient in such underperforming schools. Those interviewed felt that replacing the headteacher generally provided schools having serious weaknesses with the greatest opportunity for rapid improvement. For instance, David Bell noted that:

> "In 93 per cent of cases where a school had been placed in special measures, there had been a change of leadership by the time they emerge from special measures."

Other interviewees' reflections included:

> "It is essential to get a new headteacher. [These schools] need a fresh approach."

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"Me – I would probably change all the people at the top. Help liberate the system. Not necessarily that those people are failed leaders, they may be successful leaders somewhere else. Something very symbolic about this – not a criticism, this is just a human dynamic. The system needs a capacity to remove as well as supply."

Exceptions to this were recognised – for instance when the incumbent headteacher had recently been appointed or where there were other extenuating circumstances. The people interviewed did not advocate such an approach lightly. On the contrary, they invariably recognised the potential cost to the individual. However, at the same time, they appreciated that this course of action offered potential for a 'fresh start', to change the culture and expectations.

Given these views, it follows that one of the most common tasks that needs to be undertaken to help improve underperforming SFCCs is to appoint a new headteacher. However, it is a sad irony that, while these types of schools are likely to benefit from the appointment of a highly competent headteacher committed to the idea of the "long haul", they generally attract fewer applications and of a lower quality than is the case in other schools. As a result, heads appointed to such schools are often inexperienced. For instance, in their study of 36 SFCCs, Ainscow, Stanford and West (2003) noted that the majority of headteachers in post were in their first appointment.

However in the absence of a pool of committed highly experienced heads to choose from, there are some advantages to appointing a new or less experienced head rather than opting for a more experienced head as a short term measure:

"The problem with appointing a competent headteacher for an initial set period of time is that once improvements have been made, they may not be sustained if enough leadership capacity cannot be developed in other staff, or there is not a clear succession plan."

"The person who goes in to fix the school must have a relationship (implied commitment) to the school. You don't want someone going in there saying 'I am going to sort this mess out for you', rather they want to be saying, 'I am going to empower you all to sort this mess out...'"

The key issue here relates to the need for the new head to show commitment to the longer-term development of the school, rather than a desire to secure short-term fixes before moving onto the next challenge.

However, before taking the decision to appoint a new or less experienced head, it is important to recognise the potential implications this can have, not least in relation to the need for additional support over the short term.

One way to analyse this is to list the leadership capacities that are required by a headteacher to improve a challenging school. There is an immense amount of research that could be used for this, and the table below represents an attempt at condensing some of the literature into the context of SFCCs. A particularly good study on the challenges faced by leaders of SFCCs, and the qualities of successful headteachers of these schools was conducted by Harris and Chapman for the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) in 2002. Their work on exploring leadership approaches of successful headteachers of SFCCs has been partly used in constructing the table below.

Desirable characteristics for leaders

In their review of existing literature on leading SFCCs, Harris and Cooper identify a number of personal qualities and attributes that successful leaders are seen to possess. These are summarised in table 1 below.

Attributes/ Knowledge/ Skills	Specific examples for leadership of SFCCs	Comment	Capacity to provide support for this function externally
Intra and inter-personal capacity	Negotiation Conflict resolution Confidence Resilience	Studies indicate that training people in this area is difficult. However, preparation for specific situations that an individual may encounter is useful. Leaders need to display a positive regard for all school community members.	Poor
Values	Empathy for staff, students and community Commitment to education Persistence Determination	Studies have highlighted the importance of these values/beliefs in leaders of SFCCs. Sets tone for 'culture' of the school.	Poor
Strategic knowledge	Diagnosis of school's problems Knowledge of strategies to improve SFCCs	The capacity to identify accurately a school's problems and the best strategies to solve them has been highlighted as a key attribute for a school leader in an SFCC.	Good
Knowledge of external support	Networks of people who have knowledge or resources to assist SFCCs.	Leaders need to know the right networks where they can access the support and resources to assist with specific tasks.	Good
Knowledge of local community	Knowledge of characteristics of school, parents students and community	These factors need to be taken into account when developing strategy and assist in developing relationships with key stakeholders.	Depends on who is available to provide external support

Table 1: Characteristics of "successful" leaders of SFCCs

An analysis of table 1 would lead a selection panel to conclude that the interpersonal and intra-personal skills and values are most difficult to provide support externally.

Given this, a selection panel may be led to choose an applicant with good inter/intrapersonal skills and values, and then access the strategic knowledge and skills that are required to improve the school. In this way, due consideration can be given to providing a strategic mix of internal and external leadership capacity to encompass all the elements of leadership required to restore the school to functionality.

Planning

The development of a broader business and operational plan was most often viewed by those interviewed as the second key step to restoring functionality to an under-performing SFCC. They saw that the main goal of planning was supporting the development of good systems and processes and establishing a positive culture in the school. Business leaders were particularly clear about the need for planning:

> "Confronted with this situation I would be conducting one hell of a planning process – and everyone in the organisation would have to be involved. Planning can obviate to some extent the need for experience and knowledge in a leader."

> "Planning is critical – all the key stakeholders must have shared ownership of the plan… It must be clear to everyone what their role is…they have to think – 'if I don't do X, I am letting the team down'."

The business people were genuinely surprised that when a new leader was appointed to a failing school, it was unlikely that a clear plan and strategy would be developed (this appeared to be less of an issue for those from an education background). They expected this planning process to have been developed to cover at least the most urgent issues to be addressed, after the appointment of the new head. However it seems that all too often a clear strategy for progress is missing. For instance, Ainscow, Stanford and West (2003) note that, while the main problems facing such a school were known when a new headteacher was appointed, no strategy was in place to help them determine in which order these should be addressed.

Data collection prior to the development of a plan

The English school system has a range of highly developed instruments for to measure school performance and has developed significant capacity to interpret the data these provide. These instruments and approaches are a potentially invaluable resource for informing the development of a school improvement plan for SFCCs.

Both those interviewed and existing literature on improving SFCCs (eg Hopkins, 2001; Johnson, 1999) highlighted the need for the structured use of data in supporting the improvement of SFCCs. Arguably, this data and its analysis are most important during the initial planning phase, in assessing a school's current situation and weaknesses, and in developing strategies to address these:

> "I would want to conduct a thorough SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis of the school… You must have the information – whatever it costs, you must get it."

> "Data is incredibly useful, and allows you to drill down much better (to get a better picture of the school)."

> "We had collected all the data we could get from the LEA, and from what we knew. The school gave us some data."

Several people interviewed commented on Ofsted's potential contribution:

> "We have got to a point where we (Ofsted) can collect enough data external to the school to get a good picture of how each school is performing – we (Ofsted) probably have been able to do this for a few years…"

"We have data on everything…"

"I have a view that Ofsted inspections should become formative, not summative. It can be turned around to identify how school can improve, rather than what is wrong with them."

"The first thing we should do before we put a new headteacher in a failing school is to get Ofsted to conduct a thorough inspection and identify key areas for improvement. They could even suggest strategies that have been successful in other schools."

In addition to Ofsted, several other individuals and bodies were identified as having a significant contribution to make. These included:
- key local authority staff
- headteachers in surrounding schools
- staff representatives
- parent representatives
- governors

The importance of undertaking a full and detailed financial audit was also noted.

Role of the head in planning

As noted above, there were some differences in the respective views of individuals from education and from business of the role a new head in developing an under-performing school.

Central to this was the issue of the degree of autonomy that headteachers are viewed as having within the school system. Individuals from a business background indicated that there was a broad responsibility for designing and implementing a plan. In education, the assumption was that this was the job of the headteacher. If true, it could be argued that this assumption militates against the best interests of the school and the heads themselves. This is particularly likely to be true in instances where the headteacher is a new and/or inexperienced appointment, in which case the benefits of having an existing well-structured plan to guide their early work should not be underestimated.

Elements of the plan

There has been much thought about the key elements of an improvement plan. While this was not the main focus of this paper, the following aspects were regularly identified by respondents and are also well documented elsewhere:
- strong focus on teaching and learning
- careful use of data and target setting
- visible early 'projects' to signify things are changing
- focus on improving standards such as behaviour management and uniform

A knowledge of the types of strategies available and the appropriate time for their implementation is key in the planning process. As suggested above, it is ideal if a person or organisation with extensive knowledge of school improvement in SFCCs can be engaged to provide additional advice in this area.

The people interviewed stated that initial plans should not be overly complex, but rather should consist of clear strategies that can be executed extremely well. The focus then should be on addressing key issues in the initial stage of improvement.

Those interviewed stated that 'experts' in supporting under-performing SFCCs should work with the individual school and its leadership team to decide the strategies most suited to its specific context. Those from a business background were particularly clear that the development of this level of detail was a specialist task and that an external facilitator should be employed to support this work.

Respondents were clear that the development plan should be both strategic and operational. Indeed the importance of clarity in terms of responsibility for performing specific actions was frequently mentioned:

> "If you want the principal (headteacher) to walk around the playground, write it down. They need to know exactly what they have to do."

As part of the development of the plan, steps should be taken to identify any additional support that would be needed to ensure its successful delivery. Questions that should be asked in this phase would be: "What skills do we need to implement this plan? Do we have them ourselves? If not, where can we access them?"

Increasing capacity – drawing on external support

As noted above, those interviewed were clear that in many instances, under-performing SFCCs would benefit from utilising additional sources of support. This subsection explores in more depth four potential strategies:
- employing external consultants
- establishing a 'brokerage' unit
- outsourcing management functions
- contracting with other providers of external support

Employing external consultants

Several interviewees were clear as to the benefits of using an experienced consultant to support the development of an underperforming school's improvement plan:

> "If you are going to use consultants, they should be linked to planning. They should provide skills that may not be available in your organisation."

One interviewee spoke of a school they were familiar with, where a consultant not only had contributed to planning but had also supported the early stages of improvement to great effect. In this instance, the consultant had overseen taking inefficiency procedures against under-performing staff. This had allowed the head to focus on other areas of work, confident that this sensitive but necessary task was completed with no ill effects for long-term relationships. The use of a consultant to perform some of the 'dirty jobs' needed to turn round an under-performing school clearly has some appeal:

> "The good guy, bad guy strategy is important. If you can get someone who can deal with performance issues with staff without having to worry about longer term relationships this really helps."

More broadly though, the use of consultants provides space for the head to focus on other areas of importance for the longer term sustainability of the school. For instance, literature on under-performing schools notes that one of the most important functions for a headteacher, when appointed, is to spend time with staff, students and parents to improve the 'culture' of the school (Stoll and Myers, 1996; Hopkins, 2001; Harris and Chapman, 2002). This can take significant time. The use of consultants can reduce the pressure on the head, and provides scope for them to focus on developing the school culture, in the hope that results can be achieved more quickly.

Two of the people interviewed stated the need for caution when considering the use of external consultants. Central to this is the implicit threat of this approach to the development of a broader team culture and the creation of additional capacity within the school community. As one respondent noted:

> "You have got to be careful – some [struggling] schools are suffering death by grey suits. There are so many people visiting…someone on budget, someone on curriculum, etc. The whole message being delivered to the school staff is that you are no good. You need to use external people in such a way as to say to the school, 'You are ok. I am going to empower you all to sort this out.' External people need to build capacity in the school, not stifle it."

Mentoring and personal support

Another area of potential support for headteachers in underperforming schools is mentoring. This is potentially appropriate for new and inexperienced headteachers.

> "You must mentor people in the early part of their job. This is absolutely critical."

> "The early phase of headship is critical. If they make a major interpersonal mistake, or a big strategy misjudgement, then it can almost be impossible for them to recover. We should prepare people better for this first period."

Interviewees were sympathetic to idea that the mentor should be the "expert" in under-performing SFCCs. At the same time, some of the educationalists interviewed were concerned over the perceived *centrality* of a role any external consultant might take in supporting the early development of the school. For these individuals, external support should focus on 'behind the scenes' tasks, thereby enhancing the status of the headteacher and not potentially damaging it.

From this viewpoint, using a consultant to mentor the head was seen as highly appropriate. Such an approach was viewed as having the dual benefit of enhancing the authority of the headteacher while building capacity so that an expert external consultant could withdraw after a period of time.

External support 'brokerage' unit

One potential way forward in relation to the provision of external support to SFCCs is through the establishment of a 'brokerage' unit. The brief of such a unit would be to help restore under-performing schools to functionality, before withdrawing in a planned manner in line with the strategic aim of establishing leadership capacity within the school to ensure sustained improvement.

Such a service could act as a co-ordinator of support to under-performing schools. It could oversee the initial review of existing school data, consult with stakeholders and recommend a process for improvement to the LEA and school governors. It could guide the key stakeholders through this process and provide support in appointing of a new headteacher and subsequent mentoring of that person.

A brokerage service could be staffed by a strategic mix of headteachers with experience in supporting SFCCs, educationalists and process experts from the business sector. It may also be worth considering aspiring headteachers for this function, given the enormous learning opportunity such an approach would represent.

Outsourcing management functions

Most of those interviewed advocated outsourcing the completion of functions traditionally completed by school leaders as a good strategy for making the head's job more manageable. Outsourcing also provides an opportunity to increase a school's expertise in a particular field, with the associated benefit of improving efficiency:

> "Outsourcing means that you can get an expert in. In my current school, dining, grounds management, cleaning, IT management are all outsourced – this gives me time to do the things that matter."

Managed properly, outsourcing could reduce the workload of school leaders and improve the quality of leadership functions. The key issues to consider were which functions to outsource, how quality would be controlled and how arrangements could be introduced that would allow for economies of scale:

> "Non-core functions are the ones that are outsourced most often – payroll for example. Schools will do this even if they are not done that well – they are a non-core functions – they don't see them as critical…"

> "We have this notion of the primacy of teaching, that is all things to do with teaching and learning are our core business. Other things can be outsourced."

> "I know a person who has been a very successful headteacher of large comprehensive school. He has just taken on failing school, and he is thinking about outsourcing some of the teaching. Why not, if it is the best option he has got?"

As can be seen from the comments above, those interviewed perceived no fixed parameters on what functions could be outsourced. However amongst those functions most frequently cited to be outsourced were non-core functions such as cleaning or grounds management, and those functions that required expertise not currently present in the staff of the school, such as information technology.

The outsourcing of key teaching functions — not common practice in schools to date — caused significant comment. There were two outlooks on this. Some individuals saw this as the core business of the school, which should remain sacrosanct. Indeed such individuals commonly saw a key aim of the outsourcing strategy to be freeing up capacity within the school to allow the head to adopt a more hands on and focused approach to development of teaching and learning. Others adopted a more functional approach, stating that the decision whether to outsource should depend upon the specific circumstances of the school and the degree to which it would produce specific, tangible benefits.

Several respondents felt decisions on what to outsource also depended upon the phase of the school's development.

> "In the initial phase (of improving a SFCC), lots of things can be outsourced – curriculum, timetable, finance, site management…in hindsight, if I was in the same position again (leading a SFCCs with weaknesses), I would outsource a lot more."

> "Lots of things can be outsourced. At [my school], we initially outsourced foreign languages to another school. It had an excellent foreign languages department, and their good practice eventually got transferred back [when this function returned]. It worked really well."

> "You can split organisation from production, you get organisation right first (policy and procedures), and then you focus on production (teaching and learning). It may be that

> you out-source production in the first phase while you focus on organisation and then you outsource organisation in the second phase while you focus on production."

Perhaps the only conclusion that can be drawn from this aspect of the discussion is that teaching is not necessarily 'sacred' and outsourcing should be considered. As noted above, it may represent a good strategy in the initial stage of improving the quality of teaching, particularly in instances when good practice can be introduced into the school when this function is ultimately restored.

More broadly, it is important that outsourcing takes place as part of a clear strategic plan for improving the school.

External providers of support for SFCCs

Interviewees were asked to identify and comment on the main sources of external support for under-performing SFCCs.

Role of LEAs

There was much discussion around the role of Local Education Authorities (LEAs), tertiary institutions and private education consultants in this regard. Interestingly, there was a clear view that, while LEAs have been the prime source of support for all schools in the past, this was less likely to be the case now:

> "LEAs haven't got enough good people to do their support work – they cannot afford to buy them. Headteachers are buying their support from somewhere else if they feel the LEA cannot provide it."

> "LEAs often do not have the capacity to support SFCCs."

> "The LEA often does not provide the support you need at the time you are in special measures. For example, consultants may come in with complex models of literacy, and what you really need is just good solid basic classroom practice. They may not understand problems with behaviour, background context etc."

Greater autonomy for schools had led many to look away from their LEA to other potential providers of support, such as universities and private consultancies. While this had led to some innovation and the introduction of new ideas, it had served to reduce the capacity of some LEAs further.

The types of support required by under-performing schools can be broadly categorised as either organisational (eg funding, student enrolments, buildings, personnel services etc) or advisory (eg strategic advice, curriculum etc).

Developing LEA capacity

Differences between LEAs were appreciated and many interviewees felt that some LEAs did indeed provide excellent support to SFCCs. However, it was also recognised that quality was variable. Ensuring that SFCCs could consistently access high quality support was seen as a key priority.

There was a broad consensus that LEAs were often well placed to provide the organisational support schools needed. However, there was doubt over their collective capacity to offer strategic assistance. A range of suggestions were made as to how LEAs' capacity could be improved in this respect. These included:

- LEAs combining services to gain a critical mass to provide more expertise
- LEAs developing knowledge management processes to record the expertise of staff in their schools and call on them to provide support to other schools
- Rotating of school personnel through an LEA with the headteacher having an LEA role as well as a school role
- Developing strategic partnerships between LEAs and universities, NCSL and Ofsted to offer advisory support when required

Sustaining effectiveness

Developing leadership capacity through succession planning

Increasing leadership capacity in SFCCs was viewed as an essential aspect of ensuring sustained improvement.

The educationalists interviewed noted that headteacher jobs in underperforming SFCCs may need to attract additional incentives if more competent headteachers are to be encouraged to tackle these roles. Views on what form these incentives should take were mixed. There was general agreement that support and incentives should go further than those offered by initiatives such as Education Action Zones and Headteacher Allowances.

On the other hand, several respondents questioned the degree to which potentially suitable headteachers were motivated by material reward alone. Instead it was suggested that a greater incentive to undertake such challenging jobs would be more likely to come from a combination of greater remuneration and increased professional recognition.

The establishment of an 'urban teaching service' may be one novel approach to enticing staff in general to teach in SFCCs. This strategy has been successful in Australia in enticing teachers to teach in remote areas. It could provide a mechanism for recognising teachers with the values set needed to support disadvantaged children — itself an incentive to many. Moreover, it offers a means for providing succession planning, mentoring, training and selection for leadership in urban schools.

Business leaders added another dimension to this debate, by focusing on the importance of developing processes to ensure an ongoing supply of future leaders in these schools. These individuals generally saw the responsibility for succession planning as being with the wider school system. However, increasing capacity was seen to also involve a willingness to let poorer leaders go, as well as developing new potential replacements. As one business leader noted:

> "You have a responsibility to keep people employable, not give them employment…. Banks rate all their managers and aim to drop off the bottom 10-20 per cent each year…the worst thing you can do for a person who is under-performing is keep them in the role."

Perhaps the most enlightening discussion in this respect was with Hugh Mitchell. Mitchell has worked in the human resources area of Shell, a company with 80,000 employees and a wide network of business sites and functions. He was able to draw parallels between the processes of a large private organisation with multiple units and school systems, a public sector organisation with a large number of operational units (schools). He is also one of the governors of the National College for School Leadership, and hence was well placed to give a credible external view of the education system:

> "When I look at the data that is available on school leadership I am disappointed. I find it staggering – we don't even have data on demographics – simple things like kids versus teachers. How many heads will we need? You need to look at this, look at wastage rates, look at age profiles, and start to get some sense of where there are pressure points in the system. Without this data, what do we do? Fortunately,NCSL is staring to assemble this data.
>
> But we need more data than just this…it is about personal development – we need to develop a profile of what a good headteacher should be like. There is no shortage of analysis on leadership, but there is a distinct absence of research on what the

characteristics are of good heads, and how we train people to get there. For example, in Shell, we might take 1000 graduates and leaders; put them through three days of role plays, desk exercises, etc. Horrendous to go through it. But it shows us what people are like when they start with the company, and then we can compare this with what they turn out like as leaders.

Then we can ask 'why are they like that?' They are not necessarily born like that; they are a product of what we do with them. I do not see this data in the education area...

Supply and demand are in tension with each other – such as with teachers for example, Headteachers want to hang onto good teachers, not develop them the way they should do. Headteachers must develop their talent. Their line manager should say "I expect you to release these good people expect them to move on in next 12 months [so they can get experiences to develop themselves further]. Headteachers have a responsibility to the wider system to develop leadership talent. We have to get to a point that the right flow of talent around the system is actually tracked."

Mitchell's contention that there is a need for all the school systems to act as 'one' in managing and developing headteachers was broadly supported by other people interviewed:

"Succession planning is critical for the system – schools need to have some concept of how this is going to happen."

"Research has shown that we are heading towards a headteacher recruitment crisis. We need to do something about this. Baby boomer headteachers are now in their 50s. We (the system) need to do something about this."

Given the ongoing criticism of the educational system's perceived inability to act in a co-ordinated and coherent fashion, the principle of developing and implementing a process for the effective development and management of talent represents a serious challenge. But those interviewed did believe that more could be done in this field.

Mitchell for instance believed the establishment of the National College for School Leadership to be potentially significant in this regard. However he also saw the need for this to be built upon further, through the coordination of its work with other parts of the broader schools system, including LEAs, NCSL, Ofsted and universities. Some interesting suggestions were made by respondents as to how this could be made to occur:

"Schools could be required to meet targets for providing opportunities to staff, which might enable them to swap staff with other schools, and be penalised for not developing staff."

"There could be bonuses for good headteachers to create administration positions for aspiring administrators in their schools… Ofsted could be charged with a talent identification role."

The role of federated schools

In this final subsection, the potential benefits of developing federations of schools to support SFCCs is considered.

One striking finding from this inquiry was the amount of support amongst respondents for the idea of collaborative school federations.

Such an approach can be seen as in keeping with the general culture of collaboration currently 'coursing its way through the veins of the English education system'. This move towards greater

co-operation was seen in part to be a reaction against the previous trend towards increased competition. It was also felt to have to been motivated by greater recognition of the value of collaboration in the wider thrust towards school system-wide improvement:

> "[Schools] are now seeking new ways to improve. The collaboration that is springing up is authentic in that it is schools are getting together and deciding what it in their common interest."

The idea of the federation is particularly appealing in relation to improving under-performing SFCCs because of the potential it offers for pooling expertise and resources between with other more "successful" schools. The opportunity to share knowledge and understanding is especially valuable in helping to build capacity.

Defining federations

It is worth noting, however, that views on what federation actually means were mixed, and fell into two broad camps. On the one hand, 'federation' was taken by some to refer to groups of schools that were effectively one organisation, ie that had a formal organisational structure with one leader. For others the concept meant something more informal — groups of schools committed to working together but with their own individual organisational structures.

For the purposes of this report, the concept of federation is taken to refer to the former of these definitions, ie the notion of structured federations.

It needs to be understood that any debate of this nature requires generalisations. Every situation is different, and what may be an advantage in one setting can be a disadvantage in another. The size of the federation also needs to be defined. There is a 'balance point' in many of the factors that may be considered advantages of federations, away from which they become disadvantages. For the purposes of this discussion three to eight schools should be thought of as a federation, although it is recognised that other writers have described the benefits of larger federations with more than eight schools.

In considering the merits of federation in the context of SFCCs, its implication for the following aspects of activity are reviewed:
- physical and material Resources
- staff
- leadership
- curriculum

(adapted from Hargreaves, 2003, *The Education Epidemic*)

Physical and material resources

It is not difficult to identify the variety of material benefits that can be gained by engaging in federations. Physical resources could be shared. For example, primary school children may benefit from improved access to gymnasiums, swimming pools or specialist science laboratories.

Financial savings can be made through collective purchasing power. A single business manager may manage the material assets of all the sites in a federation and analyse where additional saving and efficiencies can be best generated. This would also have the added effect of releasing the headteachers of each site to complete other tasks that are going to contribute more directly to learning outcomes – staff and curriculum management.

These advantages need to be balanced against the need for greater co-ordination of resources. There is likely to be a 'balance point' where, if the point is exceeded or not reached, the idea of sharing of equipment and buildings becomes a hindrance to the smooth operation of an individual school's teaching and learning programme. Careful consideration would therefore be needed to

ascertain the degree to which pooling can take place and the amount of "core" resources each school would need to retain.

Staff

It seems fair to assume that the larger number of staff in a federation of schools will enhance the sum total of knowledge and skills. Specialist teachers could be shared between schools and staff with recognised areas of excellence could be encouraged to share that expertise with colleagues, thereby enhancing the overall quality of the learning enjoyed by all students. Enhanced collaboration could also support other areas of activity, such as leadership.

The increased flexibility offered by the federation could provide additional opportunities for staff development. It may also provide more scope for the allocation of tasks on the basis of expertise than may be possible in a smaller school. This would benefit the individual teacher and the broader schools system:

> "At the moment in this country, we have a two-speed transfer system. The teachers in the leafy green schools never move, and the teachers in the SFCCs turn over too fast. This detracts from the effectiveness of both. If we could put schools into federations with both these types of schools then we could get a better balance of staff movement."

To a casual reader, the staffing advantages would seem to outweigh the disadvantages in both a structured and unstructured federation of schools. However, the advantages are only likely to be realised if a culture of openness and flexibility is developed across the wider federation and policies and procedures can be structured to take advantage of these procedures. For instance, the school timetable and professional development policy may need to be reviewed to support this. There may also be a point at which size becomes an inhibitor to this collaboration. For example size may become an inhibitor when an administrator is no longer able to 'organise' the transmission of intellectual capital effectively. The point at which this is reached depends both on the number of staff in the federation and the competence of the leadership team.

Leadership

The sharing of competence in the area of leadership was the most commonly cited reason in favour of federated school models by the people interviewed for this inquiry. Many respondents were clear of the benefits such an approach could bring to leaders in underperforming SFCCs:

> "I know a headteacher who has been very successful – and he has just taken on a failing school…he had plateaued in his own career and was looking for a new career challenge. He will be able combine the resources of the two schools to turn the failing school as well."

> "One of the advantages for federation is that, when SFCCs have serious weaknesses, you can get someone (another headteacher in the federation) to be the 'bad guy' when dealing with under-performing staff without having to worry about the consequences for long term relationships. At that stage, the 'good guy/bad guy' stuff is important."

> "We need to find a model for federated schools – models begin with a presumption that people will work together and if they don't accept this, then force them to do this. Some mechanism to provide ongoing support to ensure that improvements are sustained."

Interviewees were clear that examples of good leadership would have a positive influence over a broader federation. It is difficult to state categorically the degree to which this could be guaranteed, but it is interesting to note that there is a lack of evidence that large or multi-campus school models are implicitly less effective than smaller or single-site school models. Given this, the notion that a good headteacher (or school leadership team) can spread their positive influence over a number of schools through a federated structure warrants further investigation.

Curriculum

Federated schools are arguably well placed to offer a more diversified curriculum. Some interviewees felt that the current constraints of league tables and inspection discouraged diversification, which, in turn, led to a reduction in schools' capacity to offer more personalised learning for each student. Given the current focus on this issue, this was seen as a major concern. Arguably a group of schools is better placed to use its collective resources to support this, particularly at secondary school level, where the issue of personalisation is possibly seen as being more problematic.

As discussed above, delivery of the curriculum (pedagogy) could be enhanced by sharing the expertise of staff, and through greater opportunities for collaborative teaching. Furthermore, there would be likely to be increased scope for mentoring of newer or under-performing teachers.

How should federations be structured?

The concept of federated schools in this paper is discussed in relation to SFCCs. The presupposition behind this is that the notion of federation offers the prospect of increased resources to support under-performing SFCCs.

Federations are seen as a mechanism by which the positive competitive elements of the market forces agenda may be retained, at the same time reducing their potential for negative excess. The strong would be encouraged to help the weak. A combined target for schools engaged in a federation would lead to a pooling of efforts. However interviewees in this study recognised the challenge that this presented within the current education system and the need for some creative thinking if this approach was to be possible:

> "There are two big issues for establishing federations. Firstly, there is equality, getting the right mix of schools in a federation and, secondly, there is motivation for schools to join a federation."

> "The way that federations would be structured will have to be managed by the school system. You can't have only good schools working together – you need to get the right mix."

> "If you want to set up federations, you need incentives for the strong as well as the weak. We need to find new and interesting ways of putting the incentive out there for collaboration. We (school system) could fund federations on their willingness to bring into federations schools that have severe problems etc..."

A number of the people interviewed were quick to point out both the lack of a single formula for establishing federations and the importance of recognising the specific local context in considering this issue. However there was generally seen to be merit in engaging primary and secondary schools in a federation. The following specific advantages were highlighted:

- the opportunity to greater use of specialists teachers in primary schools

- the chance to use primary expertise to supplementary literacy and numeracy tuition for less able secondary school students

- helping to address issues of transition and its negative impact on student learning and inclusion

- supporting the development of more effective information management systems to track student performance throughout their school career, hence allowing more capacity for

personalised education programmes and early intervention for students with potential learning difficulties

As noted above, the federation of schools offers enormous potential for increasing leadership capacity. However, it must also be recognised that for a federation to be effective, there needs to be sufficient capability to nurture and mobilise a positive culture of collaboration between schools and staff. Therefore the relationship between leadership and federation can be viewed as both complementary and problematic. For while federation can enhance leadership capacity greatly, it can only do so if sufficient capacity is already in place.

Conclusions

Before proceeding, it is important to record that many of the people interviewed stated that the way schools are measured (using 'norm-referenced' measures of performance, and standard models of schooling through inspection) means that there will always be less successful institutions. In short, some schools will always be seen as under-performing compared to others. Furthermore, the multiple problems faced by schools facing challenging circumstances mean that it was almost inevitable that a large number of these schools will fall into this 'less successful' category. As a result, a number of interviewees called for a change in the way the success of schools facing challenging circumstances is measured.

The findings of the inquiry challenge to some degree the long-held notion that school leadership is an entirely organic process and that no set formulae exist for improving under-performing schools. This research shows that it is possible to construct a set of guidelines and recommendations that can be followed to improve a SFCC with serious weaknesses. The report draws on the comments of leading thinkers and published literature to outline how to diagnose weaknesses, plan strategically and execute an improvement plan.

This finding is not meant to undermine the importance of context but rather intended to highlight the common nature of many of the issues such struggling schools face. In much the same way that a receiver applies a process to determine a set of actions when a company is declared insolvent, the intention of these guidelines is to outline a common process that can be applied to a failing school to restore it to functionality.

It should be borne in mind that this framework has not itself been subject to empirical investigation but rather has been drawn from these alternative sources. It is unlikely that all those interviewed would entirely agree with the 'formula' view, but most expressed sympathy with the broad framework for addressing the initial stages of improvement. The author therefore hopes that these areas are explored further by other researchers, who may choose to refine or refute these ideas.

This inquiry also challenges the main existing model for school leadership – that of a headteacher supported by deputies with no formal leadership role external to the school. It has been found that in the opinion of the people interviewed, leadership external to the school can offer significant potential to support, improve and sustain the effectiveness of SFCCs. They described a number of strategies through which long-term external support can increase the leadership capacity of such schools, notably federations, networks, outsourcing and partnerships. This indicates that it may now be time to revisit the traditional models for school leadership for schools in this context with a view reducing the weight of responsibility currently placed on one person. This is not meant to detract from the importance of maintaining a single 'moral' or 'spiritual' leader for the school, but rather to highlight the general value of increasing leadership capital.

Before discussing possible school system initiatives that could improve SFCCs, it is perhaps worth reflecting on whether the changes that have been made to the school system over the last 20 years have already led to improvement. Interviewees found this question hard to answer. However most agreed that at very least, the problems of these schools were better documented and more clearly understood than before and that this had led to an increase in resources allocated to them. There was broad consensus that SFCCs were finding it 'hard to compete' in the competitive environment of the school system, but this was not to say that the standards of these schools were now worse than they had been prior to the late 1980s.

Several respondents noted the potential need for broader system reform to support SFCCs. At the very least, it is important to recognise the fundamental tension that exists in education policy in this respect. School systems are complex, and solutions to improving and sustaining the

effectiveness of SFCCs need to be based in the swirl of political and pragmatic forces that drive school systems. In this study, respondents appear to believe that the English school system will retain its 'market' type structures in the absence of any political will to remove these. As a result, solutions to improving and sustaining the performance of SFCCs must be developed with this in mind, while at the same time seeking to reduce competition and increase collaboration between institutions.

The leading thinkers interviewed as part of this study broadly agreed that external support provides an affordable and 'high leverage' strategy for improving the leadership capacity of under-performing SFCCs, and by assumption, its effectiveness. As David Bell commented: "Given the way the English school system is structured – the only real option is external support. It has to work."

If this is true, the strategies identified by leading thinkers, such as federations, networks and the development of a brokerage service, warrant further investigation. These initiatives most often involve external support being provided to SFCCs through some sort of collaborative structure. The English school system is at a point now where it is testing a number of models of collaboration. Ensuring that these initiatives take particular account of the concerns facing SFCCs will be important if the gap between the most and the least successful school is to stop growing.

Finally, the finding of this inquiry found further support for the assumptions that underpinned this inquiry: that the solutions to the problems of SFCCs are relatively clear and that the solutions already known. In this case, the issue of underperformance by SFCCs becomes a moral rather than a strategic one. As one interviewee commented: "If you allow someone to fail knowingly, then you are as responsible as they are." The question is do we collectively have the will necessary to ensure that this is not allowed to happen in the future?

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Appendix

Profile of respondents

Name	Position and organisation	Reason selected for interview
John O'Donnell	Business Consultant, Kadmos Group Australia	John has had extensive experience in business and is now a management consultant for public, private and not-for-profit organisations. He has extensive experience with strategic management and leadership in the business sector.
Tony Howarth	Chairperson, Alinta Gas, Perth Australia (various other Business roles)	Tony's career to date has been in financial services, his last position being CEO of Challenge Bank. He has expertise in managing dispersed business units and business strategies to support the leadership of business units.
James How	General Manager RAC Insurance, Perth Australia	James' background is in chartered accountancy and as a business consultant with PwC, advising many businesses on a range of management issues. In his current role, he supervises numerous business units and staff.
David Bell	Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools in England Office of Standards in Education, UK	Prior to his current position David has held positions including headteacher and Local Authority Director. His work history and current role give him a unique overview to comment on school system issues, and the leadership of SFCCs.
Dame Jean Else	Headteacher, Walley Range School Manchester, UK	Dame Jean has been headteacher at Walley Range School for the past 14 years. During that time she has markedly improved the school, and recently received a knighthood in recognition of her work in improving the school. Additionally, she is working as co-director of the Excellence in Cities Project, established to improve the leadership of SFCCs.
Sir John Jones	Headteacher, Maghull High School Manchester, UK	Sir John is headteacher of Maghull High School and consultant to the Educational Leadership Centre, Manchester University. He is renowned for his work as a headteacher and received a knighthood for services to education in 2003.
Andrew Morley	Facilitator, Network Learning; National College of School Leadership, UK	Andrew has been the headteacher of three separate primary schools that he successfully guided out of special measures. He has an intimate knowledge of strategies to improve the performance of SFCCs.
Professor Mel West	*Dean Department of Education,* Manchester University, UK	Mel has been a successful researcher and academic in the area of school effectiveness and school improvement for 20 years. He has written widely in this area, and is co-director of the Excellence in Cities programme, which focuses on supporting leaders in SFCCs.
Hugh Mitchell	Director. International Shell	Hugh Mitchell is Director of International operations for Shell, supervising 60,000 employees in 125 countries. He is also a governor of the National College for School Leadership.

Tony Colley	Headteacher, Fred Longworth Secondary School, Wigan, UK	Tony was one of three secondary headteachers that formed a partnership with the incoming headteacher of Kingsdown School to mange the school when it had serious weaknesses. This was remarkably successful and well known in education circles in England.
Charles Leadbeater	Writer, Adviser to Public and Private Sector, Demos Associate, UK	Charles is a renowned author of several books, including future public and sector structures. He has been an adviser to a range of governments department and corporate organisations.
Tom Bentley	Director of Demos (Independent think-tank UK)	Tom is Director of Demos, an independent think tank based in the United Kingdom. He is regarded one of the most renowned thinkers in the United Kingdom.

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