LOW PERFORMING SECONDARY SCHOOLS 2004-2005

APRIL 2005

Contents	Page

Low Performing Secondary Schools 2004-2005

1.   Introduction

1.1   We define low-performing schools broadly as schools which are not doing as well as they should be doing, bearing in mind their intake and circumstances. In most cases the schools' results at GCSE are well below the Welsh average. However, this does not mean that all schools with low results qualify as low-performing, as some of them may be doing well when pupils' prior attainment and background are taken into account. Some low performing schools have results close to, or even better than, the Welsh average. We include these particular schools because they are in the lowest quarter in the benchmark tables based on free school meals (FSM), and are therefore under-performing. We also include schools whose section 10 inspection report has identified significant weaknesses.

1.2   This report addresses various issues concerning these schools, and provides a summary of findings from Estyn's visits to them in the last two years. Information about the number and range of schools and LEAs is provided in an appendix.

2.   Main Findings

2.1   In many of the apparently low-performing schools, pupils are making good progress in relation to their ability and their level of achievement when they entered the school.

2.2   In a minority of cases, pupils are making slower progress than we would have hoped.

2.3   Most Local Education Authorities (LEAs) provide specific help for low performing schools, on the principle of additional support in inverse proportion to need.

2.4   LEAs generally make specific and worthwhile efforts to follow up Estyn's recommendations.

3.   Recommendations

R1   Schools should:

- secure effective transition arrangements with the feeder primary schools;
- improve pupils' key skills, particularly literacy and numeracy;
- develop effective strategies for dealing with low-level disruption;
- deploy more support staff to help manage behaviour and give individual attention to pupils who need it;
- improve the quality of teachers' questioning skills;
- increase the amount, and ensure the relevance, of homework;
- improve the quality and consistency of marking and grading;
- use assessment data to track pupils' progress from year 7 onwards;

- intervene effectively when pupils consistently under-achieve;
- continue efforts to improve attendance;
- improve the quality and manageability of school development plans;
- extend self-evaluation, particularly at department level, with an emphasis on classroom observation; and
- improve the quality and range of feedback to teachers after lesson observation.

R2   **LEAs** should specifically help low-performing schools with the above issues. They should also:

- seek ways to increase practical support and advice for these schools; and
- consider whether their school funding formula effectively targets need.

R3   Many of the schools inspected could benefit from additional targeted funding to help them overcome their difficulties. The Welsh Assembly Government should consider making available specific targeted funding to support secondary schools in difficult circumstances.

4.   Background

4.1   There is a clear link between low performance at GCSE and economic deprivation. This is shown broadly by comparing the percentages of pupils claiming their entitlement to free school meals (FSM) in different schools.

% of pupils claiming their entitlement to FSM	0-10%	11-15%	16-20%	21-25%	26-30%	31% or more	Total schools
No. of schools in which 30% or less pupils achieve 5+ GCSE grades A*-C			2	3	4	14	23
No. of schools in which 31-40% of pupils achieve 5+ GCSE grades A*-C		6	12	10	3	7	38
No. of schools in which 65-69% of pupils achieve 5+ GCSE grades A*-C	18	5	1				24
No. of schools in which 70% or more pupils achieve 5+ GCSE grades A*-C	20	5	1				26

4.2   Almost without exception, the secondary schools in Wales with the lowest scores at GCSE 5 x A* - C in 2004 are situated in areas with an above average amount of deprivation. By contrast, of the 50 schools with the highest percentages of pupils achieving at least 5 A*-C grades, 38 have a FSM figure of 10% or below, and the highest FSM is 18%.

4.3   The FSM figures are not a totally reliable guide for individual schools, as several factors influence pupils' entitlement to, and take-up of, free school

meals. Nevertheless the figures given above clearly show a strong link between socio-economic factors and schools' examination performance.

4.4   Low performing schools often have a number of other features in common. We described them in our report, 'Tackling Low Performance' (Estyn, 1999), and they are still applicable today. This report stated that these schools have many or all of the following features:

- most serve urban catchment areas with high levels of social and economic deprivation;
- they cater for a high proportion of pupils (in some cases close to or even above 60%) who are entitled to free school meals;
- they suffer from a high degree of absenteeism, which in some cases is tacitly condoned by parents;
- many lose a significant number of the pupils in their geographical catchment area to other schools. These pupils are often among the ablest in the feeder primary schools as measured by National Curriculum assessments;
- a high proportion of pupils enter with reading ages below their chronological age, low cognitive ability scores as measured by standard tests, National Curriculum assessment scores which are well below the national average, and poor achievement in other key skills. In some of the schools, the average ability of the pupils entering in Y7, as measured by the above criteria, has declined consistently over the last few years;
- the proportion of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) is higher than the national average;
- in some, but not all, cases the number of pupils on roll is falling. This causes a reduction in the school's budget for the following year and makes it difficult to plan expenditure; sometimes a consequent reduction in staffing causes problems in managing the curriculum;
- some of the schools, because they have spare places, are obliged to accept pupils who have, for a variety of reasons, been refused entry to, or been excluded from other, better performing schools:
- many of the schools have a high turnover of staff and often rely on supply teachers to cover classes while waiting to make permanent appointments.

4.5   The report also noted that, in several cases, a combination of these factors has pushed the schools concerned into a spiral of decline, from which they experienced difficulty in breaking out.   A less able intake leads to a worsening of GCSE results. This, in turn, contributes to a public perception that the school is poor, and removal from the intake of many of the higher performing pupils from the neighbourhood primary schools.

5.   Brief description of activity and format

5.1   Until last year, inspections of low performing schools always consisted of 3-day visits by 4 HMI. In this format of visit, which we continue to use for some schools, most of the time is spent in inspection of lessons (typically about 30 lesson visits), interviews with key members of staff and preparing and

providing feedback to the school. The focus of these visits is on the school's efforts to improve standards of achievement and the quality of teaching. We also follow up key issues from the last inspection, where these affect standards of achievement.

5.2   In the last two years we inspected 7 schools using this format, but last year we also introduced a new format of shorter, less detailed visits to more than one school within the same LEA. One of the main responsibilities of LEAs is to challenge and support under-performing schools. Improved continuing professional development, better data analysis and greater emphasis on school self-evaluation have helped many schools to make progress. They have also helped LEAs to know their schools better. We have adapted our programme to take advantage of LEAs' knowledge of schools and schools' own self-evaluation.

5.3   This new approach has allowed us to cover more schools (20) in the same period of time, but with a considerable reduction in lesson observation. Generally, these schools have been in the same category as those described earlier. However, the format has allowed us to include, in a few LEAs, schools with a similar background that are doing better than the others. In some of these visits we do not inspect lessons at all, but gain a view of standards in the school through analysis of examination results and by walking around the school and making occasional very brief visits into classrooms. One of the main influences on school improvement is the quality of leadership and management, so in these visits we focus on ethos, expectations, school policies, and systems for monitoring pupils' performance or improving behaviour. In line with our new inspection arrangements, there is a strong emphasis on the quality and effectiveness of school self-evaluation.

5.4   This approach has also helped us to obtain a picture of LEAs' effectiveness in supporting and challenging these schools. In turn, this has contributed to another Estyn report, to be published in 2005, on LEAs' strategies to challenge and support schools with weaknesses.

5.5   This year, we carried out 6 of these LEA-based inspections. In all cases, following the visits, we sent report letters to the chair of governors of each school, copied to the headteacher and the LEA. After the LEA-based visits, we also sent a general report letter to the LEA, highlighting issues that applied to more than one school.

6.   Working with the LEA

6.1   As indicated above, we now place an increased emphasis on working with the LEA. Before the visits, we ask the LEA to tell us what they have done to help each school. For the single school 3-day visits, we ask the LEA to send us a letter about this, whilst for the LEA-based short visits covering several schools we meet the LEA beforehand. During these visits, we find out their views on each school and what they are doing to help the schools to improve.

6.2 For each inspection, we invite the LEA to send a representative to the verbal feedback at the end of the visit. Invariably the LEA does so, usually sending the school's link adviser.

6.3 In all cases the cooperation from the LEAs has been good, and they have always supplied us with any information requested.

6.4 After the inspections, in addition to the report letters, we send the LEA a covering letter asking it about its plans to help the school make further progress. LEAs respond to these letters either through a written reply or through discussion between the LEA and the Estyn district inspector (DI).

7. Findings from the inspection visits

Standards

7.1 As already noted, standards of attainment are lower in most of these schools than in the rest of Wales. This does not necessarily mean that they are performing badly. Many of the schools inspected receive a high proportion of pupils with a low skill-level in literacy and numeracy. Weaknesses in literacy, in particular, hinder pupils' progress and affect their achievement not only in English but also in other subjects. In most schools, this applies more to boys than to girls.

7.2 In some of these schools, we judge standards of achievement (that is, progress in relation to ability and prior performance) to be lower than in the majority of schools. However, in many, achievement, unlike attainment, is as good as in most other schools in Wales.

7.3 In a number of these schools, one way or another, weaknesses in literacy and other learning skills still hinder pupils' progress. Generally pupils listen well to their teachers, but do not listen so well to each other. Their concentration often fades towards the end of lessons. Many boys are very confident orally but they also tend to make too many uninvited contributions, often of poor quality. Their enthusiasm can inhibit the girls, who then fail to participate fully. Both boys and girls often have a limited vocabulary and can rarely express themselves eloquently. Spoken contributions tend to be short.

7.4 Behaviour is generally good in most of these schools. It is very rare to see very bad behaviour in lessons or around the school, although this does occur in a very small minority of schools. However, low-level disruption is common in some classes in many schools. It often consists of:

- calling out without being invited to speak;
- overt non-participation in the work of the lesson; or
- quiet chatting, in pairs or small groups, about matters unrelated to the lesson.

7.5 Where it occurs, such disruption hinders the progress not only of those pupils who misbehave but also of others in the class.

7.6   Even when behaviour is generally good, lack of motivation is a common cause of pupils' under-achievement. Poor attendance also prevents many from doing as well as they could.

7.7   A number of the schools have developed initiatives which have improved, or begun to improve, pupils' key skills of literacy, numeracy and ICT. These measures include:

- increasing the emphasis, in the schemes of work of all departments, on improving these skills, in particular literacy;
- working towards the Basic Skills Quality Mark;
- bridging schemes with feeder primary schools;
- introducing cognitive acceleration programmes in departments such as mathematics, science and geography; and
- using ICT based tutorial and assessment packages.

7.8   Where schools are successful in improving pupils' literacy and numeracy skills, this is evident in classes. Pupils listen attentively to the teacher and to each other. Many are confident in asking and answering questions and expressing their views. Teachers play their part by encouraging pupils to express their ideas fully through skilful questioning.

7.9   Not all schools do this successfully. In some schools, the effort to improve skills is particularly good in specific departments, whilst other departments do too little to support the initiatives. In other schools there is little emphasis on key skills at all.

7.10   A few individual schools have also begun to focus on how different children learn, and to teach pupils strategies that help them improve their learning skills.

7.11   Many LEAs play an important role through literacy and numeracy strategies, which often give extra support to schools where weaknesses in these skills are evident. Some also contribute well to improving pupils' thinking skills, for example through such initiatives as CASE and CAME. Others provide very good support and guidance in helping schools to improve behaviour and attendance.

7.12   The extent to which LEAs give adequate additional support to low-performing schools varies. Several have clear policies and practices which involve allocating more of LEA officers' time to these schools, and involving them more often than other schools in school improvement initiatives. This means, in effect, that these schools receive a greater proportion of the expenditure that LEA's have retained for LEA-based activities. However few LEAs have adjusted their funding formulae to ensure that the schools in need of the

greatest support actually receive a significantly higher proportion of delegated funds than other schools.

Quality of teaching

7.13   We often see many good features in the teaching in these schools and, sometimes, outstanding features. However, the amount of teaching that is graded 1 or 2 is usually a little lower than in Section 10 inspections in Wales as a whole. The amount of teaching receiving a grade 3 or better is similar to that generally found in Section 10 inspections, but in a few of the schools the percentage of grade 4 teaching is a little higher than normal. Shortcomings often relate to teachers' difficulties in coping with low-level disruption or, more rarely, very poor behaviour. Low-level disruption is a common feature of these schools, and derives often from the culture of the families or of the surrounding area. The task of a teacher is often more difficult than in the majority of schools in Wales. When schools can afford to make classes smaller, or to provide learning support assistants (LSAs) in the classroom, teachers find it easier to do a good job.

7.14   Most of the features of good teaching seen in these inspections are common to all schools. However, some of the recognised elements of good teaching are more important in low performing schools than in other schools. In teaching which is particularly effective in these schools, teachers:

- involve all pupils with well-paced lessons that have an interesting variety of activities, including games and other active tasks;
- have high expectations of what pupils can achieve, making effective use of attainment data and, where relevant, individual learning plans (IEPs);
- provide support for the less able and challenge for the more able;
- work effectively with assistants to support pupils who are having difficulties or are potentially disruptive;
- pay regular attention to improving pupils' literacy skills;
- encourage pupils to give extended spoken answers to questions and to write at length, at an appropriate level;
- have a good rapport with pupils whilst maintaining good classroom control and dealing effectively with disruption; and
- set homework that is appropriate, challenging and yet manageable for pupils who may lack resources and support at home.

Often, where there are shortcomings in teaching in these schools, they consist of the absence of the good features described above. However, given the nature and ability of many pupils in these schools, some shortcomings are particularly significant. Pupils often make slow progress because teachers do not:

- deal effectively with low-level disruption, for example by not allowing pupils to call out unchecked;
- take sufficient account of the learning needs of individual pupils, particularly relating to weaknesses in literacy; and

- provide pupils with enough opportunities to engage actively with topics, for example, through discussion.

Marking

7.15   Many low performing schools have good policies on marking and grading, but too many teachers or departments do not adhere to them.   Nevertheless we found examples of excellent marking and assessment procedures.

7.16   In the best examples, teachers:

- give detailed feedback, with a clear indication of whether the work reaches the level to which the pupil should be aiming;
- give praise appropriately when pupils have tried hard, recognising the difference between attainment and effort;
- correct spelling, particularly of technical terms and key words, as well as grammatical errors;
- use a grading system that is easily understood by pupils, parents and other teachers, and is usually common across the school; and
- ensure that pupils complete their homework.

7.17   Monitoring of pupils' work as part of school self-evaluation gives senior and middle managers an opportunity to feed back to teachers on the quality of their marking.

Tracking pupils and target setting

7.18.   Low performing schools vary significantly in how well they use assessment data to monitor pupils' progress and set targets. In the best examples, there are highly developed and efficient systems. Some schools, however, are only just beginning to get to grips with the full potential of using data to improve pupils' achievement.

7.19   Even in those schools which do not fully exploit the potential of tracking and target setting systems, there is usually a system of target setting in Y11, supported by mentoring of pupils who are on the GCSE grade C/D border-line. This helps to boost the school's GCSE A*-C scores. However, it does little to encourage abler pupils to obtain higher grades, or less able pupils to do as well as they could if this is below the C/D border.

7.20   In the best examples, schools:

- make good use of assessment information on individual pupils from the feeder primary schools;
- use good performance data on each pupil to set minimum achievement levels for each pupil in each subject from year 7 onwards;

- have regular assessment periods when pupils' current performance is monitored against their targets in each subject;
- use the pastoral system to monitor pupils' academic performance, with good systems for intervention when pupils under-perform;
- meet pupils and/or their parents at regular intervals to discuss progress and agree strategies for addressing weaknesses;
- provide after school clubs where pupils can do homework or research for various projects; and
- provide revision lessons after school, usually for pupils in key stage 4.

Curriculum

7.21   Pupils are better motivated when schools:

- through good transition arrangements, build effectively on the work that pupils have done in the primary school;
- add new, often vocational, courses or subjects to provide a more varied diet for some pupils;
- successfully adapt their curriculum to meet the needs of disaffected or less academic pupils in key stage 4; and
- send pupils to a range of courses outside school, often provided in nearby colleges or through good LEA-organised programmes.

Management and self evaluation

7.22   In the vast majority of cases, heads and their management teams are committed to school improvement. Almost invariably the day-to-day running of the school is effective, and senior managers provide good support for staff, for example, in helping to deal with serious indiscipline.

7.23   In many low performing schools, however, managers are under too much pressure from dealing with urgent day-to-day issues, often relating to discipline problems. Sometimes, budgetary pressures lead to senior staff doing too much teaching because of staffing shortages. As a result they have too little time to plan the future direction of the school, and do not spend enough time on self-evaluation and school improvement. This is often the case when the senior management team is too small, and simply has too much to do. In such schools there are often good, detailed plans but managers have not yet been able to put them into practice consistently across the whole school.

7.24   When the school can share out managerial tasks, and particularly when it can afford a big enough management team, there is more likelihood that it will have developed good strategies for school improvement. The better-funded schools can also benefit from additional LSAs and other support staff. However, a minority of schools have enough senior managers, as well as funds to purchase additional support, but still do not have effective systems.

7.25   All of the schools visited have carried out some form of self-evaluation as a basis for school improvement. In some, it has been limited in scope, whereas in others there is some very good practice which is having a tangible effect on teaching and learning.

7.26   The good features of school improvement and self-evaluation are common to all schools. In low performing schools, specific weaknesses include:

- school development plans that contain too many actions or do not link with other plans;
- inadequate consultation with staff about issues that affect them;
- ineffective leadership by some middle managers;
- under-developed self-evaluation processes;
- little or no involvement in self-evaluation at department level or, where this exists, inconsistency in quality and rigour between departments; and
- too little focus on the quality of teaching, with a limited or non-existent programme of lesson observation.

Attendance

7.27   Attendance is often well below 90% in low performing schools. All schools work hard to improve it, but a great deal of hard work and time often results in only slight improvement. Many schools struggle to combat a local culture in which parentally condoned absence is rife.

7.28   In most of these schools, pupil absence is a major factor affecting progress and achievement.

7.29   Good strategies which schools use to improve attendance include:

- telephone calls to parents by a member of the office staff on the first-day of a pupil's absence;
- careful monitoring of reasons for absence by form tutors or pastoral staff;
- electronic registration;
- checking the register in every lesson and sending the names of suspected truants to the school office;
- rewards for good attendance;
- adapting the curriculum to meet the needs of disengaged pupils; and
- initiatives with outside agencies, such as mentoring by local business people, or truancy swoops involving the police and LEA support officers.

7.30   Most schools benefit from the support of an LEA education welfare officer (EWO). In some LEAs there are not enough EWOs. If schools in difficult circumstances have to share them with other schools, they can only focus on the most serious cases.

Behaviour

7.31 Many schools have instituted effective systems for behaviour management, which employ a range of 'steps' or 'consequences' for each small incident.

7.32 Among effective measures used by schools are:

- rewards for improved behaviour;
- clearly understood graded sanctions, often displayed in the classroom, which increase in severity according to the number of incidents;
- timetabled patrols by senior managers;
- a rota of senior managers who are on-call in emergencies;
- training for staff on behaviour management;
- the involvement of pupils in drawing up school rules; and
- training for pupils in the rules for orderly discussion.

7.33 When teachers apply agreed discipline procedures consistently, they significantly help to reduce disruption, but some teachers do not apply them consistently enough.

8. Appendix

Schools visited under the LPS programme, April 03 - March 05

LEA	School	Type
Caerphilly	1 school	3-day visit by 4 HMI
	4 schools	1-day visit to each school by 2 HMI
Cardiff	1 school	3-day visit by 4 HMI
	4 schools	1-day visit to each school by 2 HMI
Carmarthenshire	1 school	2-day visit by 2 HMI
Conwy	1 school	3-day visit by 4 HMI
Denbigh	3 schools	1-day visit to each school by 2 HMI
Flintshire	2 schools	2-day visit to each school by 2 HMI
Monmouth	2 schools	3-day visit to each school by 2 HMI
Newport	4 schools	1-day visit to each school by 2 HMI
RCT	1 school	3-day visit by 4 HMI
Wrexham	2 schools	2-day visit to each school by 2 HMI

Last year within the same programme, and with broadly the same format, we also monitored two schools in which Section 10 inspections in the previous year had found serious weaknesses. We found that both schools had made enough progress for us to remove them from the list of schools with serious weaknesses.