Sustaining improvement: the journey from special measures

Age group: 3–19

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Executive summary

Schools require special measures because they are failing to give pupils an acceptable standard of education. Typically, schools placed in special measures have been judged inadequate[1] in relation to one or more aspects of provision including: achievement and standards, teaching and learning, leadership and management, personal development, and care, guidance and support.

The aim of this survey was to identify the most important actions that lead to improvement in such schools. The findings have implications for schools when planning improvement, and for local authorities (LA) and the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) when planning support for schools in special measures.

Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) visited 14 schools during the second half of 2007 that had been deemed to require special measures before April 2003.[2] All were removed from this category of concern in either the 2003/04 or 2004/05 academic year. All were inspected again in either 2005/06 or 2006/07.[3] The schools were selected because their provision and outcomes for pupils and students showed incremental and continuous improvement across these three inspection points.

These schools were chosen because the actions they took during their time in special measures laid strong foundations for sustaining the momentum of improvement; they were not chosen because they were removed from special measures particularly quickly. Following the removal of the judgement of special measures, they continued to improve more rapidly than other schools that had been removed from the category and subsequently reinspected within the same timeframe. At the third inspection point, inspectors judged three of the schools to be outstanding; 11 were good and often had a number of outstanding features.

Common themes emerged about the actions that appear to have had the most significant impact on transforming provision and outcomes.

The foundation for improvement was honest and accurate self-assessment. Headteachers displayed courage by giving difficult messages unequivocally and by making sometimes risky decisions. They worked to build capacity systematically and at a pace appropriate to the varying levels of skill and confidence of individuals and

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[1] For schools placed in special measures before the 2005 inspection framework the descriptor used would have been 'unsatisfactory' or 'poor'.

[2] The proportion of schools in special measures has remained fairly constant over the period covered by this survey. At the end of 2001/02, 1.2% of all schools were in special measures, compared to 1.1% at the end of 2006/07.

[3] The 2005/06 academic year was the start of inspections carried out under the Education Act 2005 (www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2005/ukpga_20050018_en_1). For further reading see *Every child matters: framework for the inspection of schools in England from September 2005* (070186), Ofsted, 2005; www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/070186.

teams.[4] The schools developed effective systems to check the progress and impact of actions. Headteachers held individuals firmly to account for outcomes.

All the schools saw that they were not making best use of many staff and gave close attention to improving their skills. The schools gave a high priority to recruiting the right staff to enhance a team.

The schools became successful in unlocking the potential of all groups of pupils and students. They quickly began to develop support mechanisms that valued them equally: pupils and students are now making progress in their learning that is at least good and sometimes outstanding.

All the actions contributed to the development of a whole-school identity and sense of belonging.

There was evident pride in recognising collective achievement. Strategies to better engage stakeholders, especially pupils and students, in the improvement process developed quickly following the designation of special measures. The associated improvements in personal development, especially behaviour, were dramatic. Unsatisfactory or poor behaviour in seven schools had improved to at least satisfactory at the point when they were removed from special measures; by the third inspection point, behaviour had improved to good in five schools and to outstanding in one.

Underpinning the transformation of these once inadequate schools to models of good and outstanding practice was the drive to create sustainable systems for change. Continuous review and the assessment of impact were common features in the relentless pursuit of excellence. To varying extents, intervention by LAs was influential in maintaining progress, particularly when leadership changed. Eleven of the 14 schools had changes in headteacher between the designation of and removal from special measures. Five did so between the removal of special measures and their first section 5 inspection.[5] Experienced LA link officers managed robust exit strategies, which were influential in maintaining momentum. The strategies included reducing the support provided to a school in proportion to need. Evidence from two schools indicated that too much external support, too soon, distracted senior leaders from the core task of improvement.

The message from pupils and students who took part in the journey from special measures is powerful and unequivocal.

They were in no doubt that the enjoyment of learning, achievement and well-being of every one of them mattered above all else in their schools.

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[4] In an inspection, inspectors are asked to judge 'capacity for improvement'. This refers to improving the effectiveness of leadership and management systematically.
[5] Section 5 school inspections began in the 2005/06 academic year: see footnote 3.

Key findings

- The first step to improving outcomes for pupils and students in the schools was an honest analysis of the current provision. Nearly all the schools accepted the judgement of special measures.
- For 10 schools a period of stability followed the initial turbulence in leadership at the point of special measures. Headteachers demonstrated professional courage by giving difficult messages unequivocally; they implemented non-negotiable actions early on.
- As the confidence and competence of senior and middle leaders increased, headteachers matched their management styles to the school's changing circumstances. Accurate identification of the training needs of individuals and the school and recruiting staff to complement a team were vital to building capacity and unlocking the potential of pupils and students.
- Headteachers took a creative approach to removing barriers and unlocking potential. They produced collaborative and inclusive strategies for school improvement. To varying extents, all the schools developed clear strategies to support all groups of learners. The development of inclusion was crucial to raising standards.
- The personal development of pupils and students was transformed. Leaders and managers took steps to ensure that pupils and students participated fully in the life of the school; pupils and students acknowledged the success of this approach in improving outcomes.
- The schools developed an ethos based on a set of well understood values where the views of all members of the school community were listened to. This contrasted greatly with the situation at the time of special measures.
- In all the schools many of the developments leading to the removal of special measures became so influential that their impact endured. The most important factor in improvement was ensuring that the capacity to improve was built sustainably across the whole school.
- Unless external support for improvement was carefully matched to a school's particular circumstances and rigorously evaluated, it had the potential to create more problems and, at worst, to slow the pace of improvement.

Recommendations

The Department for Children, Schools and Families should:

- where provided, ensure schools clearly understand the purpose and intended outcomes of external support in securing improvement

- consider ways to capitalise on the experience and expertise of headteachers who have successfully made the journey from special measures to good or outstanding provision.

LAs should:

- ensure that the authority's assigned link adviser is experienced in working with schools causing concern
- work closely with each school's senior leaders to ensure continuity and momentum during periods of transition in leadership
- devise a clear exit strategy, agreed with all stakeholders, and reduce support proportionately as the school establishes its own effective procedures for self-review and development.

Schools should:

- be honest about the state of provision and ensure that all staff and governors understand what is wrong and why
- seek to involve all stakeholders, but especially pupils and students, in the process of school improvement
- set high expectations prescribed through clear lines of accountability
- embed new initiatives systematically and check rigorously for evidence of their impact to ensure the improvement is sustained.

The importance of leadership

1. Crucial to taking the first steps from special measures in all the schools was a headteacher who was honest about the provision and able to analyse need accurately. This effective self-assessment was essential in shaping a whole-school plan through which to prioritise, implement and evaluate actions leading to improvement. In 10 schools this did not happen until a new headteacher had been appointed, some time after the school had been placed in special measures, or until the LA had appointed an acting headteacher. There was slow initial improvement in the school where the headteacher and the governing body resisted accepting the judgement of special measures.

2. Priorities varied across the schools and included stabilising behaviour, urgently improving accommodation, improving staffing structures and supporting underachieving pupils or students. In all the schools surveyed priorities were shared and clearly understood.

3. Action leading to improvement needed staff to understand the need for change. Inspectors were struck by the consistency of this message.

4. The schools communicated effectively. They developed systems to ensure staff were absolutely clear about what the school was doing and why. Individuals understood their role in achieving whole-school objectives.

5. The schools needed to overcome a climate of failure and low expectations. Improvement was based on a set of clearly understood values usually identified by the headteacher and also sometimes the senior team; it was always endorsed by the governing body. Values were communicated clearly to staff, pupils and students by actions and words. All the headteachers identified non-negotiable behaviour that they expected from staff in order to promote consistency. Initially, this tended to focus on the way that staff should treat pupils and students; for example, greeting at the start of lessons, speaking calmly instead of shouting, and rewarding and encouraging instead of being negative. In about half the schools non-negotiable behaviour was also set for pupils and students.

6. In six schools the headteacher deliberately adopted a highly directive style of leadership early on. This was modified as the school began to improve. This approach derived from a perceived need to stabilise the school sufficiently to establish a foundation on which to build improvement and achieve consistency.

7. In the same six schools a strong emphasis was given to direct communication with staff. In one secondary school the headteacher personally delivered regular, whole-school briefings to ensure that the message was not lost in translation. Staff acknowledged on reflection that, while some of the messages had been difficult to receive, this approach had built their trust and confidence in the headteacher. It also ensured that required actions were clearly understood. Two primary schools continue to have daily meetings involving all staff and teaching assistants, to reflect, share information and ideas and plan ahead. In all six schools leadership became more distributed over time, as middle leaders and teachers honed their skills and became more confident and competent.

8. In the early stages of special measures headteachers built up the staff in the same way that teachers might use for a class: firm but nurturing, recognising their talents, clarifying non-negotiable behaviour and setting high expectations. In three schools the headteacher defined what was expected in each lesson and monitored whether this was happening. The result was that some staff chose to leave rather than conform to the new expectations. All the headteachers worked hard to build competence, confidence, mutual support and an enjoyment of learning and teaching.

9. In the early weeks following special measures the highly visible presence of senior leaders in corridors and in classrooms was seen as important. This was especially so in the seven schools in which behaviour had been judged unsatisfactory or poor. This high profile, interactive style was not universally

popular with staff at the time, but they were often able to appreciate its value retrospectively.

10. Early on, five schools emphasised the importance of establishing a climate in which staff felt secure enough to talk about mistakes and seek help. As capacity was built, greater involvement in decision-making developed a sense of collective responsibility. This was a successful strategy for team-building. In all the schools there was a tangible sense of achievement, particularly from staff who had been at the school for several years.

11. One headteacher referred to the importance of having the professional courage to take sometimes risky decisions, particularly in the early stages of special measures. This courage was evident, to some extent, in all the schools and was an important factor in securing improvement.

12. One school continues to reap the benefits of a potentially high risk approach to staff recruitment in the early stages of special measures.

Reaping benefit from risk

When in special measures, a secondary school identified difficulties in recruiting staff of appropriate calibre and expertise as a barrier to school improvement. The school adopted an innovative, if potentially high risk, strategy of recruiting non-qualified teachers; its LA fully endorsed this strategy. Significantly, these teachers' common skills were the ability to establish rapport quickly with students and manage challenging behaviour effectively; the LA provided training to refine and develop their skills. The success of the strategy showed in the significant number of staff gaining qualified teacher status. Of the current nine home-grown staff, six now hold positions of responsibility. A partnership with a local beacon school was instrumental in establishing a successful arrangement for recruiting and training non-qualified staff to gain qualified teacher status.

Unlocking potential

13. A significant investment in staff training and development was a key factor in the rapid and continuing improvement in provision and outcomes. The schools highlighted the importance of personalised professional training to develop skills, confidence and capacity in order to improve the quality of teaching and learning, curriculum leadership and management. The specific actions that the individual schools took were linked inextricably to their own circumstances. However, all the schools recognised that many staff were a source of untapped potential. The skill of senior leaders was to identify individuals' strengths and nurture these through training that focused on developing both generic and specific skills.

14. Typically, these schools evolved well managed in-house strategies to improve provision. However, there were many examples where the schools used national training programmes to complement internal arrangements. Whatever the source of professional training and development, the benefit of a systematic approach to building capacity was summed up in this observation from a headteacher: 'Looking back, it was remarkable how few staff had to [leave] on grounds of competence.'

15. In one of the schools, the impact of home-grown training contributed substantially to improving the quality of teaching and learning.

The impact of home-grown training

A deputy headteacher, who was taking the lead on improving teaching and learning in a secondary school, filmed a colleague teaching an outstanding lesson to a group of challenging students. After watching the film, staff said the lesson was a pivotal moment in the school's journey to improvement. Seeing their students responding so well was a powerful experience and they were able to appreciate an outstanding lesson more potently than if they had watched an off-the-shelf film. Support from a consultant continues as the school works to improve teaching and learning further.

16. Establishing secure systems that enabled managers to check that training was making a difference was just as important. Honest and reflective review was essential to identify morale boosting success and where actions were not having the intended outcome. Carefully planned training, combined with effective monitoring, review and evaluation of impact, shifted the unsatisfactory teaching in all the schools to good, and in two cases to outstanding, within two years of the removal of special measures.

17. Middle leaders who were ineffective were often not clear about what to do or how to do it. Senior leaders were successful in developing their leadership and management skills through short-term tasks combined with regular review to enable them to see the benefits. Building skills incrementally and at a pace matched to the needs of individuals empowered middle managers to take responsibility: this raised their self-esteem. Two secondary schools stressed the value of national programmes in developing middle and senior leaders and both referred specifically to the National College of School Leadership's programme, Leading from the Middle.[6] In all the schools, staff demonstrated a strong sense of being valued by senior leaders, who recognised their contribution and talents but who kept them on their toes by holding them firmly to account for the outcomes of their work.

[6] www.ncsl.org.uk/programmes/lftm/index.cfm.

18. Recruiting the right staff was essential. In six schools the high priority afforded to recruiting the most appropriate staff for their specific needs was one of the most important factors leading to improvement. Stringent recruitment procedures ensured all appointments were well matched to the needs of pupils and students. One school paid careful attention to candidates' values and their ability to build relationships with learners; this continues to be a priority. The result was a cohesive team with a shared view of the school's purpose and aims.

19. In two schools, recruitment strategies shaped the staff profile to reflect the high proportion of children or young people from minority ethnic backgrounds. Staff and older students in the secondary school were convinced that this had contributed enormously to raising students' aspirations through highly visible, positive role models. It also helped to establish constructive relationships between the school and the local community. In the primary school the recruitment of bilingual staff who were fluent in community languages strengthened induction procedures for young children new to English and to school. Their parents, themselves often new to English, could more easily engage with the life of the school: this eased the children's transition into school.

20. One school acknowledged fundamental mistakes in recruitment early on. New staff, whose strengths may well have been an asset in a different context, were ill matched to the specific needs of the children in the school and they did not stay long. The hoped for impact of these appointments in raising standards was not realised and this slowed the pace of improvement.

21. Devising strategies to unlock the potential of all learners was at the heart of improvement. Developing an inclusive approach was fundamental to raising standards. Every child mattered. Creating a curriculum to meet the needs of every child evolved in each school and continued to develop during the journey through special measures to the present. That only two years after the removal of special measures, pupils and students in all the schools were making good or outstanding progress in their learning affirms the success of this approach.

22. In three schools with well above average proportions of pupils and students speaking English as an additional language, all staff were trained to support language development through the wider curriculum. The staffing included language support specialists, but the responsibility for supporting the pupils and students was a collective one and not a bolt-on activity to mainstream teaching.

23. The high priority given by all the schools to ensuring that every pupil and student achieved to their full potential is illustrated in this example from one secondary school.

Unlocking students' potential: from unsatisfactory to outstanding achievement

The headteacher, arriving a term into special measures, immediately challenged the entrenched concept that only the top two sets could be successful. He also insisted that the school's job was to consider the achievement of all groups, and was not just about improving five A* to C grades at GCSE level: 'I made it clear I was not happy with "satisfactory".' Students were placed in ability sets for subjects and target groups were introduced; this made the ability range narrower for teaching. The school believed that this was a factor in helping teachers to plan lessons to suit all students. Appointing a new deputy headteacher with a proven record of improving teaching and learning strengthened the leadership team. In a school with a well above average proportion of pupils speaking English as an additional language, proficiency in English was no longer a reason for placing students in lower sets. The Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant was used well to fund support for those speaking English as an additional language in lessons, with a focus on individual students. All students had one hour each term with their tutor to discuss their progress in depth. This was expensive in staff time, but the school felt it was cost-effective in supporting individual learners.

In 2007 students' progress in their learning was judged to be outstanding. In 2006 and 2007 their progress in English placed the school in the top 3% of all schools nationally.

24. Productive working relationships in classrooms, founded on mutual respect, were essential in engaging pupils and students in their learning. In three schools where behaviour had been judged to be poor at the point of special measures, senior leaders made it a priority to develop teachers' skills in managing challenging behaviour. One secondary school's recruitment process included a requirement to observe how candidates managed and built empathy with a group of challenging students. The students' views were also taken into account. The LA endorsed this strategy and contributed to its success through interventions to develop appointees' generic and subject-specific skills.

25. Improving access to learning through curriculum change was a strong theme in all the schools. In the secondary schools this was linked, in different ways, to developing alternative pathways, often in collaboration with other providers. In five primary schools there was a strong emphasis on enrichment activities, which often made greater use of the local community as a resource for learning. All the schools sought to actively engage children and young people in their learning while raising the profile of individual academic targets. All the schools understood that the link between the curriculum and high quality teaching was crucial in the drive to raise attainment.

26. A holistic approach to unlocking every child's potential included giving unrelenting attention to their personal development and academic achievement. At the time of special measures, personal development was judged unsatisfactory or poor in nine schools. At the point of removal from the category this had improved to at least satisfactory. Two years later personal development was good in six and outstanding in three of the nine schools.

27. In 11 schools the headteacher changed between the designation and removal of special measures. In seven schools this change happened immediately. In six of these, LAs were swift to second an experienced headteacher; four went on to take up the substantive post. After initial turbulence in leadership at the point of special measures, a period of stability followed for 13 schools. In three schools the LA intervened to strengthen the capacity of the senior leadership team through providing an additional senior leader to support the headteacher.

Identity and a sense of belonging

28. Pupils and students' greater engagement in school life had a significant influence on improving outcomes in almost all of the schools surveyed. The contrast between the level of their involvement at the time of special measures and at the time of our survey was often dramatic. At the point when the schools were judged to require special measures, they had very little opportunity to express their views about their school and how it might be improved. Establishing and keeping high profile a school council, an open forum or a house system were all successful approaches to giving expression to the pupils' voice. Other strategies included regular and specific initiatives to elicit and act on pupils' feedback. Older children were very clear about the improvements that had been made in their schools and their impact in bringing about change.

29. Increasing levels of participation had measurable benefits in all the schools. It created a more collaborative ethos. It improved attitudes, the working environment and the enjoyment of learning. There were specific gains, such as reducing the number of pupils and students who were excluded. The positive impact that treating pupils and students as stakeholders in the school community had on their well-being is illustrated below.

Improving pupils' attitudes and enjoyment

Year 6 pupils, reflecting on their time in the school, talked about how it used to be 'not very much fun and strict'. They remembered their time in the Reception class as 'Learn your ABC and numbers – we didn't have half the stuff they do now.' They felt that they had not had the chance to speak or express opinions: 'Here's your work, just do it' and 'It was a bit miserable really.' They believed that the circle groups – formal structures, comprising children of all ages, teachers, a governor and other adults – were valuable and important. The circle group gave them a real say in

how the school was run: ‘It’s made a massive difference.’ Their view of behaviour was now that ‘most days everyone is good and happy because they like it here’.

30. Elements such as like uniform, assemblies and changes to the times of the school day were often used well to change the perception of the school among parents, pupils, students and the local community. Although relatively small-scale, these tangible changes required less long-term, whole-school effort than, for example, improving teaching and learning. Yet they appeared to have an immediate and lasting impact that was disproportionate to their scale.

31. Building trust and greater engagement with parents were strong improvement themes in 11 schools. Several ways were used to increase parental knowledge of, and involvement with, the schools’ work. In two schools the work undertaken was instrumental in ensuring a full complement of parent governors for the first time. Some schools used more than one method, either concurrently or in sequence, including:

- Improving communication by the school through:
  - homework diaries
  - newsletters
  - increased contact by staff at the school gate
  - the sharing of pupils’ attainment targets.

  These simple improvements appear to have been a foundation in the schools’ increased involvement with parents and to have had a quick, positive impact.

- The use of curriculum projects to involve parents more fully in the life of the school. Examples include:
  - encouraging parents to be more involved in accompanying pupils on visits
  - engaging a group of Somali parents in a project to better reflect the school’s cultural diversity through lunchtime menus
  - recruiting parent volunteers to join staff on small projects such as constructing a Japanese garden.

32. All the schools were inclusive in valuing and seeking to bring out the best in each member of the community. Nearly all evolved a distinctive ethos that was very clearly focused on matching the provision to the needs of individuals. The survey found a number of examples of work undertaken to include pupils and students with a variety of additional needs. In the schools in which behaviour was a major problem an intensive whole-school focus was required to improve it. Schools that had a large number of pupils or students who spoke English as an additional language took significant, whole-school, long-term action to increase their access to, and engagement with, learning.

33. All the work concerned with identity and community was geared towards the most important element of improvement: defining a community for learning. This was not sought for its own sake, but to put learning at the heart of the community. Many of the staff in these schools were themselves engaged in accredited study. All the schools visited worked hard and successfully to develop such a learning community.

Sustainability

34. All the schools recognised that the potential of many staff was not used fully. Some schools deployed successful creative strategies to secure new staff with the qualities to match what they needed. Such strategies helped to sustain the journey of improvement and brought the benefits associated with greater stability.

35. All the schools highlighted the importance of developing the skills and confidence of staff to improve the quality of teaching and learning. A recurrent theme was the way in which leaders had skilfully identified specific development points for individuals, teams or for a whole-school focus. Training was then tailored to meet the needs.

36. Follow-up of the training helped to ensure that the teaching or learning was embedded. This approach reinforced teamwork and collaboration with evident impact on the motivation and morale of staff. The schools recognised that classroom practice could always be enhanced: systems for monitoring and using feedback to sustain high quality teaching and learning were part of a cycle of improvement. Nothing was left to chance.

37. Unlocking the potential of pupils and students was also a factor in sustaining improvement in standards and achievement. Many of the changes that led to pupils' greater involvement also helped to secure the judgements of good or outstanding personal development and behaviour in all the recent inspections. Pupils and students interviewed during the survey were overwhelmingly positive about their experiences of change. Views were particularly powerfully expressed by older children who were able to reflect on the days of special measures.

38. The schools recognised that, through raising their expectations and aspirations, parents had a key role in sustaining improvement. The schools were successful, in various ways, in engaging parents as stakeholders in the school community.

Involving parents in sustaining improvement

A parent, reflecting on the time before special measures, described a primary school as 'flat and grey, happy to be middle of the road, didn't want our help'.

The new headteacher immediately established an open door policy and a newsletter. An appointment was no longer required to see the headteacher. Information about teaching topics and class activities was sent home regularly. Parents' evenings became more frequent. The governors actively encouraged greater involvement of the parent-teacher association in school life.

Although it took some time for these actions to be assimilated by the local community, the headteacher's persistence paid off. The same group of parents now reports that partnership between the school and families is 'fantastic'.

A secondary school headteacher worked for better engagement with parents and started with the appointment of a parental involvement worker. This post is now complemented by an effective community liaison team that knows the students and their families well and lives in and reflects the ethnic diversity of the local community. This has contributed very significantly to removing barriers and has been influential in conveying the headteacher's powerful messages about raising expectations. Students reported that their families much appreciated the early finish on Fridays so many of them could attend afternoon prayers.

39. Governors, too, had a role in sustaining the momentum, especially as the role of the LA gradually reduced. LAs acted swiftly where necessary to strengthen governing bodies by appointing experienced governors and by building capacity by paying careful attention to their training needs.

40. Creating systems for change was facilitated by well-defined roles and responsibilities, delegated through clear lines of accountability. Numerous examples during the survey showed that secure, honest self-evaluation was a force for sustainable improvement.

Identifying barriers through honest self-evaluation…

A headteacher who joined a school part way through the process of moving from special measures found that although the problems of pupils' behaviour had been 'sorted' on the surface, this was because staff were controlling and pupils were passive.

In the words of the headteacher, the culture was 'ranked, competitive and stressed'. Learning was not sufficiently focused on the pupils. For example, equipment was stored in high cupboards that only staff could reach; there was little display of pupils' work; and minimal equipment for play. That which was there was unsafe, so it was kept out of bounds.

The chair of governors described the staff at this time as 'broken'.

and creating solutions…

The headteacher's approach was to seize good practice and creativity and encourage staff to take these further.

On seeing a lesson about the Victorians the headteacher bought resources, including Victorian perfume bottles from a car boot sale, and encouraged the teacher to extend her ideas; other staff were invited to watch. This approach began to increase the confidence of other teachers to experiment and make use of opportunities. For example, when it snowed, the Year 6 class did a whole day's spontaneous work on the science of snow. The headteacher referred to this as 'seizing opportunities for learning': 'if you haven't got inspired teachers, you can't have inspired children'.

41. All the schools identified assessment and the careful tracking of pupils' and students' progress as key factors in raising standards. Refining rigorous assessment and tracking systems enabled appropriate interventions to be used for individuals and groups. The critical point for sustaining improvement was the degree to which the schools ensured that staff understood the data they had, knew how to apply in the classroom what the data showed them, and expected to be held to account for outcomes.

42. In nearly all the schools improvement beyond special measures was sustained by the LA and the school working effectively on the LA's exit strategy as it reduced its contribution. Strengths were also evident at the crucial transition points between successive headteachers. Actions by the LA prevented slippage or loss of momentum. Typically, the school's link adviser was experienced and remained with the school throughout its journey. However, one LA was candid in acknowledging the limited impact of intervention and support by a link adviser who was new to the role. In another LA, itself deemed to be failing, a lack of strategic planning and support was a key factor when a school was judged to require special measures.

43. In two schools, meetings set up by consultants and other advisers in the early stages of special measures distracted the headteacher and, sometimes, other senior leaders from the core purpose of moving forward. In both schools, staff were strongly of the opinion that the meetings often lacked a sharp focus and clear outcomes.

44. In just over half the schools, headteachers and/or other staff who had been present at the time of the special measures judgement stressed the value of the monitoring conducted by Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI). These visits were seen as a force for improvement. The professional dialogue and clear, direct feedback were seen as important in validating a school's own judgements about its progress and in maintaining momentum.

The impact of monitoring by HMI

A LA emphasised that visits by HMI were highly influential in enabling a nursery school to make rapid improvement. This matched well a comment from the deputy headteacher: 'You see, we knew he [the HMI] knew exactly what he was talking about. So we listened.'

The headteacher and chair of governors of one primary school welcomed feedback from HMI as an objective marker of pace and quality of progress. The chair of governors went on to say that the robust judgements were 'shocking at times but had to be faced'. He added that the HMI's monitoring letters served as models of good practice against which the governing body developed the rigour of its own system to monitor and evaluate the school's work.

The balance provided between encouragement and rigorous guidance was invaluable for one headteacher: 'You don't realise how much encouragement is needed until you've been in special measures.'

One school acknowledged that the first HMI monitoring visit 'woke the staff up'. However, it took two visits before staff came to terms fully with the judgement of special measures and moved from a state of denial. The school credited the feedback from HMI as being the catalyst for a change of culture leading to improvement.

45. Striving to achieve excellence was at the heart of all the schools' work. Removing the label of special measures was never an end in itself but, rather, a point on a much longer journey. This was encapsulated in one headteacher's comment: 'I told the staff we can be pleased we're out of special measures, but that's not the end. We're just at base camp. We've still got the mountain to climb.'

Focus on two schools

46. To varying extents all the schools faced a common set of problems. The following examples show how a primary school and a secondary school prioritised and countered their most salient weaknesses to become effective schools.

The primary school

47. Following the designation of special measures, this school experienced considerable change in staffing. It took some time to establish a new senior leadership team. During this period of uncertainty the LA ensured continuity through securing a number of high-quality secondments that were well-matched to the needs of the school at that time. The current headteacher did not take up the substantive post until a year after special measures.

48. Governance was judged to be insufficiently supportive of the school during special measures. It was strengthened quickly by LA representation on the governing body and the prioritising of training to build capacity. It is now judged to be very effective.

49. There was an overriding need to build capacity throughout the school. The headteacher reflects that the task was not an easy one. While there were elements of good practice and a great deal of loyalty to the school, key areas such as the curriculum, monitoring the quality of teaching, self and peer appraisal and sharing information about practice were extremely underdeveloped. Before special measures each classroom was a 'secret garden', so class teachers had some anxiety about their own performance and were reluctant to allow colleagues to see what they did.

50. The approach taken was to manage improvement incrementally through a series of short-term actions. A rigorous system of review ensured that staff could regularly see practical gains. This helped to develop a sense of ownership of these new ways of working and establish them firmly into whole-school practice. All stakeholders agreed that once the leadership team was established the significant investment in developing staff skills was the most important factor in the school's continuing improvement. The school reports that 'leading from the middle' built capacity well at curriculum leader level.

51. At the time of special measures, the quality of teaching, learning and the curriculum were unsatisfactory. All are now outstanding. In the most recent inspection the richness and diversity of the curriculum were identified as key factors contributing to pupils' enjoyment of learning.

52. Radically improved decor and displays, a new school uniform, a weekly newsletter and an open door policy were small but significant changes. Collectively they had a positive impact on pupils' and parents' perceptions: for the comparatively small amount of effort expended the gains were substantial.

53. The headteacher's leadership has been crucial to the success of the school. While pleased with the huge improvements made, the headteacher is quick to point out that special measures is not without a cost that is in their view 'borne by the most conscientious colleagues [and this] needs to be recognised'.

The secondary school

54. The current headteacher joined this school shortly after the designation of special measures. The headteacher's non-negotiable approach to setting priorities, implementing actions and raising expectations set a clear improvement agenda. Retrospectively, staff and students are firmly of the opinion that this approach was necessary, although some are candid in acknowledging that the culture shock was significant.

55. The LA seconded an additional deputy and provided an experienced colleague to mentor the headteacher. These early actions, although temporary, added considerable capacity to improve. The headteacher reflects: 'It meant I was able to focus on strategic planning rather than having to react to day-to-day difficulties all the time.' The headteacher had to deal with a group of staff with a negative attitude. Two quickly left.

56. The immediate priority was to stabilise behaviour to a point where classrooms were sufficiently calm to enable teachers to teach. Senior staff adopted a high profile around the school. One middle manager reflects: 'They [senior leaders] got involved with the kids – they didn't stay in their offices and expect the rest of us to muddle through.' The impact on morale was enormous. The deployment of support staff to manage behaviour outside of lessons took the pressure off teachers and enabled them to focus on learning. Older students clearly have a huge respect for the headteacher's zero tolerance of unsatisfactory behaviour and endemic bullying through.

57. Senior staff worked effectively to make assessment information accessible and understandable. Systems of accountability provided checks that all staff understood the data and used it well to track progress and identify underachievement. The outcomes of initial student assessment during induction helped the school to target individual learning support for the above average proportion of students learning English as an additional language.

58. Early acceptance of the special measures judgement by the majority of staff was influential in securing rapid improvement. Staff acknowledged the need to improve the quality of provision. This attitude was strongly influenced by the sense of empowerment that was derived from the leadership style: 'We didn't see the big picture before – the new head showed us how together we could really make a difference.'

59. Standards continue to rise. The once poor attendance is now above average. Exclusions have reduced dramatically. Most telling is this comment from a Year 11 student, which was roundly endorsed by his peers: 'You wouldn't believe that us and that Year 11 [at special measures] were from the same school.'

Notes

The aim of the survey was to identify the most important actions leading to improvement in schools that had been judged previously to require special measures.

HMI visited 14 schools between June and December 2007: one nursery school, seven primary schools, four secondary schools, one special school and one pupil referral unit. The sample included inner city, suburban and rural schools. All the schools had been judged to require special measures before April 2003 for failing to give pupils an acceptable standard of education. All 14 were removed from the category of

concern in either the academic year 2003/04 or 2004/05 and were inspected again in either 2005/06 or 2006/07 under the 2005 inspection framework.[7]

The schools were among those showing the greatest incremental improvement when compared to all schools removed from special measures and reinspected over the same period.

Inspectors held discussions with headteachers, senior staff, middle managers, teachers, nursery nurses, teaching assistants, other support staff, governors, pupils and students and, in some cases, parents. In each school, inspectors held discussions with a number of people who had been associated with it across the three inspection points. Discussions were held with one or more senior officers from the relevant LA. Inspectors analysed documentation, including the reports at each of the three inspection points for each of the schools visited.

Further information

Forward from special measures (HMI 244), Ofsted, 2001; www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/244.
A review of strategies schools employed to maintain progress during the 12 months following the removal of special measures.

From failure to success: how special measures are helping schools improve (HMI 109), Ofsted, 2000; www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/109.
This is Ofsted's first survey of schools in special measures.

Improving behaviour (HMI 2377), Ofsted, 2006; www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/2377.
This report was based on the progress made in 2005 and 2006 by secondary schools in which, in routine institutional inspections, behaviour had been judged to be unsatisfactory.

Lessons learned from special measures (HMI 176), Ofsted, 1999; www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/176.
This publication aims to share with others who were involved in improving schools the lessons learned in turning around the first 250 schools in special measures.

[7] The new inspection framework has high expectations of schools' performance. For the schools' inspection reports visit www.ofsted.gov.uk/reports.

Annex 1

Schools visited for this survey

Alice Model Nursery School, Tower Hamlets

Burtonwood Community Primary School, Warrington

Carlton Bolling College, Bradford

Millbrook Primary School, Tameside

Nightingale School, Wandsworth

Saltfleetby CE Primary School, Lincolnshire

Shepwell Centre, Walsall

Snape Wood Primary and Nursery School, Nottingham

Spinney Hill Primary School and Community Centre, Leicester City

St John's Church of England Voluntary Controlled School, Essex

St Mary's CofE Junior and Infant School, Manchester

The Heartlands High School, Birmingham

The James Hornsby High School, Essex

The Wroxham School, Hertfordshire