



Strategies to Challenge and Support School Performance in the United Kingdom ▀

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Education in England is overseen at the national level by the Department for Children, Schools, and Families (DCSF). Within the state system, schools have a high degree of autonomy and are largely responsible for setting their own budgets, managing their own admissions, and choosing how to teach the curriculum. A Local Education Authority — somewhat akin to a local school district in the United States — has an oversight role for schools in its geographic area, including a responsibility to intervene in the case of a school's poor performance. There are 150 local authorities in England and their size varies considerably from small metropolitan inner-city areas to large rural counties. The number of schools they are responsible for varies significantly as well but averages around 25 secondary schools and 125 primary schools per local authority.

In addition to DCSF, there are a number of other national entities that influence schools. The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services, and Skills (Ofsted) is the official body for inspecting schools in England. The National College for School Leadership¹ (NCSL) is funded by the government to offer head teachers and other school leaders² opportunities for leadership development and, as described in more detail below, deploys effective school leaders to work with underperforming schools. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) maintains and develops the National Curriculum and associated assessments. It also oversees the work of the awarding bodies, who develop and sell to schools qualifications and examinations, to ensure that the related administration, grading, and awarding procedures run smoothly. Subject to legislation currently going through Parliament, part of the Authority

1 Subsequently the National College for School Leadership has been renamed the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services.

2 Head teachers and heads are used interchangeably in this document to refer to the leaders of schools. They are akin to a high school or elementary school principal in the U.S. The term "other school leaders" refers to other staff who occupy management positions within the school, likely including deputy or assistant heads and school bursars.

will be split off to establish an independent regulator of exam standards to be known as the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation. The Training and Development Agency (TDA) for schools is a national agency responsible for the recruitment, training, and development of the entire school workforce.

Approximately 93 percent of school children in England attend schools funded by the state. Under the Education Act of 1996, Chapter 56, children aged 5–16 must receive a full-time education. Compulsory primary education covers students ages 5–11, and compulsory secondary education covers students ages 11–16. In 2007, 17,361 state primary schools served 4,107,680 students, and 3,343 state secondary schools served 3,268,490 students (DCSF, 2007). The Education and Skills Act of 2008 states that, starting in 2013,

Editor's Note

This is one of four case studies developed in mid-2009 for the U.S. Department of Education that focus on how countries other than the United States have been addressing the challenge of turning around their low-performing schools. The other three case studies focus on Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. This case study has not been updated since it was initially developed.

the approved leaving age for compulsory education or training will be raised to 17 and, starting in 2015, it will be raised again, to age 18.

England's National Curriculum, introduced in the Education Reform Act (1988) is intended to ensure that all students in compulsory education are taught according to the same content standards. Changes to the secondary curriculum were published in September 2007, with new programs of study designed for each subject by the QCA. These new programs of study were intended to give teachers a less prescriptive, more flexible framework for teaching, along with more opportunities for coherence and relevance, such as linking learning to life outside school, making connections between subjects, and infusing cross-curricular themes and dimensions. Functional skills for English, mathematics, and ICT (i.e., information and communications technology) have been built into the new curriculum. Alongside these is a framework for personal learning and thinking skills (PLTS), which has been embedded in the new programs of study under the National Curriculum.

Policy Context for Tackling Poor School Performance

The policy context for dealing with poor school performance in England was set in the early 1990s with the advent of a regular school inspection cycle to be led by an independent inspectorate, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services, and Skills (Ofsted). This same period

introduced the annual publication of school-level results achieved on standardized assessment tests and national exams.

Publication of these data at a national and local level and subsequent use of related student-level data at the local authority level and the school level have played a key part in the drive to improve school performance. The data have given schools and those that hold them to account a clearer picture of the individual progress being made by students. The availability of these data has also helped ensure that schools are both challenged and supported on a more informed basis. For example, at a national level they have allowed both absolute and contextualized comparisons of school performance, and at the local authority level and school level they have allowed schools to evaluate the impact of different student-level interventions.

The government has also used these data to set benchmarks for judging school improvement. At the primary level, judgments about a school's performance were made on the basis of students' performance in standardized assessment tests taken at age 11, at the end of primary school, in English, mathematics, and science. For primary schools, the "floor target" — that is, the minimum acceptable level of school performance — was set in 2002 at 65 percent of students achieving certain scores in English and mathematics³ by 2006. (Science

3 The primary tests were assessed according to the achievement of different levels within the National Curriculum. Level 4 was the expected level for students at age 11. See <http://>

wasn't included initially in the floor target but was subsequently included.) At the secondary level, students were expected to achieve five "Good" General Certificates of Secondary Education (GCSEs) by age 16. Achieving these came to be seen as the key criterion for student success, with the initial floor target set at 25 percent of students meeting this criterion.⁴

Ofsted has a statutory responsibility under section 5 of the Education Act 2005 for inspecting schools at least once every 6 years. Schools are judged against a four-point scale: *outstanding*, *good*, *satisfactory*, and *inadequate*. Schools are inspected on the principle of proportionality, with the schools that are judged *outstanding* or *good* inspected once

www.qcda.gov.uk for description of what these levels mean.

4 GCSEs are national subject-level assessments taken at the end of secondary education by nearly all students. They are graded on a scale of A*-G, with grades A*-C seen as top-end performance and grades C-G seen as lower-end performance. Because the measure of five GCSEs A*-C came to be seen as a passport to further learning, schools were judged on the proportion of their students who achieved this level. The measure was subsequently strengthened to require students to achieve grades A*-C in both math and English as part of their five GCSEs A*-C. Prior to this, students could achieve these grades in any combination of subjects including vocational subjects, which were given equivalence to a number of GCSE grades. See <http://www.qcda.gov.uk> for descriptors of different grade criteria.

every six years and other schools inspected more frequently according to their previous inspection judgment and an annual assessment of their subsequent progress.⁵ Schools judged *satisfactory* are normally re-inspected within three years of their last inspection.

Schools judged as *inadequate* are placed into one of two categories — *special measures* or *requires significant improvement* (commonly known as *notice to improve*). The *notice to improve* category was introduced in September 2005 to replace a previous category known as *serious weakness*. Schools in *special measures* or *notice to improve* categories continue to receive monitoring visits and are typically re-inspected within a year of the inspection in which they were judged *inadequate*. These two categories of “schools causing concern” are defined below.

- » *Special measures*: the school is failing to give its students an acceptable quality of education, and the persons responsible for leading, managing, or governing the school are not demonstrating the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school.
- » *Notice to improve*: the school requires significant improvement because either: it is failing to provide an acceptable quality of education but is demonstrating the capacity to improve; or it is not failing to provide an acceptable quality of education but is performing significantly less

⁵ See Ofsted's *Framework for Inspection* from September 2009 at <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk>

well than it might reasonably be expected to perform.

These judgments by Ofsted are critical in determining whether schools are considered to be in need of turnaround efforts. Schools judged by Ofsted to fall into the category of *special measures* or *notice to improve* often have been the focus of the government programs and initiatives that will be described later in this paper, as well as the focus of local authority school improvement efforts. In more recent years, schools that do not fall in either of these lowest categories but are judged to be only *satisfactory* also have come under increasing pressure to improve, with a number of government programs focusing on schools that are seen to be coasting or to have poor value-added in terms of their attainment.

Each state-run school has its own governing body, which is responsible for the appointment and management of the school's head and staff, the school's financial management, setting targets for student achievement, and overall standards of educational achievement. Most schools also operate under the purview of a Local Education Authority, which is legally responsible for overseeing school performance and for intervening in the case of school failure. Academies have a governing body like other schools but do not operate under the purview of a local authority and, instead, are directly accountable to the national Department of Education through their funding agreements.

The national government has passed successive Acts of Parliament that

not only strengthen the power of Local Education Authorities to intervene in schools causing concern, but also push them to intervene at earlier points in order to prevent failure. Acts of Parliament have also given the country's Secretary of State for Education (i.e., the chief minister of England's national Department of Education) the power to intervene directly if a Local Education Authority fails to take the necessary action to improve a failing school. Exhibit 1 summarizes the most recent powers given to Local Education Authorities and the Secretary of State (DCSF, 2007).

Most local authorities have their own school improvement staff and resources to work with schools and support their efforts to improve education outcomes for their students. The range and nature of this support varies according to the size and effectiveness of the local authority, but in most cases in recent years these resources have been concentrated on efforts to deal with schools that are either in *serious weakness* or have been given a *notice to improve* or are below the government's national floor targets. This includes schools at risk of falling into any of these categories. Some local authorities have also focused resources and efforts on supporting schools judged *satisfactory* or whose performance might be characterized as coasting. Very little local authority resource and support is given to schools judged *good* or *outstanding*, although they will often be part of areawide school improvement networks.

In addition to giving intervention powers to Local Education >>

Exhibit 1: Education and Inspections Act 2006

Powers given to Local Education Authorities

- » Providing early intervention and warning notices to a poorly performing school
- » Compelling a poorly performing school to work with another school, a college, or a partner body for the purposes of school improvement
- » Appointing additional governors to the school's governing body
- » Applying to the Secretary of State to replace the entire governing body of the school with an Interim Executive Board
- » Taking back the school's delegated budget

Powers given to the Secretary of State

- » Appointing additional governors to a school's governing body
- » Appointing an Interim Executive Board
- » Closing a school in *special measures*

Authorities, the government has established the National Strategies, which was both a national program with dedicated staff and resources at national and local levels as well as a set of prescriptive — though not compulsory — strategies for schools to use in raising student performance, particularly in the core subjects of English and mathematics. The strategies were established in the first term of the Blair government by Michael Barber, and their initial focus was on literacy and numeracy standards at the primary-school level. Schools were expected to devote a specific number of minutes each day to developing students' literacy and numeracy, and teachers were given and expected to use detailed guidance and programs aimed at enhancing students' skills in these two key areas. The National Strategies yielded considerable success in many primary schools: At a national level, between 1997 and 2000 the number of students

achieving the expected level of performance increased by 12 percentage points in English and 10 percentage points in mathematics. Based on this success, the National Strategies approach was expanded into secondary education, and its focus was broadened to encompass teaching and learning and pedagogy beyond the initial focus on literacy and numeracy into other subject areas and to deal with issues such as behavior and attendance and special educational needs.

As the Blair government moved into its second term, the debate moved on to how to build on the initial success of the national strategies — which had been seen as highly centralized, top-down, nationally driven strategies — to how schools could drive more progress themselves by working collaboratively and spreading the impact of the most successful school leaders. In 2004 the government established what it called

“a new relationship with schools,” which was designed to give schools greater autonomy and responsibility for raising their own performance. As part of the “new relationship” a new role of “School Improvement Partner (SIP)” was created. This was a role typically filled by experienced head teachers — in many instances they were either recently retired or nearing the end of their careers.

SIPs were recruited nationally by the National College of School Leadership to ensure a certain standard and level of performance in the role, but were deployed locally to work on behalf of Local Education Authorities to help provide challenge and support to their schools. All schools in England had a SIP, but the amount of time the SIP spent with a school depended on the school's current level of performance — those schools with the greatest challenges were given more time with their SIPs. SIPs were provided with detailed data to benchmark a school's performance against that of other schools with comparable student populations and were asked to engage in a professional dialogue with their fellow heads to focus on what a school's priorities for improvement should be and how they were going to achieve them.

The SIPs also reported to their school's governing body their views on the school's targets for improvement and current performance; in doing so, they were part of the formal performance management process of head teachers by governing bodies. As well as providing challenge to the head and the school about their current performance and what they needed to do to improve, the SIP was also asked

to help broker and advise on the support that a school might need. This might mean reporting back to the local authority on what support it should be providing for a school, or it could be recommending directly to the head where else he or she might get the type of support needed — there are a number of private providers who offer support.

Another other new role, created in the same general time period, was that of a National Leader of Education (NLE). In its 2005 white paper *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All* (DfES 2005), the government asked the National College for School Leadership to identify a new group of national leaders of education who were succeeding in the most challenging leadership roles. NLEs were envisaged as taking on a system leadership role in which they would continue to be responsible for the outcomes achieved in their own school, but would also contribute to improvement of other schools locally or nationally. NLEs have carried out this function in a number of different ways. Some have become Executive Heads of other schools on a temporary or permanent basis, assuming formal responsibility for the outcomes achieved in that school as well as in their own; others have carried out the role in a more advisory capacity by providing additional challenge and support to an existing head and his or her school.

The Evidence Base

The main evidence of the impact of efforts to turn around school performance in England comes from

three types of sources: independent reports by the national inspectorate, Ofsted; independent academic evaluations of the impact of policy initiatives; and research conducted by the Department for Children, Schools, and Families. This section considers the evidence from all three types. First, however, a note of caution about how conclusive any impact evidence can be for policies and initiatives aimed at turning around schools in England: In their study of the effect of Ofsted inspections on schools, Matthews and Sammons (2004) observed that schools causing concern are influenced by such a range of interventions and initiatives that it is difficult to identify the relative impacts of individual turnaround interventions and initiatives.

Definitions in the English Context

The term *turnaround* is not commonly used in England in reference to schools. However, the concept of schools needing to dramatically improve their performance is evident in other terminology, such as “schools causing concern” and “schools below the floor target,” both of which are typically associated with school failure and interventions to rapidly reverse school performance. The first term, “schools causing concern,” comes from Ofsted’s inspection framework. The second term, “schools below the floor target,” describes schools that do not reach the government’s set national floor targets. A school in any of these categories is likely to be the focus of efforts to turn around its performance.

What constitutes a turnaround school? Other than a school having improved its performance enough so the school no longer falls in one of these categories, there is no common definition as to what level of improvement would constitute a turnaround school. Because the performance in many of these schools is subject to significant fluctuation, simply improving performance in one year may not be enough to say its performance has been turned around. Therefore, some of the studies referred to below use the Ofsted performance categories of *good* or *outstanding* to show that sustainable improvement has been achieved; others refer to sustained levels of performance above the floor target. For example, for a secondary school to be considered as having turned around, it might not be enough to have exceeded the floor target of 30 percent of its students achieving five GCSEs graded A*-C, including English and math. Before labeling it as a turnaround school, one might want to see this higher level of performance sustained for a number of years and, ultimately, to see the school’s performance continue on an upward trajectory.

Evidence from the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services, and Skills

An important source of general information about what might lead to school turnaround is provided by the inspections carried out on a regular basis by the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services, and Skills (Ofsted). Ofsted also produces regular thematic

reports that look in more detail at certain aspects of school improvement. Ofsted's 2008 report, *Sustaining Improvement — The Journey from Special Measures*, examines successful improvement efforts at 14 schools that had been placed in its lowest performance category of *special measures* on the basis of inspections before April 2003.⁶ These schools were all subsequently removed from this category of concern in either the 2003–04 or 2004–05 academic year on the basis of re-inspection. All were inspected again in either 2005–06 or 2006–07, and those inspections showed that the schools remained at the higher level of performance. In short, they could be said to have turned around.

The schools were selected for this study because their outcomes for students showed incremental and continuous improvement across two inspection points. They were not chosen because they were removed from *special measures* designation especially quickly, but because the actions they took during their time in *special measures* laid a strong foundation for sustaining their improvement. Following the removal of *special measures* designation, these schools continued to improve more rapidly than other schools that also had been removed

⁶ Schools are identified as requiring “special measures” as a result of judgments made by Ofsted during inspection visits. Therefore, the category does not correlate explicitly to a certain level of performance, but one would expect to see significant weaknesses in the quality of teaching, leadership, and management and, in all but a few cases, student outcomes.

from the category and had been re-inspected within the same time frame. At the inspection points in 2005–06 or 2006–07, inspectors judged 3 of the schools to be *outstanding* and 11 to be *good*. Looking for actions that had the most significant impact on transforming outcomes, the review identified some common themes:

Changing leadership. At 11 of the 14 schools, the head teacher changed in the time between the school going into and coming out of *special measures* designation. At 5 of the schools, the head teacher changed again, or for the first time, between removal of the *special measures* designation and the school's first subsequent re-inspection. The willingness of the head teacher to accept the need for change and that individual's ability to deliver difficult messages to other school staff were seen as vital to school improvement.

Building teaching capacity. Recognizing that they were not making the best use of many of their current staff due to capacity deficits, the schools paid close attention to improving the skills of their staff. Schools also gave a high priority to recruiting new staff with the skills to enhance the school's education team. In all schools, a strong focus on staff training and improving the quality of teaching and learning was combined with effective monitoring, review, and evaluation of impact. This effort shifted unsatisfactory teaching to good teaching — or, in two cases, to outstanding teaching — within two years of the school's *special measures* designation being removed.

Developing the right systems and processes. All 14 schools identified

student assessment and the tracking of student academic progress as key factors in raising student performance. Refining assessment and tracking systems yielded better data to guide interventions, both for individual students and for groups of students. In addition, involving students and parents in the improvement effort helped build a coalition for change. Students' greater engagement in school life had a significant influence on improving outcomes in almost all of the schools surveyed. Parents were similarly engaged. In many instances, schools needed external support from local authorities, other schools, or private organizations in order to accomplish their improvement goals, but that support needed to be tailored to the school's individual needs to ensure the school wasn't overwhelmed by multiple sources of support and didn't become distracted from its core priorities. The Ofsted inspection and re-inspection process was also seen as being helpful to these schools in ensuring they were focused on the right priorities and were making sufficient progress in their journey out of *special measures* designation.

Evidence from Recent Academic Literature

A range of studies have looked at the impact of different initiatives on turning around the performance of failing schools in England. This section provides some detail from two such studies: *Survival of the Weakest: The Differential Improvement of Schools Causing Concern in England* (Matthews and Sammons, 2005) and the more recent *System Leadership in Practice* (Higham, Hopkins,

and Matthews, 2009). Both highlight some of the consistent features of schools in England that have successfully turned around.

Matthews and Sammons (2005) compared improvements between two groups of schools, those that had been identified as *special measures* and those that had been identified as *serious weakness* (now replaced by the category *notice to improve*). *Special measures* schools were seen as having more serious issues than *serious weakness* schools because *special measures* schools were judged not to have the leadership capacity to improve. But in this comparison, the researchers found evidence suggesting that, as compared to *serious weakness* schools, *special measures* schools demonstrated greater capacity to improve and to sustain that improvement. Eighty-six percent of *special measures* schools improved their GCSE results, compared to only 69 percent of schools in the next higher performance category. The researchers hypothesized that this difference is based in part on *special measures* schools receiving greater support and funding than schools deemed to be performing at a higher level. However, they also attributed this difference, in part, to *special measures* schools experiencing an initial “shock” at being placed in this lowest performance category; that shock, they argued, prompts these schools to take more decisive and immediate action compared to *serious weakness* schools, which, technically, are not judged to be failing. Matthews and Sammons posed that the seriousness of the *special measures* judgment is more likely to prompt the radical and

decisive action needed to transform performance.

Matthews and Sammons used this argument to explain why Ofsted decided to abolish the category of *serious weakness* in its inspection framework and, instead, introduced a more-detailed and prescriptive *notice to improve* category for schools at that performance level — a notice intended to give the schools less room to avoid the necessary, but often painful, actions needed for improvement. Arguably, Matthews and Sammons’ evidence supports a wider point when it comes to addressing school turnaround: the need to be as precise as possible in identifying the causes of failure for an individual school, the action needed to secure improvements, and the willingness of all involved to accept the need for change.

Higham, Hopkins, and Matthews (2009) have looked at three in-depth case studies of turnaround schools serving disadvantaged areas that are now providing leadership to help turn around other schools. Each of these turnaround schools had demonstrated sustained improvement for over 10 years, after previously being judged as failing. Higham, Hopkins, and Matthews identify some common key factors found in these turnaround schools, related to initiating, developing, and sustaining a journey of improvement. In addition to an initial change of leadership, the common factors are:

» *Developing a narrative for improvement.* In all three schools the need for change was

clear. The challenge was to translate the new mission — that is, improvement — into clear principles for action and to generate urgency for change. This meant developing a clear reform narrative, which made transparent expectations of improvements. Often this involved engaging students, parents, and the wider community in the debate and directly challenging — and if necessary removing — both students and staff who proved unwilling to cooperate. Also, the schools focused early on the need to improve the quality of teaching and learning in order to improve exam results. While this often required staffing changes, those teachers and other staff who remained at the school recognized that they had the support of the leadership.

» *Organizing the key improvement activities.* Though the schools initially generated performance improvements, progress stalled after a few years. The schools then developed whole-school activities and systems that helped move them forward again. The researchers summarize these activities as having three central themes: First, there was a *whole-school focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning*. For example, one school developed its own whole-school good lesson guide, with lesson observation and monitoring of student work by the school’s senior management team helping to sustain the drive for improvement. Second, *improvement activities were also regularly reviewed, evaluated, and, if necessary, redeveloped*; such review was especially important during

a period when performance had reached a plateau and it was necessary to identify action needed to make further progress. For example, one school's initial focus on borderline students had produced an immediate impact in improved student performance, but when this improvement hit a plateau the school had to widen its efforts to standardize the whole-school approach to teaching, grading, and behavior support. Finally, this review-and-rethink approach was supported by the *development of highly reliable school systems and clear leadership roles*, such as the use of data, student progression targets, and student progress tracking systems, which played a particularly crucial role by monitoring student progress throughout the year. Students were tested every half term, data were recorded in a standardized format, and heads of department were responsible for identifying progress — or a lack of progress — against individualized targets.

- » *Focusing on professional learning.* Each school's improvement strategy identified the professional development needs of school staff. Training sessions outside of school hours and regular peer observation became common features in these schools. Moreover, innovation started to emerge, with individual subject matter departments developing their own approaches based on what worked. Schools also started to share effective practices internally and became more open to introducing ideas from the outside that teachers had discovered.

- » *Changing institutional cultures.* Developing cultures and values that supported effective learning and professional development was also seen as key. First, staff supported and encouraged students' positive attitudes to learning, with a firm discipline policy that engendered in teachers a greater respect for the views of students, as evidenced through greater efforts to listen carefully to what students had to say. Second, a culture of professional action reduced the need for excessive managerial pressure and control over teachers wanting to work hard to provide the best for their students.

Evidence from the Department for Children, Schools, and Families

The final set of evidence comes from Department for Children, Schools, and Families research on factors that make schools in deprived areas effective (DCSF, 2008). Again, this evidence does not look at the precise question of what leads to school turnaround. Rather, this research considers what makes some of these schools in deprived areas more effective than other schools in the same kind of areas. The research finds there is no obvious link between the level of deprivation and the differing performance of these schools. Factors identified by the research include:

- » *Leadership.* Effective leadership has been commonly identified as a characteristic of improving schools in urban and challenging contexts. Keys (2003) produced an analysis of the evidence to date on leadership in challenging

schools in England, concluding that, to be effective, a head teacher's leadership style needs to be attuned to the specific context of the particular school. Distributed leadership was also a key theme that emerged. In his study of schools located in former coalfield sites in England, Harris (2003) added to the evidence that distributed leadership is effective.

- » *High expectations.* High expectations are consistently mentioned in the research as a way to raise attainment. In her review of leadership strategies adopted by effective head teachers in challenging circumstances, Keys (2003) identified the importance of head teachers having high expectations of both staff and students. Harris (2003) also emphasized "a climate of high expectations" both for students and for teachers.
- » *Data use for understanding problems.* Creemers (2005), generalizing about all schools, emphasized the need for a school to be able to assess and diagnose its own issues. Keys (2003), too, cited the need for the leadership within the school to be able to make an accurate diagnosis of the school's problems and to identify the school's strengths and weaknesses. But she also acknowledged that failing schools may not be capable of using data to design their own improvement strategy. However, use of data can be effectively supported centrally. One example is the Families of Schools policy, part of the London Challenge initiative (DfES, 2006).

» *Tailored support.* Much of the research emphasizes the importance of tailoring, at least to some degree, improvement approaches to a school's particular needs. For example, the evaluation of the DCSF OCTET program to support eight schools concluded that external intervention and support are most effective when seen as complementary to schools' own improvement strategies, when they build the capacity of key personnel to assume ownership of improvement, and when they identify ways of marrying local decision-making with central support (MacBeath, 2005).

» *Partnership with parents and the community.* Several pieces of research evidence demonstrate the importance of involving parents and the local community in helping to achieve success in deprived areas. MacBeath's (2005) evaluation of the OCTET schools emphasized the importance of drawing parents and the local community into finding local solutions to improve the school — many of which involved locating new community facilities (e.g., health centers or ICT facilities for adults in the school). Harris (2003) asserted that successful schools in deprived areas build positive relationships within the internal and external community. Successful schools also make every effort to involve parents in the life and work of the school.

How Have Approaches to Tackling School Failure in England Evolved?

This next section looks at how the range of government initiatives and methods employed in England has evolved over time. It examines a number of initiatives that can claim to have made the greatest contribution to school turnaround and considers the merits and disadvantages of the differing approaches. Broadly, it identifies five types of interventions intended to address school turnaround, with one example of each type:

- » *Structural solutions* — radically changing the governance and nature of the school and shaking up the local market (e.g., Academies Program).
- » *Area-based “multiple” improvement programs* — programs with multiple strands/tailored approaches to individual schools/areas (e.g., London Challenge).
- » *National imperative strategies* — major national-level approaches to improvement, backed by significant investment and incentives/sanctions (e.g., National Challenge).
- » *School-based improvement programs* — more traditional whole-school or subject-specific improvement programs (e.g., Improving Schools Programme).
- » *Lateral strategies* — utilizing the most effective school leaders and schools to transfer and share

best practices in school improvement (e.g., National Leaders of Education).

Many of the initiatives that have ultimately proved successful in turning around school performance grew out of earlier, less successful initiatives. Shortly after coming to power in 1997, the Blair government published a list of schools judged to be failing and said that, unless they showed signs of improvement within one year, radical and decisive action would be taken. This policy, known as “fresh start,” involved replacing the head teacher, replacing its governing body, or, if these first two approaches were judged unlikely to achieve school turnaround, closure of the school. This policy was heavily criticized for placing too much emphasis on the role of the individual head — the “hero head” — but it also set a clear expectation that government would no longer tolerate school failure.

The “fresh start” policy set the direction for another program that was introduced in the Blair government's first term — the *Academies Program*. This program was similar in many ways to the charter school movement in the U.S. with a focus on turning around the performance of schools in the most disadvantaged communities. But unlike the “fresh start” policy, which simply replaced the school's head teacher, the creation of a new academy involved much wider change. A new school was created, with the injection of fresh expertise from an external sponsor who had to contribute up to £2 million, which was then matched by government investment of between £20 million and

£30 million to support capital investment in new buildings. As discussed below, the replacement of a previously failing school with an academy often brought about rapid and decisive improvements in these schools — although there was debate about whether this improvement could have been achieved by other means and what impact these new academy schools had on neighboring schools.

The government was also keen to develop solutions that focused on providing support to *all* schools operating in the most challenging circumstances. Its *Excellence in Cities* program, for example, provided additional funding for groups of schools to work together on school improvement. The government also developed tailored individual packages of support for schools below the floor target that were struggling to improve. All of these approaches — the replacement of head teachers, opening of new academy schools, greater collaboration between schools, and more tailored support — were subsequently developed on a more systematic basis, initially in London through the London Challenge program, and then countrywide through the National Challenge.

At the same time, the lessons that had been learned in the Blair government's first term about improving students' performance in literacy and numeracy in primary schools through the national strategies were applied even more systematically to primary schools below the floor target through the *Improving Schools Program*. Finally, as noted above in the policy context section, the approach to school

improvement has increasingly evolved to make greater use of the best school leaders and schools through the *National Leaders of Education* program. Each of the above-mentioned programs is explained in more detail below.

The Academies Program

Academies — which are similar in nature to charter schools in the U.S. — are state-funded schools for students of all abilities that are established and managed by a wide range of sponsors: individual philanthropists, businesses, universities, successful schools and colleges, voluntary providers, and faith communities. Academies receive their day-to-day funding directly from the Department of Education rather than through local authorities. Initially, they were exempt from a number of rules and regulations that apply to other schools — for example, having greater freedom regarding teachers' pay and conditions and requirements about what they should teach as part of the National Curriculum. As discussed below, however, some of these freedoms no longer exist.

At the start of the Academies Program, sponsors had to commit £2 million of their own money to support the establishment of a new academy, but that requirement has since been dropped and sponsors can simply offer their own expertise to the running of the school. Academy sponsors were brought in — not just to provide the initial funding — but to use their outside expertise to challenge traditional thinking on how schools are run and what they should be like for students. When establishing an academy, the sponsor sets up an

endowment fund with its initial £2 million; its proceeds were spent by the academy trust — the academy's governing body — on measures to counteract the impact on education of deprivation in the school's feeder communities. In addition to the £2 million funding from the sponsor, most academies received additional capital funding — about £20 million to £30 million — from central government to pay for the physical rebuilding of new schools (some were built on new sites, others replaced failing schools which had been located there before).

The first academy was established in London in 2002. Since then the program has expanded substantially, with 133 academies open by September 2009, and an additional 167 expected to have opened subsequently. Most academies replace existing underperforming schools, although others have been created to provide high-quality schools in areas that need additional school seats. In addition, a small number of academies have opened as a result of mergers between high-performing schools and weaker schools as part of national or local school-improvement strategy. High-performing schools were often incentivized to do this by the significant additional capital funding they would receive, as well as by their commitment to supporting other local schools. Finally, some academies were created simply by the conversion of another older category of schools — City Technology Colleges established under the Thatcher government in the 1980s — which already enjoyed many of the freedoms of academies and as such simply converted their

name to an academy. Most didn't receive any additional capital funding, though some did.

As noted above, academies, as a type of school, initially were granted greater freedoms in dealing with national curriculum requirements, national pay and conditions for teaching staff, and Local Education Authority control. Such freedom was seen as a great advantage for the schools. But much of the success of these schools has come not necessarily from the use of *those* particular freedoms, but rather from the freedom inherent in establishing a brand new school with the strong leadership and fresh thinking that had previously been missing (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2008). In fact, all new academies were made subject to the same requirements as other schools in relation to the core National Curriculum from 2008, and most work closely with other local schools and their Local Education Authority.

As with charter schools in the U.S., the impact of the Academies Program has been the subject of intense political and academic debate in recent years. Critics argue that the academies are no more effective than the schools that they replaced would have been had those schools been given enough time to change or given the same level of resources that academies have received. Critics also argue that academies have a negative impact on other local schools around them by recruiting the best students and skewing the admissions of other schools. In this way, critics claim that the creation of an academy simply replaces one failing school with another.

Despite these criticisms there is now strong evidence from a number of sources that academies have a positive impact: Results in GCSEs examination show academies improving at twice the rate of other schools nationally; many academies have been judged by Ofsted to be *outstanding* or *good*; there is no evidence that academies have negative impact on neighboring schools by skewing their own admissions and affecting the student profile in other schools; and "academies are proving popular with parents and staff," now typically receiving three applications for every available place (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2008; National Audit Office, 2007). Academies, therefore, can be said to have played a major role in reducing the number of failing schools in England and, in many of the most deprived communities, have ended decades of school failure.

The London Challenge

The London Challenge, which was launched by the national government in 2003, was aimed at improving the performance of secondary schools in the nation's capital city. London was chosen as the focus of the program because it is a densely populated city with many areas of deprivation in which many schools were underperforming.⁷ The program's multistrand

⁷ There was also considerable political and media attention on London's schools because many politicians and journalists sent their children to school in London and also because, compared to parents in other parts of the country, many more London parents choose private-sector schools for their children.

improvement approach included at the start:

- » A focus on any secondary school that was below the floor target of 25 percent, five A*-C GCSEs or judged to be at risk of being so (described as the *Keys to Success* schools);
- » A focus on five *key boroughs* that were selected as the largest, poorest performing, most economically deprived and politically most important to secure improvement in;
- » A series of pan-London activities focused on support for all state-funded schools, including improving leadership and management, promoting cultural activities for students, and helping with teacher recruitment by supporting housing costs.

This approach is based on the lessons learned from the Department's and local authorities' earlier work dealing with schools below the floor target during the Blair government's first term. Once the schools were identified, case conferences were held between the Department, the local authority, and the school to negotiate a package of support for each school, often drawing on existing programs like the national strategies and other external consultancy support.

Highly experienced senior London Challenge advisers — most of whom were experienced former heads or inspectors — were appointed to work with the schools, checking on progress but also ensuring that each school was receiving the tailored support it needed. A triage system ■■

identified which schools within the program were causing the greatest concern, and Local Education Authorities were challenged to come up with radical solutions for these schools. Solutions could include a change of leadership, partnership with another more successful school, closure, or conversion to academy status — the list of options was similar to the federally approved options for failing schools in the U.S.

The focus on five key boroughs was intended to support and enhance the focus on *Keys to Success* schools across all London boroughs. This meant a focus within these key boroughs — not just on their own *Keys to Success* schools — but also on the performance of all schools and how to achieve areawide transformation in educational quality. The launch of the key boroughs strand of work coincided with the government's national program for capital investment in schools, *Building Schools for the Future*,⁸ which was rolling out at this point. Any local areas — both inside and outside London — seeking capital investment for their schools were required to produce a compelling vision and plan for how the capital investment would be used to transform education. So the London Challenge provided support to each of these boroughs to help them prepare their proposals and plans.

⁸ *Building Schools for the Future* was the government's program for capital investment in schools. It was undertaken in a number of phases with local areas having to put in proposals for their long-term education vision for their local areas and how they would spend the capital investment to help achieve this.

There was also a focus on building capacity within the key boroughs' own school improvement services in order to ensure their own support for their schools made a bigger impact and therefore helped to sustain any immediate improvements that might be delivered through the involvement of the London Challenge. Each key borough was therefore given a London Challenge project manager — which also provided a vital feedback loop to the Department on whether the boroughs' capacity was improving or not.

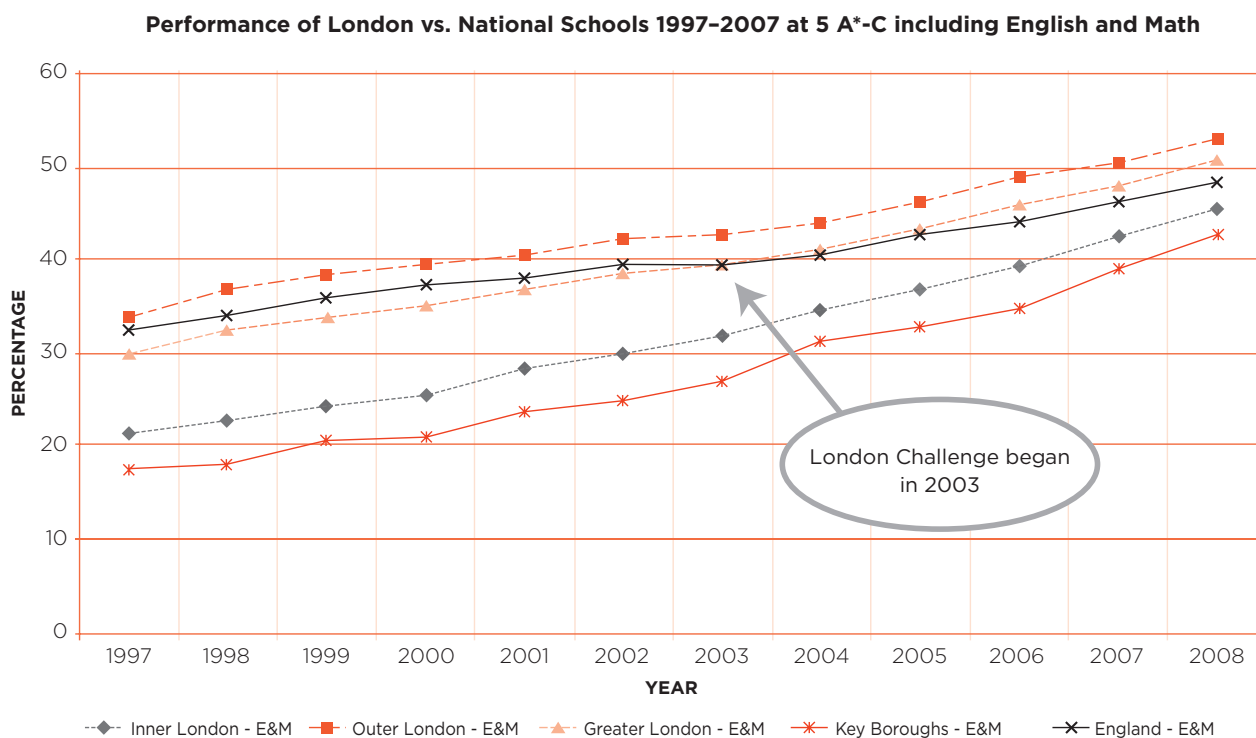
Underpinning this specific focus on particular schools and boroughs was the London Challenge's city-wide approach to developing stronger leadership and management for *all* schools. A London leadership center was established to provide tailored and specific training programs to head teachers and other school leaders. There was also a London-wide cultural offering for students — which guaranteed a certain number of cultural experiences for students, like theater trips, and gave schools additional resources to pay for these, as well as establishing a teacher home-buy initiative to help recruit more good teachers by helping with housing costs.

One of the most interesting aspects of the London Challenge was the approach it developed to data analysis. The Department developed “families of schools” so that schools with similar intakes but differing levels of performance were encouraged to benchmark their performance and work together to identify actions to improve their performance. Each family of schools sorts schools across a city region into statistically similar groups based on

their student intake and previous performance. The program further sorts schools by “contextual” factors, identifying all schools that, for example, have significant proportions of students who speak English as a second language and/or have high student mobility. Identification of these “families” enables schools to compare themselves to and share their experiences with schools with similar characteristics.

The impact of the program has been very positive. Within two years, the performance of London's schools had exceeded the national average, with the strongest contribution coming from the *Keys to Success* schools and the schools in the five boroughs that had been targeted for support. Moreover, the early improvements have been sustained and built on since (Exhibit 2). Perhaps the strongest evidence of program impact comes from an independent report by Ofsted (2006), which found that performance — as measured by performance in GCSE examinations — in poorly performing London schools had risen faster than in similar schools nationally. In inner London, 89 percent of secondary schools below the floor target of having 30 percent of their students achieve five GCSEs graded A*-C, including English and math, had made improvements in the numbers of students achieving five A*-C grades at GCSE between 2001 and 2005, compared with 73 percent of secondary schools nationally in the same period. Inspection evidence confirmed this improvement trend. The proportion of schools graded as *good* or better was significantly higher than the national average (59 percent compared to 49 percent).

Exhibit 2: Impact of the London Challenge on the Performance of London Schools



Leadership, management, and the quality of teaching had improved significantly (73 percent compared to 58 percent for leadership and management and 57 percent compared to 51 percent for quality of teaching). The London Challenge approach has now been extended to primary schools and other English cities through a new program called the City Challenge.

The National Challenge

The approach of the London Challenge was seen as so successful by the government that it was first developed in other areas of the country — like Manchester and the Black Country through the *City Challenge*

program — and then subsequently was adopted across the country through a national program called the *National Challenge*. This program, launched by the government in June 2008, is a centrally driven, top-down strategy from national government to secure higher performance in secondary schools with a specific focus to ensure that, by 2011, every secondary school in the country will have at least 30 percent of its students achieving five or more GCSEs grade A*-C, including both English and mathematics. The National Challenge focuses on every school in England that is below this target or judged to be at risk of being below the target.

Many elements seen as critical to the success of the London Challenge and the City Challenge have been adopted in the National Challenge. As with the London Challenge the focus is on ensuring that every school has effective leadership, as well as a strong grasp of the basics of good teaching and learning and behavior. In many schools, attention has focused on performance in English and mathematics because performance in these areas has been dragging down overall school results.

For each of the National Challenge schools, Local Education Authorities were asked to provide plans for how they intended to transform the school's performance or accelerate

current improvements. Participating schools were assessed by the Department on the basis of the local authority's plans to identify the level of support they require. All of the schools then had a National Challenge Adviser appointed to work with them to support the school directly and to broker additional support tailored to the school's individual needs.

The Department made an assessment of the level of the support needed for each school — and their chances of turning around their performance. On the basis of this assessment most attention was focused on the lowest-performing schools or schools judged least likely to be capable of turning around their performance on their own or with the support of their local authority. These schools were then likely to be subject to a structural solution with a similar list to that seen in the London Challenge and in the U.S.'s federally approved options to turn around schools — namely a change of leadership, becoming an academy, or closure.

In addition to the structural solutions that had been applied and tested before by the Department, a new option of becoming a National Challenge Trust was offered to these schools. This was similar to becoming an academy but simply involved the leadership and governance of the school being taken over by an external partner — typically a more successful school or other education provider like a college or university.

The government has stated that any school that has not achieved the floor target by 2011 will close and be

replaced by an academy or National Challenge Trust. In other instances where schools were judged not to require such a radical solution, a National Challenge school may have received support by working with a National Leader of Education (described in more detail below). This leader, who has been successful in leading his or her own school, was designated by the National College of School Leaders, along with the leader's home school — a National Support School — to help improve a low-performing school by providing additional leadership capacity and by sharing many of the systems and processes that has made the leader's own school successful.

Significant additional resources have been committed by the government to supporting the National Challenge program — £400 million in total: £40 million to pay for the National Challenge Advisers and National Leaders of Education working with these schools; £100 million committed for teaching, learning, and study support; £195 million to pay for new academies; and £65 million to pay for National Challenge Trusts. The precise distribution of the funding depended on the detailed plan agreed upon with the Local Education Authority for each school.

It is too early to assess the detailed impact of the National Challenge because school-level results for the first full year of the program were not available at the time this case was written. However, despite some early criticism of the program from some school staff who felt their school had been unfairly labeled as failing, program implementation was proceeding well. A detailed plan

was in place for each participating school; many structural solutions had been implemented; and school progress assessments from National Challenge Advisers identified positive progress for the clear majority of schools.

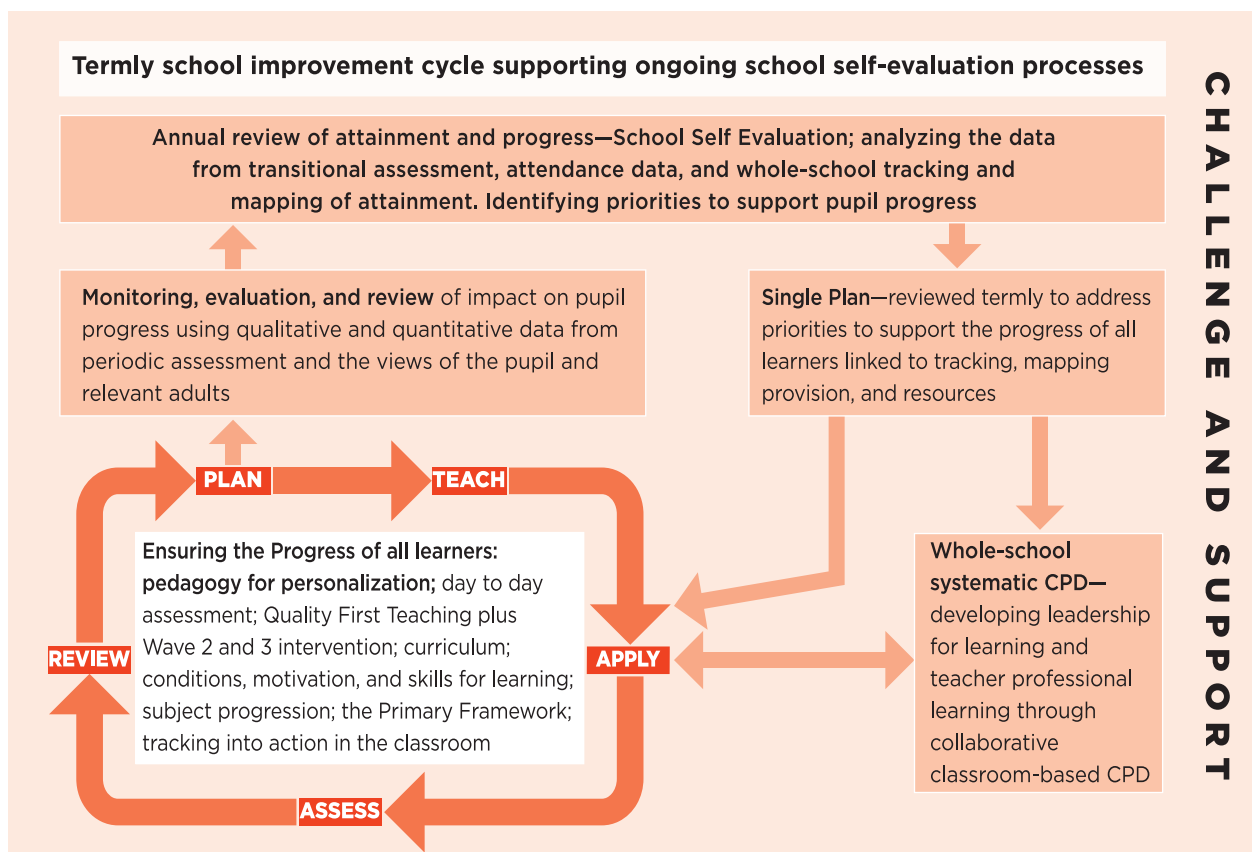
The Improving Schools Program

The Improving Schools Program (ISP) began in 2002 as the Intensifying Support pilot project run on behalf of the government by the National Strategies. It has since been further developed as a national program by the National Strategies to focus on primary schools below the floor target. At the heart of the ISP approach is the concept of tracking student performance on an individual basis and using that information to challenge and advance schools' understanding of the action needed to improve student outcomes.

The program is applied flexibly in each school so it meets the priorities identified by data analysis and softer intelligence, but it does then commit the school to a process of specific, intensive, and rigorous planning of remedial actions across every student cohort, every subject and teacher. It comprises a vigorous "top-to-toe" model, involving every layer of the school's management and staffing. It is a truly whole-school model.

The aim of ISP is to raise the quality of teaching and learning, to accelerate progress, and to build sustainable improvement at participating schools. Although ISP started as a program specifically

Exhibit 3: School Improvement Cycle



aimed at turnaround schools, it is suitable for all schools because the structured and responsive approach can be introduced at various stages of the school improvement cycle. Complementing its focus on learning, the program also supports strengthening of leadership and governance, enabling heads to develop distributed leadership more effectively across the school.

The program is built around a school-improvement cycle that takes place over the course of a single term and around core elements that provide

the systems and structures needed to secure and sustain progress (see Exhibit 3). By using the cycle and the core elements, the whole school is able to identify priorities, focus on learning, and review impact. Among the most effective aspects of the program has been the use of student tracking to identify both the progress students make and any barriers to student learning so that changes can be made quickly.

Schools also develop and implement a “raising attainment” plan with which schools set targets, constantly

evaluate progress, and identify the professional development that would be most useful, either for individual members of staff or for the school as a whole. So, for example, if a school’s data show that student writing is a weakness, progress in writing becomes the priority for the term and professional development for staff is targeted accordingly. Because the whole school is involved, the program emphasizes the development of the school as a learning community. This means amongst staff a high level of shared work to understand the issues, share

the problems, and strive together to turn around the school.

One of the most positive benefits of this schoolwide commitment is the evolution of a new ethic among staff that they are learning together how to improve, sharing their experiences, and pinpointing what works. Staff can be seen to be entering a new period of staff development that is more deliberately cooperative and focused on professional learning. This is commonly referred to as the professional learning community, which stands the school in good stead, even after a successful turnaround has been achieved. It is one of the best legacies of ISP.

The program has evolved over the years, and many schools have voluntarily adopted ISP elements. Participating ISP schools have consistently achieved double the national rates of progress in results in the externally assessed examinations at the end of primary school with 6 percent improvement annually in the number of students achieving the expected standards in English and mathematics. Evidence from a wide range of sources, including students, schools, Ofsted, and Local Education Authorities, confirms the sustainability of the improved progress rates. Schools identify the positive impact on the quality of learning and teaching and the development of the whole school as a learning community.

National Leaders of Education

The lateral transfer of best practice through the work of National Leaders of Education (NLEs) is

another type of support provided to schools facing difficulty. An NLE is a head teacher of a highly successful school who has agreed to support other heads and/or schools. Typically a head teacher will do this in conjunction with support from his or her own school, which can become what is known as a National Support School (NSS). NLEs and NSSs are designated as such by the National College of School Leaders, which provides ongoing support to NLEs and their schools and matches them with low-performing schools in need of their support. England's cadre of NLEs grew from 68 when the program was introduced in autumn 2006 to 180 two years later, and there are plans for continued expansion of the program.

NLEs and their schools are deployed in different ways. In 2008, about a third were used in executive headship roles where the NLE assumes formal responsibility for the leadership of another school as well as his or her own. In some cases existing heads will continue serving under the Executive Head, in others they will be replaced by a new head or the Executive Head may be the only head of the school for a period. But the majority of NLEs support other schools without assuming formal leadership responsibility, providing advice and support to the existing or new head of the school they are supporting (Higham, Hopkins, and Matthews, 2009).

According to the National College of School Leaders (2008), NLEs have, on average, helped move schools out of *special measures* within 9 to 10 months of deployment. Primary

schools supported by NLEs have experienced a 5–6 percentage point increase in the number of students achieving the expected level in English or mathematics. Secondary schools supported by an NLE for more than 6 months have improved by a 3.9 percent age point increase in the number of students achieving five or more A*-C grades, an improvement that, in many cases, raises the school above the floor target. Hill and Matthews (2008) are more cautious in their assessment of the impact of NLEs, stating that “not all the effect, whether positive or negative, is necessarily due to NLEs and NSSs,” and noting the broad range of support from which these schools often benefit. Nonetheless, Higham, Hopkins, and Matthews (2009) argue that the data show that, in most cases, NLE involvement is associated with improvements in the schools being supported.

School Case: Debden Park High School

Debden Park High School in Essex is a specialist performing arts college, occupying new facilities built for that purpose. In 2004, the school's results were slightly above the national average, but then they declined sharply. The school failed an inspection in January 2007 and was placed in *special measures*. Unacceptable student behavior was rife and, that summer, GCSE results plunged to 23 percent of students achieving five A*-C GCSEs including English and mathematics. These results were well below both the level previously attained and the national average,

leading, in July 2008, to the school's enrollment in the National Challenge program.

Soon after the inspection result was confirmed, the Local Education Authority engaged a National Leader of Education (NLE) who, with help from his current high-capacity school Kemnal Technology College, was expected to provide the leadership and capacity-building necessary to help Debden Park come out of *special measures*. In this instance, the NLE was appointed as Executive Head, with direct responsibility and accountability to the school's governing body for an improvement in results. He would provide leadership for the *special measures* school while continuing to lead his own school, so would spend some of his time in Debden Park and some of the time in his own school. As such the NLE appointed a new head teacher to Debden Park to provide daily, on-the-ground leadership the school had previously lacked. With the arrival of this new leadership, robust monitoring and evaluation procedures were implemented in all areas of the school's work. Also, a new student behavior policy was immediately implemented, resulting in expulsions dropping dramatically and attendance improving steadily. Professional development opportunities and student performance targets were agreed upon with all staff.

These positive changes at Debden came too late to have an appreciable impact on results in 2007, but by October 2007 the school's recovery was so evident that Ofsted not only removed it from *special measures*, it ranked the school as *good*

— an exceptionally rare verdict for a school emerging from the lowest category. Ofsted noted that the school had made outstanding progress, with excellent student-tracking procedures, a significant rise in standards, and good student behavior. Crucially, staff morale had been restored; teaching quality was rising quickly; and students once more enjoyed their education. Parents were very positive about the transformation.

Since the school emerged from *special measures*, progress has continued and been even more impressive. From 2007 to 2008, the percentage of students achieving five or more GCSEs graded A*-C more than doubled (from 29 percent to 60 percent). Including English and mathematics, there was a 19-percentage-point improvement, from 23 percent to 42 percent. These results were the best Debden had achieved in its six-year history. The trend reversed a three-year decline and put Debden on track to exceed the national average.

Following the turnaround in Debden's performance, the Kemnal Trust was established to provide support from the NLE and Kemnal Technology College to an even greater number of schools. The trust was a formally constituted legal entity that could be contracted with directly by other schools and local authorities to provide support. The NLE and the trust have been working as part of a group of four schools, including Debden, to turn around the performance of two additional schools, in which similar progress has since been made. Provisional results for 2009 show the impact

of the trust's work with one school recording an 18 percentage point rise in 5A*-C and 9 percentage point rise in 5A* including English and mathematics. The other school exhibited a rise of 18 percentage points and 10 percentage points on the same measures. Interestingly, Kemnal Technology College has also maintained its own rate of progress with a 3 percentage point and 10 percentage point rise on these measures, suggesting that providing support to other schools can also help to improve a schools' own performance particularly in the key subjects of English and mathematics.

A number of lessons from this case study are potentially applicable to turnaround efforts elsewhere. The leadership provided by an NLE undoubtedly was critical to the school's turnaround in performance. Good leadership is essential and, especially at a time when effective school heads are scarce, the value of utilizing an excellent head to support more than one school has been demonstrated in this and other examples in the United Kingdom. The Debden example also demonstrates the value of distributed leadership rather than reliance on a single "hero" head teacher to rescue a school. The NLE working with Debden sees his appointment of a new head teacher as having been vital to the day-to-day drive within the school for improvement.

Significant change in the rest of the school staffing was also seen as critical to the turnaround. Two talented middle managers were appointed to Debden's senior leadership team and teaching **»**

staff. A lot of work was undertaken by the NLE, his school, and the new Debden staff, with the rest of the middle management team, to raise morale and address performance concerns. Of the 45 staff members working at Debden when the NLE arrived, 19 subsequently left, unable to cope with the pace of change needed to transform the school's performance. Moreover, while the difficulty of recruiting good staff is used as an excuse for poor student performance by many schools in challenging circumstances, Debden was not allowed to use this excuse. Typically schools in need of turnaround struggle to recruit good new teachers, but the Kemnal Trust employs a model wherein one individual is appointed to manage staff recruitment across all schools in the trust, and following adoption of this model, the number of open staff positions at Debden Park plummeted. By focusing early on the recruitment of good new staff, Kemnal was able to ensure that Debden's staff shortages did not become a barrier to improving results.

It is also evident that much of the support received by Debden — and, once the trust was established, by other schools as well — has come not from the NLE personally, but from his home school, Kemnal, working as an NSS. Many of Kemnal's proven systems and processes were introduced to Debden to support, for example, data collection, the use of information technology, and quality assurance. The Kemnal team — which included other senior leaders such as the deputy and assistant heads as well as subject

teaching staff — worked with staff at Debden to collect data on student progress and set ambitious targets for improvement, sharing both the data and improvement targets with parents. They also removed any non-teaching responsibilities from Debden's teaching staff, telling them to focus exclusively on the quality of their own teaching in the classroom. Information technology systems were established to simplify processes as much as possible for staff. And a system of quality assurance and lesson observations was put in place to make sure teaching standards were high at all times. Any weaknesses were quickly addressed through a program of professional development for all staff — common weaknesses and issues were addressed by program for all staff, but tailored development was provided to meet teachers' specific individual needs.

The drive for sustainable improvement has really taken off with the support provided through the Kemnal Trust, and herein may lie the greatest lesson for an approach to turnaround schools: Trust status has allowed Kemnal, the school, to devote more of its own resources to supporting other schools, and the schools in the trust are now sharing staff and expertise on a regular basis. The role of national government initiatives has been to make sure the schools most in need of support, identified through the National Challenge program, are receiving what they need from an experienced head and his school.

Lessons for Other Countries

- » Effective leadership is a necessary but insufficient condition for success. Clearly it is no coincidence that in an estimated two-thirds of schools with the *special measures* designation there is a change of leadership before they emerge from this status. But it is also clear from the English experience that good leadership is not itself enough to turn around schools. The model of the hero head dragging a school up from failure is an outdated one. Models of distributed leadership appear key to success, as does getting the rest of the staff on board and prepared for the changes needed to turn around performance.
- » System leadership roles — where heads and schools support the turnaround efforts in others schools — can help turn around school performance, as demonstrated by the impact of NLEs. Again though, it is not only about the role of excellent heads supporting or leading other schools but also about the support, systems, and structures these leaders bring with them from their own successful schools.
- » Self-assessment is a critical factor for schools seeking to turn around. In the examples of programs given above, the importance of schools and heads understanding their strengths and weaknesses and what they need to do is clearly evident. Inspection has an important role to play here, but in England an increasing focus has been on

making sure schools understand their own strengths and weaknesses through effective self-assessment. The development of a new relationship with schools and the role of School Improvement Partners have focused schools on the quality of their own self-assessments.

- » Promoting the effective use of data to track student progress is key to turnaround, but poorly performing schools do not necessarily have the capacity or expertise to use data in the way that is needed. Much of the government's efforts in the United Kingdom have focused, therefore, on improving the quality and use of data in schools that need it most. The National Strategies have promoted more effective assessment for learning through student-progress data, and the London Challenge adopted a family-of-schools approach.
- » Balance between central and local support is important. Much of the debate in the academic literature on school improvement and turnaround has focused on how easy or not it is to replicate the strengths of effective schools in failing schools. Creemers (2005) asserts that a one-size-fits-all model is not applicable and not practical in helping failing schools; Thrupp (2005) emphasizes the difference between schools and their contexts, and thus the need for locally applicable solutions. An interesting feature of recent attempts at school turnaround in England has been the balance between central and local support. In one sense, for example, the National

Challenge is a highly centralized, top-down strategy with a clear expectation that schools either will reach a nationally defined standard within three years or will face closure or a centrally imposed structural solution. But the National Challenge also places a great deal of emphasis on developing contextualized solutions for individual schools, with Local Education Authorities responsible for coming up with an action plan for each failing school within their jurisdiction

and individual National Challenge Advisers working with every individual school to ensure it receives a tailored package of support that addresses its particular needs. Even the National Challenge Advisers themselves strike this balance between central and local; they have been centrally appointed and trained but are employed locally and are expected to work closely with Local Education Authorities to ensure that the right solutions are developed for individual schools.

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