



National College for
Teaching & Leadership

Freedom to lead: a study of outstanding primary school leadership in England

Technical annex: Findings from schools

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Isos Partnership

These are 18 case studies designed to reflect real-life examples of outstanding primary leadership. Together, the case studies provide the substance of a summary report: Freedom to lead: a study of outstanding primary school leadership in England.

The content of the case study is derived entirely from information provided by the school mainly through interviews, supplemented by extracts from relevant Ofsted reports. Although the writing uses both quotation and description, it is co-constructed with the school and reflects the work of the school not the views of the author.

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Case study 1 - Ash Grove Primary and Nursery School, Macclesfield

Primary leadership case study: from ailing school to system leader

Ash Grove Primary and Nursery School, a converter academy since January 2014, is a small but expanding school in a mainly White British estate in Macclesfield where there are high levels of social disadvantage.

The school was designated a teaching school and national support school in April 2014, and the headteacher a national leader of education. The school is key to enabling a strong and growing group of local schools as a teaching school alliance. The alliance includes the partner secondary school (graded good in its latest Ofsted inspection), which is providing the teaching school director, a Catholic secondary school (graded outstanding in its latest Ofsted inspection) and a number of close-knit primary schools currently graded 'good' that aspire to become outstanding. There is a very strong and collegiate sense of purpose among these schools and Ash Grove and its leadership are held in high regard by their peers.

Headteacher: Kevin Simpson

Chair of governors: Sue Bowen

“This is an outstanding school. Children make exceptional progress in nursery and reception and teachers throughout the school continue to build on this excellent start. The quality of teaching and, consequently, pupils’ achievement are outstanding. The curriculum is exciting and makes them want to learn. The headteacher and senior leaders have made enormous improvements to all areas of the school’s work since the previous inspection and the governing body is a major influence in driving the school forward and bringing success.”

Ofsted, 2013

Portrait of the school

This smaller than average school is poised to grow to two forms of entry owing to parental demand, driven by the school's success and burgeoning birth rate. It has been transformed since 2009, when the current headteacher and deputy arrived and stabilised the school after a troubled period. Now it is a thriving and exciting place, characterised, for example, in spring 2014 by a cavernous 'Dr Who' set, complete with oversized Dalek, which led to pertinent thematic displays on astronomy.

The school is an example of how to raise the achievement of pupils and aspirations of parents in disadvantaged predominantly White communities. Nearly two thirds of pupils are eligible for the pupil premium, yet over 90% achieved level 4 or above in reading, writing and mathematics in 2012 and 2013, and all made at least the expected progress in these three aspects. The headteacher is also executive head of a school in a neighbouring town that has improved from an Ofsted grading of inadequate to good.

Leadership and governance

Before coming to Ash Grove in 2009, the head had taught in three contrasting rural and urban schools and was deputy headteacher of a first school in Leek. There he was involved in developing the nursery and children's centre as well as being key stage 1 leader. He had many leadership opportunities in that school, benefiting from the head's commitment to distributed leadership and working progressively through the leadership of all the subjects. He is "driven by making a difference", and having completed the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) knew he wanted the headship of a school in a challenging area. When the headship of Ash Grove became vacant, it presented a number of challenges. Combined level 4 results were 10%, the roll was falling and the school was threatened with closure. When appointed, he was given a year to prove he could turn the school around.

Staff see the headteacher as having great vision and drive. He encourages them and leads (or pushes) them out of their comfort zones. As one said:

"I think he's very good at seeing potential. Many teachers are not very self-confident in terms of their abilities to lead and manage beyond their classrooms, but he's very good at seeing potential within people and empowering them."

The senior leaders believe that they should protect teaching staff as much as they can so that they can focus on teaching and learning. All the training they receive is related to performance management and centres on outstanding teaching, learning and attainment, and lesson planning. The headteacher describes it thus:

"It's about all the things being joined up. It's actually quite simple because we'll sit here sometimes and come up with these grand plans and then strip them right back to keep them focused and manageable. An awful lot of the decision-making in terms of say non-negotiables for lessons – the things we expect to see within lesson-planning – are collaborative and discussed within staff meetings. Staff are fully involved in the agreements that are made."

The deputy has noticed that the headteacher has changed his style of leadership as the school has developed, from having to take decisions unilaterally to far more collaborative decision-making. The deputy said:

"I think it has been very useful for me to see that you don't remain the same kind of head – your school changes and you change, or you change and your school changes. I think that the leadership style has changed within the school journey. What's really noticeable even in the last few weeks is he is very much focused on building that next level again. He's looking at the way ahead and has been very much looking at how to protect Ash Grove while still building capacity and taking on new opportunities."

The governors have played a big part in the improvement of the school. Not only did they give their new head full backing and help get the community on board, but they were led – and still are – by a very experienced chair. She was a former head and had worked in the local authority, which gave her the background needed to help drive improvement. The headteacher explains: “It was like having an in-house inspector, especially in the first two years, because she [the chair of governors] has the background and vision to see the bigger picture. She has conveyed that to the governors. Even now she’s on the phone every day; she’s emailing; she’s challenging; she’s asking me about capacity, and she has transmitted her keen involvement to the other governors.”

The governing body has become very strong. Two years ago the chair and vice chair started to bring in several new governors from different relevant professions including, for example, governors having financial and human resource management expertise. In 2013, Ofsted reported:

“The governing body is highly skilled and highly effective. Its drive and ambition for the school have recently been recognised in the award of the Governor Mark. The governing body challenges the school vigorously, not only in terms of standards represented in national test data, but also on all aspects of the curriculum. Equally, it supports the school in its drive to continue to improve the provision for pupils ...”

The governors understand the links between provision, costs and performance. They check spending in terms of equity for all pupils and monitor the use of pupil premium and its impact.

School improvement: becoming outstanding

Ash Grove was inspected three months after the headteacher started in 2009 and was judged satisfactory. When monitored in 2011, all the teaching was good and some outstanding. Most recently, the school was judged outstanding on all counts in 2013.

The number on roll was about 80 when the headteacher arrived because many parents had moved their children to other schools. The budget was in deficit by £90,000. A loyal core of parents remained who really wanted the school to succeed. The head was able to appoint a new deputy and two new staff. The new deputy brought a wealth of experience at key stage 2 to complement the early years strength of the headteacher. A number of strategies and actions were key to turning the school around.

Performance monitoring and performance management

The first priority was rigorous performance monitoring. The headteacher advocates sitting down and having an honest conversation with staff members about where they are going and where the school is going as the first port of call. Often, worries about change will emerge during that meeting: “You can judge how colleagues are reacting to the vision of making sure the children achieve the best they possibly can. One of the original teachers at Ash Grove remains a model example; she bought into the new philosophy entirely.”

The headteacher is clear about the importance of performance management, in which all staff have targets that relate to the school development plan and targets related to their everyday work. The results – pupils’ progress and outcomes – then, he considers, follow from this and speak for themselves.

It is always difficult to know, the headteacher states, how much coaching to give to teachers who do not meet the needs of the school. When taking responsibility for a school in difficulty, “you have to identify potential and if they haven't got potential then I have no qualms in moving them on because the children have to come first.” Two staff left Ash Grove because of increased expectations. The headteacher says: “They think that you're making them do more than is expected when actually what you're expecting them to do is the job that they should've been doing all along.” Two left the school naturally but the school has resorted to capability procedures when necessary. “I prefer not to go that way but ultimately the children come first.”

Modelling to improve the quality of teaching

Although the deputy headteacher was appointed as a non-teaching deputy, things did not turn out that way. The deputy's experience was sorely needed in key stage 2 classrooms, modelling from day one, while the headteacher did the same in reception and years 1 and 2. In the first year, the headteacher was often teaching for half the week. As he says: “Over the years we've learned from each other and become experts across all areas.”

A relentless focus on the teaching of basic skills

The school is determined that the children should leave as competent readers and writers and be able to do maths to survive and be the best they can be in the real world. So, as the headteacher says: “You don’t mess with the mornings – we have reading, writing, maths every single day and we do that now. There is no change in that because the intake hasn’t changed and in order for us to keep getting the results we need, that drive for basic skills has to be there.” In 2013, 100% of children got at least the expected progress in reading, writing and maths.

High expectations

The school strives to ensure that as many children as possible, 80% last year, make three levels of progress in key stage 2. Over 40% of children achieved level 5 or more and a few gained level 6 in all three aspects. Value added is very high.

Phonics from age three

While the headteacher believes in structured play at nursery age, this does not happen automatically. “Children who come here have got very low starting skills. If we don’t expect them to do things such as pick up a book and read it or sit down and write then it’s never going to happen, it just wouldn’t. So children do have daily phonics sessions from day one, from [age] three.” They go on ‘sound walks’ and letters are introduced so they are well prepared for reception. By the time children leave reception, they are making the progress expected of their age; in key stage 1, progress is increased again and children achieve well above average by the end of key stage 2. The children also have writing books in the nursery and are expected to write their name by the time they join reception. Writing is done through play as much as possible. The headteacher observes that:

“Very often, even in excellent schools like this, children are still below average by the end of key stage 1 because there’s been so much catching up to do and then they make the biggest progress in key stage 2. But you crack it early ... without depriving children of their childhood ... the sky’s the limit. I think the greatest gift you can give a child is the ability to read and write and we pride ourselves on being able to do that here.”

Speech and language therapy

There is a very high ratio of staff to children in nursery and reception: there are six members of staff for 50 children. One of the staff has been retrained and provides a very rigorous programme of speech and language therapy daily to children who need this.

Language development and educational enrichment

The school gives high priority to broadening children's experience and developing their vocabulary and language. They all have an educational visit each half term. There is always an overnight residential visit in key stage 1, an adventurous residential in key stage 2, and a visit abroad in years 5 and 6; last year it was to Iceland, this year Rome. Every Friday afternoon there is an enrichment afternoon where the school brings people in to work with the children in mixed year groups. Themes include sports, arts, culture, local community and global community, so they get all those experiences as well. The ultimate sanction for misbehaviour is to miss the Friday afternoon programme, which is treated as a reward for the work children have done during the week. As the headteacher says, "If you work hard, you get to play hard."

Planning and assessment

The headteacher still looks at the planning every week and reviews the work of all children every six weeks. He meets the teachers, looks at the books, conducts and monitors lesson observations and reviews the progress of children, especially every pupil premium child. The great majority of children attract pupil premium. "We have a menu of 20 options for pupil premium children; it's like going into a Chinese takeaway!"

Looking outward

Initial teacher training

Ash Grove was designated a teaching school in 2013. One of the key strands is initial teacher training (ITT), which is already a strength of this school. The school's involvement in initial training of teachers and other staff is disproportionately large in terms of its size. This school of only seven classes and a nursery takes four to six BA and PGCE placements a year, mainly students from Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) (a grade 1 primary ITT provider, 2012). The school also provides secondary trainees with short placements in a primary setting.

Rated by MMU as one of the practice schools in which trainees learn most, trainees attest that the staff could not do any more to help them achieve the highest professional standards as teachers. The deputy headteacher has trained as a mentor with MMU and has in turn trained all class teachers as mentors. She is a Reading Recovery lead teacher for Every Child a Reader, linking with the Institute of Education in London.

The rigorous approach to performance identified in the latest Ofsted inspection applies to trainees every bit as much as to regular staff and explains why the school is such a good provider of ITT:

“School leaders check teaching, attainment and pupils' progress rigorously. They are single-minded in their view that only the best is good enough for the pupils. They have an accurate view of how well the school is doing and are fully capable of maintaining its high performance. The management of teaching performance is first class. The monitoring of teachers' work is on-going and is the basis for continuous training and support to keep teachers' skills and expertise up to the mark.”

Trainees' work is constantly monitored – by the class teacher-mentor, the school mentor and by the headteacher – and subject to the six-weekly progress reviews of all pupils that the headteacher conducts with each member of staff. Trainees are fully integrated in all aspects of the work of the school.

Figure 1-1: Picture of ITT

The school feels that student teachers bring a lot to pupils, through creativity and new ideas, freshness and enthusiasm, and add to their progress. Staff mentors enjoy their role. It sharpens their own practice and prompts more reflection on their approaches. Trainees find the school innovative, dynamic and very supportive. Looking forward, the school is working with alliance headteachers to audit ITT needs and make projections for recruitment and training. It works in close collaboration with MMU in planning for School Direct. MMU is reported to regard the very positive approach to ITT by the staff of the school as “second to none”. Students emerge from placements at Ash Grove as good or outstanding teachers

School-to-school support

There is a strong catalogue of support for other schools and Ash Grove’s impending growth to two forms of entry will increase further its capacity for school-to-school support. The headteacher became executive headteacher of a school (Daven Primary School) in Congleton. The deputy headteacher at Ash Grove has been seconded to support this school.

As a new academy, Ash Grove is now receiving requests to sponsor other schools. One is a small village school that has been judged inadequate by Ofsted and requires special measures. Ash Grove was recommended to the new headteacher, who came to assess Ash Grove as a sponsor followed by her governors; the role was quickly agreed.

One of the assistant headteachers from Ash Grove will go to the village school for a year in a consultative capacity, working alongside the head in school development planning and getting back to basics. The supported school is deciding whether they want to become an academy under a multi-academy trust led by Ash Grove. Meanwhile the assistant head will spend two days a week for a term supporting another school that requires improvement and where the headteacher has been ill and there is no deputy. She sees the role as consultancy to the headteacher.

Looking forward

As a teaching school, a national support school and an expanding school, Ash Grove has much to look forward to but many roles to manage. Another school is interested in associating with Ash Grove as a voluntary converter academy, possibly within a multi-academy trust. That school serves a similar community but feels somewhat isolated and recognises in Ash Grove a school with similar challenges. Ash Grove will be cautious about the rate of expansion as it heads towards being the hub of a multi-academy trust.

Research and development is another passion of the school which feeds into its internal and outreach work. The school is developing and marketing 'interventions'. One of these, for example, is 'PIT' (Putting it Together). This involves a common approach to intervention through reception and year 1. It is aimed at helping those children who have learned all their sounds but are still not quite fluent enough to read and write.

Policy issues

Changes to the curriculum and assessment regimes

The school is less concerned about the new curriculum content than about removal of curriculum levels and the increased difficulty of targeting. Discussion within the school is focused on identifying the set of skills underpinning each curriculum area and how they build on each other. If curriculum levels are removed, staff will still have those skills, which will be represented in the planning formats along with learning objectives and success criteria. The school spent a long time developing their literacy and numeracy schemes and believes these will continue to guide work in these two areas. There is, nevertheless, some concern about not having levels which offer quantitative measures. Staff at the school know what progression looks like, but are not sure that all teachers in other schools do.

Multi-academy trust

Administratively, the school is preparing to be a multi-academy trust by employing new staff and extending the role of the business manager. The school currently sub-contracts human resource matters to the local authority but will keep this under review. They retain good professional links with the local authority, which is a strategic partner in the teaching school alliance. The local authority continues to turn to the school to see whether it can help other schools needing support.

Above all, the challenge is to remain outstanding but the school has thought through its strategy. This rests on appointing a home-grown head of school at Ash Grove and – as the school expands – a team of middle leaders on teaching and learning responsibility (TLR) posts who will be expected to emerge as future school leaders. These posts will include, for example, head of innovation, and sports champion. The school aims to be a breeding ground for future leaders. The head says: "This can benefit the children because the teachers now are very hungry to get to the next stage of their career and are

all out to prove themselves. We hope that in the longer term the teaching school will provide the next batch of teachers beneath the middle leaders to come through.”

Case study 2 - Booth Wood Primary School, Loughborough

Primary leadership case study: aspirational leadership that brings success to White British children

Booth Wood Primary School is situated on the western side of Loughborough, serving a highly disadvantaged, almost entirely White British, community. It had 194 pupils on roll in 2013. More than half (52.1%) of the pupils were eligible for free school meals, and the proportion of pupils supported at school action plus or with a statement of special educational needs was above average. It was judged by Ofsted to be outstanding at its latest inspection in December 2012. Its outcomes for pupils, especially socioeconomically disadvantaged vulnerable groups, had been well above the national average since 2010. One hundred per cent of pupils achieved level 4+ in both English and mathematics in 2012. Julie Harvey, previously deputy head at Booth Wood, took over the headship in 2008.

Headteacher: Julie Harvey

Chair of governors: Kay Hughes

“This is an outstanding school. Pupils really enjoy school and see learning as fun. The school makes sure that pupils flourish both academically and in their personal and social development. Pupils make outstanding progress by the time they leave school in Year 6. No one is left behind. Teaching is outstanding. Lessons are interesting, well planned and set at the right level for all pupils. Pupils learn exceptionally well ... The school is an exceptional place where all staff and governors work together to create a supportive and lively community.”

Ofsted, 2012

Portrait of the school

This small primary school is almost 40 years old. It is the pride of the local community in many ways. Few parents have a history of accessing further education. They are proud to come into this warm, fun and welcoming school and be involved in various activities to help their children learn and celebrate their achievements. Pupils describe the school as a family where they are looked after and cared for, and where they believe that they are special and outstanding. The school is an exciting place for learning for teachers and for pupils, who know what their aspiration levels are and what they need to do to reach them. Basic literacy and numeracy skills are taught and reinforced with rigour within a creative and innovative curriculum. The school is perceived by parents as a centre of excellence and a source of hope in a highly deprived community. It is committed to giving every pupil the skills and life chances that they deserve and aspirations for learning and achievement have no limit: “Even though we are outstanding, we never stop improving” (Julie Harvey, headteacher).

However, when Julie took over the headship five years ago, the school was a different place. There were high levels of staff absence and turnover and outcomes for pupils were below the floor standards. The physical environment of the school was shabby and was not conducive to children’s learning. Its open plan environment, typical of the early 1970s, was not deemed compatible with the advent of interactive whiteboards and other technological equipment that is regularly used for today’s teaching and learning. The relationship between the school and the community was almost non-existent.

Today the school enjoys a transformed culture and a different physical outlook. Pupils are taught in enclosed, individual classrooms and displays create a fun and positive learning environment, which provides a direct contrast to the home experience of many pupils. A new flat roof and double-glazed windows have contributed to the safe and secure learning environments that pupils enjoy. The new entrance hall is welcoming and inviting and the school has developed an excellent relationship with the local community. Like pupils, teachers also describe the current school as a caring family where everyone is striving for excellence in learning. Booth Wood’s mission statement is SMILE: **S**timulating **M**inds through **I**maginative **L**earning **E**xperiences, which pupils are proud to wear on their uniforms.

The school improved from an Ofsted inspection judgement of satisfactory with good features to outstanding within two years; and the proportion of children reaching or surpassing level 4 in English and mathematics soared from below average in 2009 to 100% in 2012. The quality of the school is also represented by the awards that it currently holds, including: National Healthy Schools status; a Sports England Activemark, an International Schools Award, and a Gold Award for innovation in science.

Leadership and governance

“Leadership and management are outstanding. The school has made considerable progress since the previous inspection due to the determination and high aspirations of the headteacher ... The headteacher provides strong leadership with a clear determination to raise standards. She has focused the school over the last few years on making considerable progress in improving the quality of teaching, achievement and attendance. As a result, the local authority’s involvement with the school is ‘light touch’ but effective.”

Ofsted, 2012

Path to headship

Julie Harvey wanted to lead a school because she believed that she could make a difference. She came from a family where many members were teachers. Although she had always wanted to be a teacher, she “drifted into industry” after her first degree and developed a successful management career in the business sector. At the age of 29, she decided to fulfil her original career plan and went into teaching upon completion of her PGCE at Loughborough University.

To date, Julie has worked in three schools – all serving very disadvantaged communities. This was a conscious decision because she passionately believes that “every child deserves the best education”, and that disadvantaged children are in far greater need than their middle class peers to be taught by outstanding teachers who can give them the life chances that they would otherwise not be able to have. Her first school was an inner-city school in Leicester where she was promoted to literacy coordinator after two years of teaching. She then moved to a large inner-city primary school as learning manager before joining Booth Wood as deputy headteacher and year 6 teacher. As deputy head, her remit was to improve teaching and learning across the school and thereby raise the pupils’ attainment at the end of key stage 2. Much of her effort was focused on coaching in order to establish a high level of consistency in the quality of teaching and learning across the school. Within two years Booth Wood was the most improved school in Leicestershire for its national curriculum test results.

It was then that Julie decided to undertake the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) in preparation for headship. She was ready for a change and a fresh start elsewhere. Circumstances at the school resulted in Julie becoming acting head and, although she still wanted to lead a different school, she was eventually persuaded by her staff to apply for the headteacher post and was successful in her application.

Path to outstanding headship

In reflecting on her five-year headship at Booth Wood, Julie feels that a number of professional and personal qualities and skills that she has developed over time have been key to her success.

A clear vision and a strong sense of moral purpose have always underpinned her leadership actions: “I was determined to make the school outstanding because I knew the children here were so special and deserved to be educated in an outstanding school.” She is passionate about learning and education and, in the eyes of her staff, she always has “super ideas about teaching and learning” (senior leader). More importantly, she is “a woman of the people” (chair of governors) and a skilled communicator who is very good at sharing her motivation, passion and enthusiasm for learning with her staff and pupils. She has high expectations of her staff and pupils, and models high standards of behaviour and vision across the school. Moreover, she gives her staff opportunities and support to learn, to develop, to be creative and, through this, to empower themselves: “You know their talent, and you make sure that the training is there for them.” For her, learning to distribute leadership was admittedly “hard for one who likes to hold on to things”.

She cares about the progress of every single child in the school and values her staff. As one of the teachers put it, “she looks after us all”. Julie believes that “to be a great head, you have to be, or have been, a great teacher; you need to have empathy with both the children and the parents.” She is also perceived to be a good listener and risk taker; she openly encourages initiatives and embraces new ideas: “I have always wanted to do something different. I have always relished new challenges and I embrace new initiatives. I never stay still for long.”

In addition, Julie is community minded. She is chair of the Loughborough Development Group, which is jointly organised by 24 schools. It provides a forum for them to discuss issues and work together to improve practice, focusing on teaching, learning and curriculum development. Julie is proud that her literacy and numeracy coordinators have provided highly evaluated training for the local authority: “That’s empowering them and also makes them feel valued”. Booth Wood is also a strategic partner in a teaching school alliance which is regarded as important in supporting the many small schools in the area.

In terms of her leadership focus, teaching and learning have always remained “at the forefront” of her priorities: “SMILE [Stimulating Minds through Imaginative Learning Experiences] is what we are about here at Booth Wood Primary School. We provide the children with lots of exciting opportunities in order for them to gain valuable learning experiences.” The emphasis on improving children’s English and mathematics skills cannot be greater at Booth Wood: “English and maths skills are incorporated into everything we do here. Our children need constant reinforcement of English and maths skills in order to leave Booth Wood with the levels they need to succeed in life.”

Senior leadership

The school is led by a strong senior leadership team, which includes the deputy and the numeracy coordinator. The deputy specialises in data and assessment and plays a strategic role in the leadership of the school. The special educational needs coordinator (SENCO), who has a good rapport with the community, and the literacy coordinator work closely with the senior leadership team. The literacy coordinator is now in charge of the phonics programme. Except for the SENCO, the other three were all appointed by Julie in the past two to four years. Julie has also appointed a business manager who is responsible, amongst other duties, for improving the physical environment of the school. This appointment has enabled Julie to concentrate on teaching and learning.

There are six other teachers in the school – each responsible for the teaching of a year group. In order to develop younger members of staff, foundation subject coordinators are given quality subject leadership time one afternoon every week. They use this to produce action plans, portfolios of work and cross-examine evidence of pupils' numeracy and literacy skills within their specific subjects. They are all committed to their own learning and development and subscribe to the same values and practice that Julie believes in.

Governance

Ofsted (2012) found that:

“The governing body knows the school well. Governors keep up to date through regular training and visits to the school. They are well informed about the school's performance through detailed reports from the headteacher on all aspects of the school's work. They keep a watchful eye over targets set for teachers to improve their work and robust targets are set for the headteacher. Any underperformance is tackled by using carefully planned approaches for individual staff. The governors fulfil their statutory responsibilities. Governors have a clear understanding of how well pupils are doing when compared with others nationally. Finances are well managed and the pupil premium funding is spent carefully to make sure that pupils who need extra support receive it. This helped to fund a part-time teacher to focus on small group work resulting in pupils doing outstandingly well.”

It is clear that Booth Wood's success has benefited from the support of a highly committed and active governing body that has deep trust and respect for the leadership quality and skills of the headteacher.

The governors have a wide range of experience and expertise. The chair of governors was a long-standing teacher (16 years) and acting deputy head at Booth Wood. She has deep knowledge about the history of the school and its community. An ex-parent who is an accountant joined the governing body to help with the finances of the school. An ex-teacher monitors curriculum development. The governing body is committed to their own

training and development. Most governors have been on different courses in order to “keep abreast of issues” and “maintain effective support and governance of the school” (chair of governors).

The governors are actively engaged with the children and different aspects of school life. From 2012, each class has been allocated a ‘class governor’ so that “children know who we are and what we do” (parent governor). Class governors also play a role in building links with parents and, through this, deepen the good relationships that the school has already established with the community. The governors are also involved in undertaking regular learning walks with the headteacher and members of the staff. This has enabled them to get to know the pupils and their progress. They are knowledgeable about and speak highly of innovative developments in curriculum areas, such as single sex PE in years 5 and 6.

Maintaining the ‘outstanding’ status of the school is now seen as the priority. Although the governors are confident in Julie’s ability to do so, they “wanted to give her more challenges”, the chair said, “so in her performance management, we discussed where she could go. One thing was to become an Ofsted inspector, which the school will benefit from, and the other was to be involved in the teaching school”.

The governors are allied to the local authority and cannot see the benefit of becoming an academy. The local authority paid for the double glazing and the flat roof for the school and the school is keen to keep the excellent relationship that they have with it.

School improvement: from satisfactory to outstanding

When Julie was appointed, she says that “morale was low and half of the full-time staff were leaving; the physical environment of the school looked dreadful and was not conducive to learning and children were pushing boundaries with fights on the premises but no effective system in place to discipline their behaviour”. She consequently set about improving the school in two phases, the first of which focused on reshaping the internal conditions for teaching and learning.

Phase 1: Transforming internal conditions for learning

Building shared vision and high standards

“It was my focus to get these children to at least level 4 by the time they left ... Every child deserves to get at least level 4 standard; otherwise we are not giving them the life chances that they deserve. The staff have heard me say it a hundred times that we have failed these children if that does not happen.” (Julie Harvey)

Such a determination and passion for education drives Julie’s leadership of Booth Wood. Since she took over the headship, she has had many in-depth conversations with her staff about her passion and how to achieve this. She also talked to the parents and the children to find out “what they expected from us”: “They wanted fun and creativity. We wanted that but also high standards.” As an experienced classroom teacher, she modelled her expectations of standards of work through her own classroom practice. Much effort was put into demonstrating to her staff that “actually we **can** do this!” Her hard work has paid dividends. As one of the classroom teachers put it, “She’s inspired us!”

Reshaping the teaching and learning environment

One of Julie’s priorities was to tackle the environment immediately, so that children “were able to learn within their environment – because at the time they were seriously impeded”. Because of finances, she had to have a three-year plan to put partitions in and enclose all the classrooms. She then led the staff and children to decorate individual classrooms, and transformed the ethos of displays across the school so that classrooms and the corridors became a showcase of children’s work and achievements.

Establishing a student behaviour policy

Julie introduced a traffic lights behaviour system which focused on promoting positive behaviour in the school. Initially she had to have regular conversations with her staff – either privately or in public (e.g. at staff meetings) – to ensure that the new standards of behaviour in the corridors and classrooms were communicated and understood across the school and that the system was consistently followed through. “You have to keep firm to what you believe”, Julie explained. A behaviour mentor was appointed to work with those who had a red card during lunch-time breaks. Parents were brought in for discussion if their children misbehaved. They were also contacted if their children had

achieved over and above what was expected. Over time, Julie's efforts bore fruit and the behaviour mentor found herself having far fewer students to deal with.

Developing and empowering teachers

Successful leaders recruit, develop and retain outstanding teachers. Julie is no exception. She is a firm believer in teamwork. For Julie, "Bringing in the staff who share the same vision is essential":

"I don't think we have a member of staff now who does not want to improve ... That's what all teachers need to be doing and that's what mine do. They are constantly searching for ways to improve their teaching and learning. They video each other at work and are constantly looking for how they can make it even better for the children."

The appointment of the senior leadership team (see above) who shared Julie's vision and passion was a milestone in the school's improvement journey.

"Once we had our leadership team fully in place, I invested both time and money in quality leadership training. Some time was spent with external providers but the most valuable experience was spent on developing a strategic plan which ensured standards were raised year on year."

Two members of staff are undertaking master's degrees. Although the school did not fund their studies, Julie has made sure that they have some time off to complete their coursework.

At the whole school level, continuing professional development (CPD) was planned and arranged with talent management and leadership development in mind. Funds were always available for external courses. However, over time greater emphasis has been placed on using the school's own staff expertise to coach, mentor and develop colleagues, "because they have now got exceptional skills that need to be cascaded to others" (Julie). Teachers saw the benefit of observing and videoing each other's lessons and no longer feel intimidated when asking for help from their colleagues. In the eyes of the staff, CPD has been "a team effort" because "we mentored and coached each other, sharing expertise" and "we up-skilled ourselves" (classroom teachers). But it was Julie who linked colleagues' development needs and aspirations with the people who could most help them. As the business manager said: "She gives us the confidence. She has made us all outstanding in our own roles."

The success of these strategies served as a necessary foundation for sustained change and improvement during the second phase, in which Julie focused on deepening and embedding creative and personalised learning as well as enriching collaborative cultures of learning and development. She began shaping a supportive, open and collaborative learning culture in the school and, through this, building a team of outstanding, forward-

looking teachers who have been at the heart of her work within and across the two phases of Booth Wood's development.

Phase 2: Deepening and embedding creative and personalised learning

Having implemented phase 1, Julie focused on what she identifies as phase 2 of her leadership journey.

Data driven, evidence-based teaching and learning

“We are very data-driven here. If you ask a question to any member of the staff about any group in a class, they can talk forever and a day about that group and how they are progressing. And, more importantly, they know exactly the next steps required in their learning journey.” (Julie Harvey)

The deputy head plays a key role in establishing a data-driven and evidence-based culture for teaching, learning and improvement. Each child's progress is clearly and systematically tracked. Termly data are sent to the deputy who then produces a synopsis of key findings at the end of the academic year. This synopsis is first reviewed by the senior leadership team and then cascaded down to the staff for discussion and implementation.

In terms of performance management, termly pupil progress meetings are held in which teachers are engaged in in-depth conversations about the progress of every vulnerable group and every child. Discussion has often focused on pupils who failed to progress and strategies to make a difference. As a result, the staff as a whole are well informed of each child's progress: “We know every single child in this school” (senior leader). The impact of innovation is also reviewed at these meetings, so that “there are no surprises by the end of the year” (Julie Harvey).

Every teacher has a forecast in the school, which includes an expected level of progress and an aspirational level of progress for each of their pupils: “It is the aspirational levels, which are outstanding progress, that every teacher in this school aspires to achieve” (Julie). Children also have detailed and regular academic coaching in the school: “We talk about levels all the time” (deputy headteacher). “Children can tell you what levels they are at; what their next level is and what they need to do to get to the next level ... Children now want to get to level 6!”

Much effort was also put into improving consistency in the quality of marking across the school. A random sample of books was regularly checked by Julie and her deputy along with the literacy and maths coordinators, who then gave feedback on its quality at staff meetings. Initially, giving critical feedback was a constant exercise and sometimes private conversations had to be held to ensure that work was quality marked across the school. Their efforts eventually bore fruit and the children are now able to receive clear and consistent guidance on the next steps that they need to take to improve their learning outcomes. The standard in all books remains consistently high.

Learning with fun and creativity

Learning at Booth Wood is fun, innovative and creative. All teachers are encouraged to do something different each year in their curricular areas in order to stimulate pupils' interest in learning. They design and organise stimulating termly events. Recent examples have included 'Inspiration Days' and 'Viking Day' which made learning a real life experience for the children. Each subject coordinator works closely with literacy and numeracy coordinators to ensure that English and maths skills are embedded in the teaching of all subject areas. A boys' reading club was organised to encourage boys to read more and develop their literacy skills.

New ideas are regularly shared at staff meetings. As one teacher said, "Our staff meetings are quite exciting ... At every staff meeting new ideas come up because we are always striving for more." Julie, her staff and the governors all expressed little concern about curriculum reform because they have the confidence that skills and facts can be taught, learned and acquired whilst still maintaining a creative environment.

"We are very creative here. There is no reason why you can't be creative and instil the basics that you need. The creativity and the enthusiasm come from children's interests. They need to know that they have got to have a high level of English and maths in order to be successful and they know that." (Julie Harvey)

At Booth Wood pupils are actively engaged in fundraising activities. The school council went to London and the Houses of Parliament as a reward for their hard work. Members of the school council presented to four 'Dragons' to win £500 for a scooter project so that pupils could hire them at weekends and during half term. They are proud to raise money for their out-of-school trips, which for many are eye-opening learning experiences. Pupil premium funding has been used to support these school trips.

‘Extended family’

For both the staff and the children, Booth Wood is an ‘extended family’. Pupils feel cared about and cared for here:

“Children come first here because if you are struggling teachers will help you straightaway ... Booth Wood is one big family. It feels like a family ... I am now in year 6. I am a bit sad because it feels like family splitting up.”

Pupil focus group

For the staff, the school is also an inspirational, warm and caring place where they have opportunities to learn and develop and where they feel valued:

“She’s [headteacher] developed people ... I don’t feel that I’m at the bottom of the scale. We are a team ... There is a lot of passion to give the children the best in this school.”

Classroom teacher

Julie emphasises that school improvement is “a whole team effort”: “I want them to feel that they are making a difference to the children’s lives.” There are also a lot of social events in the school where all staff and governors are invited.

The school has had many successful stories of transforming pupils with severe behaviour problems, especially those who were sent to the school having been excluded elsewhere. Julie believes that this is because “we care for the children. We give them a second chance, and sometimes the final chance.” The staff and the pupils are now proud to say to the newcomers: “You will be ‘Booth Wooded’.” If you ask a pupil what that means, they will tell you it means you are part of the Booth Wood family, a family that strives for excellence.”

Engaging community

Engaging the local community has been an on-going effort. Emphasis was placed on creating a warm and non-threatening environment to engage parents in their own children’s learning. The school organised termly special learning days when parents were invited to come in and help their children to participate in fun but learning-orientated activities (e.g. making passports to travel around the world where each class covered a different country). They are also invited to participate in class celebrations. In the mornings one member of staff is always on duty at the school gate to welcome parents and children into the school. Julie also introduced early bird exercises to help children to calm down and develop thinking skills when they arrive. Upon arrival, parents and children are greeted by a teacher in the classroom who will then guide the child to the daily thinking skills task. The school has now developed excellent relationships with the local community.

However, despite this achievement, the “social deprivation that comes into the classroom” has always been a challenge for the school. The headteacher says:

“We have worked tirelessly to gain equality at Booth Wood. We know that everything that happens at home impinges on the learning. What happens at home makes it so challenging more than anything. It is hard work. Yes, our parents are on board more than they have ever been but it is a long-term effort to change their mentality in relation to the importance of education. We have travelled far in this area but have not yet reached the destination.”

Looking forward

Sustaining its outstanding status is the top priority for the school. The ethos of continuous improvement is clearly shared across the school. The outstanding status has been a significant booster and source of pride to the staff, who have become more enthusiastic, confident and committed to the education of the children. The focus of school improvement is now firmly set on harnessing such positive energy and enthusiasm for more creative and innovative ways of working and also on expanding and deepening its outreach to the wider networks and communities of schools.

Sustained effort will be put into curriculum and extra-curriculum development, creating more opportunities to reinforce pupils' literacy and numeracy skills as well as social skills. Language taster sessions are popular and working well. The Edison Learning approach has been used to organise teaching and learning. Julie explains: "It is a thematic approach. We put all the key literacy and numeracy skills within the Edison Learning Themes and ensure that we still focus on the fact that we need to get all our children to at least level 4 by the end of year 6."

Following the success of the breakfast club, the school will introduce the after-school culture club. Between 3.15 and 5.30pm, children will have the opportunity to enjoy the homework zone and arts and sports activities supervised by a dedicated member of staff and a sports coach. Pupil premium will be used to fund this club. Around £5,000 is currently being used to fund the breakfast club. Julie strongly emphasises the importance of pupil premium in enabling the school to provide targeted and responsive support for their children:

"It [pupil premium] has been instrumental in improving the life chances of these children by getting them in early for breakfast and therefore ready for learning ... Without the pupil premium, we wouldn't be able to continue the provision. There is no way that we could support our children. It has made a huge difference in allowing us to be innovative and to use the money to raise standards. This is crucial and will remain crucial."

The school will do more to enhance children's learning and development on transfer to secondary school. Booth Wood is part of a trust with link secondary school Charnwood College. The behaviour mentor and SENCO at Booth Wood are receiving training on restorative justice, which will be introduced to the school so that there is consistency in approach to behaviour for year 6 children when they move to secondary school.

The school is also working closely with Charnwood to improve the provision of pastoral care so that pupils do not feel lost in the larger school. The deputy head of Booth Wood will take the lead, working with year 7 teachers on this aspect of work. The literacy coordinator is training her secondary colleagues to use the phonics programme with their special needs children. Also, moving forward, Booth Wood will pay the French teacher at Charnwood to teach their years 3, 4, 5 and 6 classes every week. This will enhance the

link with the secondary school and also use their expertise to prepare Booth Wood's children for the future curriculum change.

National curriculum and assessment

Teachers and leaders at Booth Wood have little concern about curriculum reform because they are highly confident that they can teach “prescribed” facts and skills in innovative and creative ways (see details on pages 13 and 14).

With regard to assessment changes, like many other heads in Leicestershire, Julie is keen to know what future changes will entail. However, she is not keen on abolishing key stage tests because “how can you target children’s ability if you are not going to assess the level they are working at and the next steps required? It seems to me that if they are going to get rid of that, they are taking a backward step.” In her view, it is important that both teachers and pupils know their targets and levels, and that pupils’ learning and performance are measured and assessed at the end of each key stage.

Looking outward

Teaching school alliance

Booth Wood is working with a local special school to develop an application for teaching school status. It is a strategic partner on the bid and is instrumental to the bid being successful.

Teacher supply and quality

Booth Wood is involved in the Graduate Teacher Programme and currently hosts two self-fee-paying student teachers from higher education. Their lack of commitment and passion for teaching has led Julie to question the robustness of the selection and interview process in the current system. The quality of these two candidates is in sharp contrast to that of the outstanding trainee teachers they used to have. She has concerns about whether the current system is training and producing 'higher quality' candidates for the profession as it is intended to achieve: "Quality is an issue, I think, because of the variety of ways of entering the profession now. Different entry systems seem to be out there and quality is an issue." If the school is designated a teaching school, it will become more involved in the selection of student teachers.

Relationships with local authority

Booth Wood has always had a good relationship with the local authority: "They have been there for us in the past. You could phone them up for advice and, as a new head, that was invaluable. However, it is rather unfortunate that the local authority's roles are diminishing but hopefully our role as strategic partner in the teaching school will ensure that support for schools will still be available."

Case study 3 - The Colmore Federation, Birmingham

Primary leadership case study: long-term leadership of outstanding infant and junior schools, providing support to schools across an inner city

Colmore Infant and Nursery School and Colmore Junior School form a federation, sharing the same site in the Kings Heath area of Birmingham, about five miles south of the city centre. The schools were three-form entry and are moving to four-form entry: there are 380 children on roll at the infant school aged between three and seven; 390 are on roll at the junior school. Both schools were judged outstanding by Ofsted at their most recent inspections: the junior school in 2007, and the infant school in 2011. Viv Randall has been at the infant school for 25 years and been headteacher there for 20 of those years. Cheryl Millard has been headteacher at the junior school for 18 years. Both heads have taken on system leader roles across Birmingham supporting schools as national leaders of education and organising city-wide school improvement. The schools now lead a teaching school alliance. Their joint leadership story is a clear example of outstanding education over a sustained period to support inner-city children, the power of working collaboratively, and reaching out to play a wider system improvement role.

Headteachers: Viv Randall and Cheryl Millard

Chair of the federated governing body: Lorne Pearcey

“This is an outstanding school. All pupils thrive because they receive the high-quality teaching and support they need to achieve outstanding outcomes. Expectations of what pupils can achieve are very high and shared by all staff who continually strive for further improvements. It is not only academic achievement that sets this school apart. Nearly everything that the school provides is of the very highest quality. The attention paid to the care and support for individual pupils, especially those whose circumstances may make them vulnerable, is exceptional. By the time they leave school, pupils are confident and independent learners whose behaviour is exemplary and who are able to concentrate for long periods when tackling problems. Many of their attributes are remarkable for children of such a young age, most notably their research skills and public speaking abilities.”

Ofsted report on Colmore Infant School, 2011

“This is an outstanding school that enables its pupils to attain very high standards in English, mathematics and science and also in art, drama and music. At the core of the school's success are highly effective leadership and management at all

levels. High quality teaching and learning results in pupils of all abilities achieving very well. The outstanding curriculum ensures that pupils excel across a wide range of subjects. Pupils behave in an exemplary manner and are very caring and considerate to others. The procedures for checking the progress that pupils make are second to none, very effectively identifying if any pupil is not achieving his or her full potential. As a result, the school is able to put intervention strategies into place at an early stage and to set realistic and challenging targets for improvement. These procedures play a vital role in the progress that pupils make and the standards they attain.”

Ofsted report on Colmore Junior School, 2007

Portrait of the federated schools

The schools serve a mixed community with local housing consisting of both private and council-owned properties. The backgrounds of the children joining the schools have changed considerably during the time that Viv and Cheryl have been at the schools. The proportion of pupils from minority ethnic groups has increased: around half the pupils now come from a White British background, with others mainly from Asian heritage or mixed-race backgrounds. The proportion joining the schools who speak English as an additional language has increased significantly and is now well above average. The numbers eligible for free school meals and the proportion of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities supported by the schools are just below national averages.

The infant school outcomes have remained consistently high, with the numbers achieving at level 3 at the end of year 2 reaching double the national rate. At the junior school, 93% of pupils reached level 4+ in English and maths in 2012, with two thirds of pupils reaching level 5. Across both schools, rates of pupil progress are exceptionally high. The welcome to the infant school on its website explains the approach of both schools: “the staff and governors believe that each child who attends our school is a special person who has skills to be developed, curiosity to be encouraged, difficulties to be overcome, and goals to be achieved”.

Leadership and governance

In 2007, Ofsted made the following comments about the leadership of the junior school:

“The headteacher is an inspirational leader who has created a very strong team ethos. As a result, all staff are firmly committed to helping individual pupils to achieve as well as they can. An effective management structure ensures that defined roles are interlinked, complementary and draw on individual strengths. This is exemplified in the work of the senior management team, which plays a crucial role in school improvement. Subject leaders are proactive in developing their subjects. Well-established development planning and self-evaluation provide an accurate understanding of what the school does well and what is needed to improve.”

Ofsted report on Colmore Junior School, 2007

Ofsted in 2011 made the following comments about the leadership of the infant school:

“[The school] is being driven forward by exceptional leadership from an inspirational headteacher who receives excellent support at all levels, including from members of the governing body. Self-evaluation pinpoints even the smallest areas for improvement, which are invariably tackled successfully. The headteacher’s vision and continued drive for improvement are shared by all staff and their morale is high. Rigour and equality of opportunity are at the heart of the school’s work. Data on pupils’ achievements and their characteristics are analysed exceptionally well and used to inform interventions and to adjust the provision.”

Ofsted report on Colmore Infant School, 2011

Viv had not intended to become a headteacher. She had been working at the infant school as the deputy, teaching full-time. The then head retired. Viv did not apply for the post initially, but when no appointment was made, reconsidered and when she applied on a second round was successful. Cheryl was a mature student at college, qualified, and then worked with an inspirational headteacher “who was an example of someone who believed in every child”. She had been a deputy for four years, and then applied and was successfully appointed at Colmore. She immediately found Viv to be an important ally: “headship can be a lonely job and it’s really good to have someone to share and talk things through”. At that time the two schools were very separate and Viv had decided she had to work constructively with the new head whoever it was, so “it was a huge bonus when it was Cheryl”.

These two highly successful leaders have collaborated closely throughout their lengthy spells as headteachers at Colmore. They have become good friends and have been on similar journeys. Both are self-confessed “Birmingham girls”. Viv recognised that her role

as headteacher had changed dramatically over the last 20 years, but the core values have remained the same: she wants to have a successful school, with children who want to come to school because of the learning experiences. Cheryl said one reason for their close working relationship was that they shared a similar philosophy about primary education. For Cheryl, she wanted to ensure a broad curriculum with a strong emphasis on arts and sports, although “holding on to that has not always been easy”. They both acknowledged that the “friendly competition between us” was another important part of their relationship and growth as leaders. Their collaboration has been long-standing: Ofsted noted its effectiveness during an inspection of the junior school in 2003.

Both Viv and Cheryl reflected that some of the most important moments in their development as leaders had been when someone had said to them “we think you are up to this” or “when someone spots you, and when it’s someone who knows what they’re talking about”. A good example of this was their early steps in working with other schools. They were “picked to do bits of support work” during the early 2000s, including acting as facilitators for developing senior teams, becoming primary strategy consultant leaders for the National College, and carrying out a range of support work for the local authority. All these opportunities at the time “seemed like a natural progression”.

And once the results at their own schools had reached a good level, and they had been judged ‘good’ during Ofsted inspections (the junior school in 2003 and the infant school in 2006), more support work on behalf of the local authority followed.

At the same time as Viv and Cheryl were taking these steps, the National College was developing and then announced the role of national leader of education (NLE) in 2006. They applied and both were successful in joining the first cohort, preferring to work together. Cheryl and Viv started to work across Birmingham with schools that needed support, and were completely convinced about the benefits of schools supporting other schools. They regard themselves as having been on a “continuous learning journey” and always learning something from all the other schools.

“We keep two lists when we’re working with other schools: one is about what needs to be done at this school; and the other is what we also need to do at Colmore because we can learn from this, or this practice is better than we have at our own schools. Working with other schools has made a real difference to us, and we are better leaders because of it.”

Both Viv and Cheryl acknowledged that there had been no formal training to develop them to work with other schools: “learning was always on the job”. Their view is that emotional intelligence is vitally important in discerning the response from the other school, how the engagement is working, and the impact that is being felt – “what do other people think and feel about what you’re doing”. Tenacity and perseverance have also been critical components of their success: “you do need to be brave – and you do need to get other people on board”. They were also clear what they were hoping to achieve:

“we took these steps because we felt desperate for Birmingham. We thought ‘I’ll do something about it’.”

Throughout this period utilising their own skills and the capacity of their schools to work with other schools, their leadership abilities have been recognised and highlighted by successive Ofsted inspections at their own schools. A common thread running through the inspection comments has been the leadership qualities of both headteachers in establishing, motivating and supporting effective teams.

Reflecting on each other’s leadership styles, Cheryl described Viv’s “warmth, which she uses in a clever way. She knows how to bring people with her. And then when there is an urgency to get things done, she becomes much harder-nosed”. Viv described Cheryl as “the sort of person everyone respects. She is very inclusive. Good at delegating. She makes people feel valued, and is good at getting the best out of people”. They both also recognised that part of motivating an effective team was ensuring that their staff were working with good team players. And part of their roles as heads was to model this practice, be consistent in their behaviours, and ensure people knew how they were likely to respond in given situations.

Senior teams

Both Cheryl and Viv knew that supporting other schools would provide opportunities for their staff and also challenges in ensuring there was no loss of focus on Colmore: “the more we supported other schools, the more we needed to be secure in our own schools”. So they made a conscious choice to build up the capacity of their own senior teams, at the same time as the National College was promoting thinking about distributed leadership – “it doesn’t work if the head retains all the power”.

The current senior leadership team at the infant school comprises two deputies and ‘learning leads’ for each year group. The learning leads have an overview of the data across their four classes. For their pupil progress meetings, for example, learning leads will review the data and the deputies will review and consider any issues for the year group as a whole. Learning leads will then organise the deployment of additional staff and review the effectiveness of interventions.

The junior school has mirrored this type of structure. The two deputy heads have phase responsibilities as well as assessment and pastoral responsibilities. The senior leadership team is therefore made up of the subject co-ordinators and the two phase leaders who are deputies. The year team leader’s role was refocused on data and progress across the year group: “we wanted to have real clarity of roles and ensure we were not just replicating historic roles”.

Governance

“Governance is outstanding. Members of the governing body have managed an excellent balance of support and challenge. In order to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching pupils in sets for mathematics, for example, they observed lessons, evaluated the provision and agreed further funding to support the changes.”

Ofsted report on Colmore Infant School, 2011

In January 2013 a federation governing body was created, replacing the previous separate governing bodies for the two schools. The chair of the new governing body is Lorne Pearcey, who was previously the chair of the infant school and began as a parent governor in 2008; she is also now a National Leader of Governance.

The federation governing body was created partly as a way of planning for a time when Viv and Cheryl would not be headteachers at the schools, partly to ensure greater alignment between the infant and junior schools, and also as a way of managing the work of the teaching school alliance. Previously the two separate governing bodies had shared a committee on premises. In planning for the changes in 2013, the governing bodies had established a ‘cross-roads’ committee which had looked into a range of future options, including conversion to academy status and thinking about succession planning; they soon realised that federation was the important first step as it kept many other options open for them.

In moving from two governing bodies of 20 members to a single federated governing body, it was perhaps inevitable that some existing governors felt as though they were losing their jobs. So the governors reviewed the skills they needed for the roles and how many governors were needed, and produced a one-page person specification for a Colmore governor (including expectations about meetings, visits to school, skills needed, and confidentiality issues), and invited governors to apply. The current structure of the federated governing body comprises the following committees: teaching and learning; staffing; staff and pupil welfare; premises; strategic overview; finance for each school (as well as a joint finance meeting); and pay review.

The outcome has been “a stronger, more able and experienced governing body”. It has allowed governors to streamline their procedures and policies, pool governor resources and gain a much better overview of the schools’ work as well as better learning across the two schools. But the chair of governors acknowledged that it has required a considerable amount of work in drawing up new terms of reference for all the committees, developing a new annual plan for the governing body and revising their existing policies.

Lorne’s role as a national leader of governance (NLG) has added a further system leadership strand to the work at Colmore. Since being designated, Lorne has been deployed to support another chair of governors and also undertaken reviews of governance in schools deemed to ‘require improvement’ by Ofsted. This has worked

particularly well when Colmore was working with the school and governance had been identified as an area for improvement. Most often, the key issue for the governing body has been what she describes as a “lack of clarity about what they should be doing”. There are now five NLGs in Birmingham, and they are meeting as a group in considering how to support schools and share practice.

School improvement: from good to outstanding

Throughout their time at Colmore, Cheryl and Viv have wanted to ensure there was a clear flow between the two separate schools to aid learners. This has gone as far as ensuring continuity in the classroom decor and the organisation of the classrooms. This has been explicitly to avoid the separateness of some of the infant and junior schools that they have worked with. They avoided amalgamation because, having modelled the finances for the single primary school, it would have resulted in less money being able to be spent on the children.

Viv and Cheryl highlighted six areas that they thought have been important to the growth and success of the two schools.

Ensuring a consistent focus on learning

Establishing consistency across the teaching and learning in their classrooms was considered a vital step. Cheryl remembered: “When I arrived, the school was coasting and had been shocked by the introduction of the national curriculum. You have to identify people on the same wavelength, and also people who are not going to be with you, and then work out how to get them on side”. For Cheryl, this was about establishing new leadership structures and systems to make decisions and drive progress. “We needed to change some entrenched attitudes, and we needed to move to an ethos that decisions were being taken in the interests of the children and for their learning, rather than for the teachers”. They knew the difference they had made in both schools when they “walked into the staffrooms and found everyone talking about teaching and learning”.

Lesson observations now take place termly, and once a year for appraisal purposes. At the junior school, there are now non-negotiables and expectations designed to promote consistency across the school. One of these is the ‘4-a-day mental maths’: helping pupils understand when and how to use basic addition, subtraction, multiplication and division methods. The school recognised that numeracy strategies were important and some children were confused about methods. This approach has been designed to promote regular practice of the four core skills, as well as experiments with and learning about different methods.

Leading a focus on pupil-level progress

One of the most significant single developments was establishing and promoting procedures for reviewing and monitoring pupil-level progress. Cheryl recalled that the junior school was effective in terms of overall attainment, but when they started looking in detail at their data and comparing it with data from other schools they were supporting, they found the issue for Colmore was inconsistent progress in different year groups and between pupil groups across year groups. “One of the things we then tried to do was actively to spread the year 6 pressure throughout the school so there was a feeling of

collective responsibility for making sure all pupils made progress. Our support work with other schools helped a lot with this.”

For the infant school, this focus on pupil-level progress has resulted in a single page assessment grid for each pupil that captures the following information, for example for a year 1 child:

- reading – speaking, names and sounds
- writing – letter formation in upper and lower cases; writing their own name; and examples of further writing skills from their independent writing
- phonic knowledge – phase 2 to phase 5 sounds and tricky words. Target of 80% year 1 to be able to read and spell the phase 5 tricky words by the end of year 1
- numeracy – reading, writing, ordering numbers 1–10; number bonds and doubles; differences between single and two-digit numbers; partitioning and halving.

Viv remarked that: “This has also been very powerful in working with other schools that are often overwhelmed with ways of recording lots of information – we wanted to try and keep it very focused”. The assessment grids for all the children in a class are then displayed in the classroom with comments, colour coding and other references to record progress. The assessment grids are a powerful way of levelling across staff and year groups. These are then reviewed at the termly pupil progress meetings.

Providing a broad curriculum with wide-ranging opportunities for pupils

This has been an important element of Cheryl’s and Viv’s leadership of their respective schools, and also collaborating on joint provision where this has been possible. Ofsted noted at both schools:

“The outstanding curriculum ensures that pupils excel across a wide range of subjects. It has been imaginatively organised to provide all pupils with specialist teaching in art, music and drama on one afternoon each week. The results of this are evident in the stunning displays of pupils’ art in classrooms and along corridors throughout the school. The school has also forged close links with organisations such as Birmingham Repertory Theatre and Birmingham Royal Ballet Company, to develop pupils’ artistic talents. There is a very wide range of clubs for pupils to join, including choir, samba band, cricket, netball and gardening club.”

Ofsted report on Colmore Junior School, 2007

“The curriculum is full of diverse and exciting activities. Artists in residence, for example, help pupils to create beautiful works of art. Parents and carers are

heavily involved in working with their children through events such as science week and ‘men behaving dadly’, where fathers and male carers join in practical activities. Partnership with the local junior school has allowed the appointment of a specialist music teacher, resulting in high standards of music across the school.”

Ofsted report on Colmore Infant School, 2011

Leading change related to school growth

In 2010, beginning to move from three classes in a year group to four required significant re-thinking of some of the fundamental parts of both schools. This has required significant changes with a need to re-organise roles and responsibilities, the organisation of the school week and ways of analysing data. The schools had to reassure parents that they were not becoming just a huge school and they would retain the same values and ethos. Nevertheless it has been organised with the usual collaborative leadership and experience of leading change evident in much that takes place at both Colmore schools.

Empowering pupils to take ownership of their own learning

Both schools have developed very strong processes for enabling pupils to lead learning and undertake their own research. At the infant school, Ofsted noted in 2011:

“The outstanding system for marking and assessment was devised by the pupils themselves, which typifies the way they are able to take the lead in learning. In the past, pupils did not always understand their teachers’ comments, so they proposed a system of symbols which all teachers now use in their marking. Pupils have undertaken research into what helps them learn and presented the findings to national conferences. They have surveyed the local community to identify any concerns they may have and then worked with the police to resolve parking issues.”

Ofsted report on Colmore Infant School, 2011

The marking scheme uses 14 symbols to denote not just ‘capital letters’, ‘full stops’ and ‘letters on the line’, but also ‘6 legs on the floor’ (chair legs and two feet), ‘correct pencil grip’, and ‘tell an adult what you want to write’. Pupils are eloquent and confident and want to be able to take ownership and responsibility. They undertake their own action research (which led to the revised marking policy) and also organise a year 2 annual conference involving six other schools. Research findings are presented to staff and pupils. The focus for their action research is guided by the school development plan, and is helping pupils to develop as researchers.

Learning from others

Cheryl and Viv acknowledged the risk for outstanding schools is that they feel everything is working and they stop moving forward. But at Colmore they have seen their practice improve by supporting other schools. “When staff need to explain what they are doing and why they are doing it, it helps to sharpen their own practice. We need to be thinking all the time ‘how good is it here at Colmore?’ if we are explaining this practice to others. So it helps us to re-examine our practice as well.” One idea they have incorporated is to use ‘focus groups’ of teachers to develop ideas and practice across both schools.

Looking outward

Viv and Cheryl recognise that there is still work for them to do to bring along parents, governors and staff with the agenda of working with and supporting other schools. They state that, for staff, it has meant that some have left; others 'get it' and want to be part of the journey; and for others this makes it an attractive place to work. Staff are honest in saying that part of the attraction of working in the schools is to be able to have the opportunity to work and support other schools: part of the 'Colmore offer' is to be able to expand and develop your skills by working with other schools. However, Viv and Cheryl state that with some parents there is a "constant battle" to explain why some of the schools' best teachers are working outside of them: "One way we try to do this is to reinforce the messages about fairness: that all children deserve as good an education as they receive here."

Leading work with other schools

Cheryl and Viv have used the capacity of their schools in supporting six schools over the last 10 years, each for about 18 months in turn. All six were very vulnerable schools, then in special measures, and all came out; none have returned to an Ofsted category of concern. Some of the difference in the long-term change effected in the six schools was related to whether there was new leadership capacity in place that was being supported to improve, and the length of the engagement with Colmore.

Viv and Cheryl have deliberately not sought to become executive heads: "We want to make the changes sustainable, and also we're not empire builders. Schools can improve when you're there, and then when you walk away they become vulnerable again. So we want to work to get sustainable improvements rather than temporary improvements in performance." For schools in a crisis, Cheryl and Viv have found the schools are keen simply to be told: "just tell us what to do and we'll try and do it"; however, they then soon become more confident in developing their own practice.

Once they had worked with their first school to support it in moving out of special measures, both Viv and Cheryl knew the model they were operating could be effective in working with other schools. There was also the benefit for their own schools in creating the opportunities for other staff to step up and lead when Viv and Cheryl were out of school working with others. "We got better at it, and much sharper, and we ratcheted up our own skills".

Cheryl and Viv have been spending on average about two days out of school each week. Throughout their support work they have emphasised the nature of the collaborative work: schools learning together through joint practice development, and both the supported school and school supporting engaged in learning together.

Work across Birmingham

In recent years, with the performance, they state, of Birmingham schools under the spotlight, part of the work undertaken by Cheryl and Viv has been to help a group of heads establish a school improvement group across the city. Once it was established in 2011, Viv chaired the group. All national leaders and all local leaders of education (LLEs) across Birmingham were involved.

The work “has not necessarily been popular, as the group has sometimes been seen as elitist”. But it has galvanised other heads and schools to work together and establish networks to support schools. Often the meetings themselves “... were really difficult. The group was established at a time when vulnerable schools were being converted to become academies, and heads felt as though all of their jobs were on the line, especially when the data was spread out on the table”.

The group looked at the areas of support that were needed by vulnerable schools. They brokered in support, and they undertook support themselves. They also looked across the city to see what were the overarching needs, and at trends in terms of continuing professional development, data and what to do in response.

The time that heads gave to meeting as part of the Primary School Improvement Group was without cost, and the administration to support the work of the group was carried out by Colmore. There are continuing fortnightly meetings of the main group and sub-groups. “However there was no blueprint and we always thought we were making it up as went along”.

The impact already appears to have been significant. Those schools that have received support have improved faster and further than other schools. In 2011, 84 primary schools were vulnerable and below the floor target. This was down to 14 in 2012. As one of the heads said: “It changed thinking and created momentum; people knew what needed to be done.”

Leading a teaching school alliance

From that city-wide system improvement it was natural that when, nationally, the teaching school role was established, Colmore were keen to apply. After the infant school had been judged outstanding by Ofsted, Cheryl and Viv decided that a joint application and joint designation would be most powerful.

Viv and Cheryl have been “amazed at the energy and engagement from the alliance’s strategic partners”. There are 26 schools currently in the alliance. They have been working closely with the local authority in organising support for other schools, and working with schools to the south of the city linking vulnerable schools to NLEs or LLEs. They have 30 School Direct placements, and have appointed 20 specialist leaders of

education (SLEs) across the alliance. The key priorities locally are supporting the development of maths teaching and learning, and supporting schools that are vulnerable.

As with their other outward-facing work they have seen the benefits for staff in opportunities and developing their confidence. It is, they consider, a significant undertaking: “the work of the teaching school is massive – we had no idea”, and they now find they need to rely on their own staff even more than before to maintain the outstanding provision at Colmore.

Viv and Cheryl recognise they cannot now support another school one-to-one in the same way as before, and there are now other schools that are taking the lead on elements of the teaching school role “a bit like distributed leadership in our own school”.

Viv and Cheryl are now working with the other teaching school alliances across the city to establish geographical areas that each alliance can support, for example Colmore in the south of Birmingham, as well as specialist areas of expertise, for example support for English as an additional language learners. The aim is to have a loose association across the teaching schools and then lead the school-to-school support in certain areas across Birmingham. At the same time, the alliances have developed a common charging policy and a memorandum of understanding to look at sharing effective practice.

Looking forward

Viv and Cheryl recognised that the key priority over the next period would be succession planning for their roles. Cheryl is part time in 2013/14 and concentrating on the teaching school role. Viv is embarking on a new period as executive headteacher of the infant school and a local school in special measures. Although she will only remain in this capacity until a new head is appointed at the other school, both Viv and Cheryl recognise that this is a new departure in their support for other schools and comes with challenges as well as opportunities. For Viv, there is the question about whether she can replicate the improvement journey that she has managed to achieve at Colmore.

For the governors, there are key strategic decisions ahead. As Cheryl and Viv move to part-time models of leadership, the governors will need to decide if they are looking for another NLE to work across the two schools in time, perhaps working with heads of schools for both the infant and junior schools. The governors are also now contemplating conversion to academy status as an opportunity for the two schools to be linked through a trust, potentially sponsoring another school.

Viv and Cheryl both recognised they now needed to refine the systems and structures that they had established, to make them more rigorous and to ensure monitoring was effective. They are growing and developing the roles of middle leaders and the leaders of learning as succession planning is, they acknowledge, crucial. The need to build leadership capacity was demonstrated in 2013 when the federation lost three advanced skills teachers and needed to fill these posts.

For these two outstanding heads, they recognise the pressure that now comes with retaining their outstanding status. "As heads, you need to be able to see the reforms and how the bits fit together. Consistency is absolutely key." Their view about system leadership is that it has to work, as "there are not enough good heads to go round".

Case study 4 - Dearham Primary School, near Maryport

Primary leadership case study: serving a village; supporting Solway schools

Dearham Primary School is a rapidly expanding village primary school near Maryport, Cumbria. It has in quick succession become a converter academy, earned an outstanding inspection report and been designated a national support school (NSS). The headteacher has previously led two schools out of Ofsted categories and worked for a time as a local authority school improvement officer. Together with a discerning and dynamic governing body, she and her colleagues are running a vibrant and high-achieving school and contributing to the improvement of other schools with which they work.

Headteacher: Samantha Kidd

Chair of governors: Michelle Jenkinson

“Dearham inspires pupils to thrive in both their personal and academic development. Outstanding teaching stimulates and supports pupils. Together, all staff, members of the governing body, volunteers and visitors create an exceptional environment in which to learn. This contributes to pupils being extremely well prepared for the next stage of their education, which is very much appreciated by pupils and their parents.”

Ofsted, 2012

Portrait of the school

Dearham Primary School is a happy, ambitious and very successful academy set in a Cumbrian village and serving the surrounding area. Its popularity means the school is oversubscribed, but a substantial building programme will alleviate the pressure on accommodation and provide for more facilities that can be shared with the closely involved community. Although challenges such as those accruing from disadvantaged families are below average, such families are increasing in the area. A significant minority of children have special educational needs.

The school is characterised by a rich curriculum, which includes two modern foreign languages and opportunities to visit France and Germany, teaching the national curriculum through topics, and much exposure to the visual and performing arts. Several pupils cited mathematics as their favourite subject. One teacher illustrates how the topic approach works:

“I do a lot of literacy through history ... if you ask the children, they’ll remember when we did Florence Nightingale or Guy Fawkes. I use such topics to get a lot of literacy out of the history work; ICT as well. With the history, you can get sequencing, you can get questioning, you can get them working together to ask each other questions, and check if they’ve got it right. The children do a lot of peer assessment. They also give a lot of feedback on how well what we are doing helps them to learn. I have been able to cover everything in the national curriculum through a topic-based approach and try and do the topics in a different way each year.”

The recent inspection report extolled the quality of teaching, which it described as inspiring pupils. There is an absolute attention to detail when it comes to teaching and learning. As the 2012 inspection noted:

“Teachers continually measure pupils’ understanding of their work and use this to plan lessons which meet the needs of every individual.” As a result: “Much of the teaching is outstanding as a result of exceptionally well-planned lessons. Teachers provide on-going opportunities for pupils to learn through a very wide range of activities and at a rapid pace, which highly motivates and continually engages pupils and challenges their understanding ...”

Assessment and feedback are supported by regular and detailed marking that helps pupils understand how to improve their work. Pupils are given many opportunities to learn from their own and each other’s work.

The whole school community – particularly the headteacher, senior staff and the governing body – is committed to continually improving Dearham. They constantly check on the quality of teaching and learning and this has led, in the judgement of inspectors, to “continuous improvement in pupils’ performance across all subjects”.

Sam has been head of the school since Easter 2010. The school had been judged good by Ofsted previously. Asked what difference Sam's appointment had made, one of the staff responded:

"Sam came in and she's basically driven us forward to a standard that we probably never think we'd be capable of, but she's done it really discreetly. It's not been too many changes at once. She did little changes, all to benefit the staff to begin with. Obviously that had a knock-on effect. You enjoy coming to school each day, and all you want to do is improve your practice further and further. Good's not good enough anymore, and that's just because of your own personal ambition."

Staff comment that Sam runs a tight ship, raising professional standards without people feeling inadequate. As one said: "She's very direct and very fair. The best things are that she loves children – and laughter. We laugh every day!"

Leadership and governance

The headteacher's leadership journey

Sam's path to headship began in 2000 when she went as deputy head to a school in special measures. She wanted more experience, having previously worked in an infant and all-through primary school. After a term as deputy head, the headteacher left on health grounds. Sam was appointed acting head for the 18 months it took to bring the school out of special measures. She remained as substantive head for a further 18 months, in which time she had led the school to 'good' with outstanding features, as judged by a further inspection, with almost all the same staff.

Figure 4-2: Example of school transformation

One reason for successful transformation was that she provided the clear boundaries and guidelines that had been lacking. Her new deputy shared the same philosophy and they developed a collegiate approach which proved very successful with staff who wanted to work with positive leadership. Sam also valued the input from an experienced HMI who monitored the school's progress. She then went for a new challenge: the headship of a junior school having serious weaknesses in Workington. The school had a special provision unit which was not integrated with the school. The main challenge was working with staff who had been there a long time and were very set in their ways, without a strong focus on teaching and learning. Sam recalls that: "They weren't bad practitioners, they just needed more leadership." To achieve quick change, Sam gave all teachers different classes for the next school year, by providing each teacher with their second or third choice of class. The school came out of its category and a further thematic inspection on special educational needs and inclusion judged the provision to be 'outstanding'.

Sam then worked for the local authority as a school improvement officer to 28 schools and was the county lead for early years. Although the schools responded to her well and many remain in touch, she felt that school improvement provision was spread too thinly to make a substantial difference and that she was increasingly divorced from what was going on in schools. So she returned to headship and is now also a national leader of education (NLE), able to support schools causing concern with the high credibility and knowledge that accrue from her current and previous headships and her school improvement experience.

Governors' perspective

The chair of governors, who was involved in Sam's appointment at Dearham, stressed that the governors wanted someone who could move a good school on to the next stage.

“Sam was the outstanding candidate from the outset. From her application on. Although you can't judge and have to go through the whole process, you just had that feeling that she wanted to take the school forward and be with the children. It was evident from the letter she did. Although she had not really been teaching – she'd been out of school – she walked into that classroom [to teach a lesson] as if she'd never been away. It wasn't a difficult decision, seeing the kids' reaction; they got so much out of the lesson. And you could tell she wanted the job.”

Four years on, the chair is in a better position to identify Sam's leadership qualities. She stresses *collaborative leadership*. Sam, she states, has a clear vision of where she wants the school to go, but people are not railroaded. Everybody in the school from top to bottom knows what is expected and what is going on because Sam adopts an open approach where information is shared. Every member of staff is treated exactly the same, from the school crossing man to the deputy headteacher. As the chair stresses: “You can walk into the school and you know that Sam gets on with everyone. She's undoubtedly the leader but you know that the staff are happy.” The result, she states, is that staff turnover is low: the last time the school had a vacancy, there were 68 applicants.

Empowering staff

The leadership team includes an assistant headteacher and two middle leaders: one is literacy leader and the other leads on early years and is the special educational needs coordinator. A part-time outstanding teacher and the school business manager complete this team. Sam considers that there is good distributed leadership, although she keeps a close eye on everything. A good indication of the ways staff feel valued and trusted to take responsibility is the encouragement they get to venture into new areas. In this and other ways, leaders are being grown within the school and three are specialist leaders of education. One said:

“I've felt empowered by working for her. She is very aspirational for everyone and interested in your own career development. For example, she'll come in, say, on the first Monday back after Easter, and just drop something on your desk and say, 'I don't know whether you're interested in this', and then she leaves it with you. That in itself is just a total confidence boost. It makes you realise that she thinks you're good enough.

For example, one day she asked us if we could go and speak to some students who were doing their post-graduate course. That's something that 12 months ago I would never have dreamed of doing. And I felt so proud of myself, and ready to take on the next thing. It's because she doesn't really make a big fuss of it, she

just puts it out there to you, and says, 'You are capable, I trust you completely', and it gives you a bit of a buzz."

Another teacher agreed:

"Yes, my experience was similar in that she asked me to do the post-graduate student talk as well. From that I've been asked to go and talk at the University of Cumbria in June, to some primary school teachers, to try and encourage them to do more foreign language teaching. It's little things, but they all develop your confidence, and they've opened doors really. You do things you would not have dreamed of before; she's very supportive."

Positive governance

The process of conversion to academy status says much about the business-like competence of the governing body.

The governors shared the head's view that, despite much good work that the local authority does, the school was not getting full value for money from the local authority. Also, the school did not support the local authority's approach to the pay and conditions of teaching assistants and preferred to retain its current pay scale. "Single status was when teaching assistants were re-graded across Cumbria. It was a dictatorial approach which took a long time and resulted in pay cuts for many. When we put forward academy status there was a very quick decision that we wouldn't go on single status and teaching assistants would remain on their current pay scale."

The debate about applying for academy status started in April 2011 when the head indicated that she would like to go down the academy route. The chair of governors was clearly of the same mind, saying "I've been waiting for you to say that". They tabled it as an agenda item and invited a head from a local academy and a solicitor to talk to them about what it would entail. The governors asked challenging questions and also took pains to survey staff's views and commission a cost-benefit analysis. They asked for a cost-benefit analysis before the school even began the process and before they began retaining or losing services from the local authority. They were also keen that there was some mechanism to evaluate the school's performance. The school now uses other headteachers who are either trained inspectors or whose schools have been judged outstanding as external evaluators of this.

The school still has a good relationship with the local authority, which asks them to undertake school-to-school support. The school also uses the local authority programme for the support and development of newly qualified teachers. Sam also became a 'primary academy associate', funded by the Department for Education, to support heads who are thinking about the academy conversion process, as Dearham was then one of the few schools in Cumbria that had converted to academy status.

School improvement: from good to outstanding

When Sam took up the headship of Dearham in April 2010 she felt there was much to be done. Although the school had been judged 'good' at its last inspection, she considered there was a need for a stronger focus on the monitoring of teaching and learning. Sam consequently focused on the following priorities.

Establishing a new culture

From the start, Sam recognised that she needed to change the leadership approach from what staff had been used to. This would involve greater accountability, openness and sharing of practice.

Finding out where the strengths and weaknesses of the school lay

Sam had intended to "do everything gradually". This quickly changed. Having started by clearing out the office on the first day – "decluttering", as she calls it – she then interviewed everyone who worked in the school and observed them all at work, completing this in the first three weeks. She was open and straightforward about this, saying: "I haven't got an agenda, I just want to know what you're feeling, what your strengths and weaknesses are, and what your practice is like."

Improving the school environment

Sam also embarked on an on-going programme of improving the school environment, which has involved altering teaching accommodation, using space in better ways, creating a new staffroom and enriching learning resources.

Making the most of personnel changes

Staff turnover also provided an opportunity to change the dynamics of the school. In Sam's first term at Dearham there were vacancies for a site manager's position and a cleaner's position. A job share of two teachers came to an end, leading to the opportunity to appoint a new teacher to strengthen the teaching. Adroit adjustments of staff roles complemented these changes.

The new close interest in what they were doing was a culture shock to staff; they were not used to having their lessons observed and children's books and marking scrutinised. The evaluation confirmed some inconsistencies across the school. The head believes the staff realised this and that they wanted to move forward as a school. To do so, they had to share the findings and take a collegiate approach to school improvement. Everyone was part of this, with the head ensuring that no-one ever lost sight of the "nitty gritty": the fundamentals of effective teaching and learning. Teachers' views of the changes Sam introduced are illustrated by one, who said:

“She’s inspirational really. She’s been head before at schools which needed improvement, and she’s brought them on. I didn’t know her but what I like about Sam is that she’s got respect for everyone and she’s fair. Because of this, people go out of their way to do what she asks. There’s a lot of give and take, which is really good. It makes good morale in school, and makes good relationships between staff and pupils, and between the head and the staff.

She has brought in a lot more stringent management systems. The focus on our work, of course, was uncomfortable for everybody. But she did it in such a way that it was not confrontational. People just got on with it. She approaches things in a way that makes you feel safe; she makes you feel comfortable. So that’s why we all just work in a more effective way. We don’t bother about it at all now [lesson observations]. We also do things like book scrutinies, and we moderate together, and we do pupil interviews and a pupil questionnaire once or twice a year about different subjects. So she’s brought all that in.”

Monitoring and feedback at all levels

Teaching observation has been the core driver for improvement. Observations apply not only to teachers but to all staff. Teaching assistants, for example, are observed as part of a lesson but they also have their own discrete observations as well. Subsequent observations in the cycle focus only on development points. Sam believes that this approach has been instrumental in improving practice. But her approach to quality assurance is based on more than observation cycles; Sam is a presence throughout the school, constantly taking its temperature.

“I make a conscious effort to go into class every day. I’m visible. Actually I was having a conversation with a colleague and was moaning that there were a couple of drawers that weren’t labelled. And then I thought, ‘does that matter?’ Well yes, it does. Somebody said: ‘You notice everything’. And I come in at weekends and have a ‘ratch around’, and I know what everyone is or is not doing. It’s done very jovially – and I don’t think I’m obsessive – but I want to be the very best I can be. I want this for the school too ... The biggest accolade we ever had here is that the [inspection] report has everyone in it. I’m not dictatorial and try to get things done in a very supportive way. Yes there’s a bottom line, but actually you can do it by being fair and kind and supportive.”

This approach is borne out by her colleagues in comments such as:

“She’s very professional. She’s very fair on everybody. She’s respectful, she’s family orientated: the school as a family and individual people’s families, if anything’s happened. She definitely knows what she’s doing, she keeps very up to date, education-wise, with whatever’s happening. So therefore she keeps us up to date. She expects the best; she expects nothing but the best.”

Sam states that one of the Ofsted inspectors commented that “having talked to all of your staff, none of them think they’re being held to account, but every one of them is.”

Looking outward

Support for other schools

The school has partnered and supported a number of other schools, some more formally than others. Currently they have a formal partnership with Silloth Primary School, which requires improvement. This was at the request of Silloth, whose head was known to Sam. The two schools arranged reciprocal visiting of all members of the two staff teams, spending one or two days with the corresponding year group teachers in each other's schools, on a planned rota.

The Silloth staff completed proformas of the things they have learned and the things they could do better. These findings have been shared with the Dearham staff. For example, each teacher spent a day with their counterpart in Dearham and looked at basic classroom management in lessons at Dearham. This has in turn built the confidence of Dearham staff. The Silloth teachers have taken back many solutions, for example how to assess and make the most of the profile in the early years; how to make lessons less passive; a range of different foci.

Dearham staff are given time out of class to talk to their counterparts and have then gone to Silloth to observe and discuss practice, what could have been done differently. Informal feedback is provided in this way. Silloth has subsequently been inspected and judged to be 'good'. The inspection report commented that: "Good practice is being shared through the school's link with a local outstanding school."

This type of support, Sam states, needs careful managing:

"Since we became outstanding we've been inundated with requests from different schools to come and look at our practice. That's been quite tricky because some schools come with the right intention, which is that it would be ongoing; some schools seem to think that there's a magic thing that you do which would give you outstanding."

The school discusses potential visits and filters the requests, tending to accept those that are interested in an ongoing relationship. The governors were very clear:

"we're not doing any outreach work if our own practice suffers'. So to that end I present them with a snapshot of school-to-school support and the impact for us and the other school. They have been happy with that and supported the NLE and NSS application because we had already demonstrated that we could undertake it successfully".

Dearham is currently supporting another primary school that requires improvement. The focus here is on early years so all their early years staff have spent time at Dearham and Sam has been back at the school's request to see how they have implemented what they

learned from their visit. To aid capacity, Dearham has appointed an extra teacher – an outstanding practitioner – to teach modern foreign languages and provide internal cover.

Looking forward

The head is alert to the challenge of maintaining the drive and enthusiasm of the staff having been judged outstanding. Staff feel it is a privilege to be where they are now. They know that they have worked hard and say that Sam has been the driving force behind it.

The school is not complacent and is resolved never to take the foot off the pedal. Sustaining its excellence is a new challenge for Sam, something she has not done before and she states that she finds it more daunting than taking on a school in special measures ever was.

Her strategy is to look for opportunities for the school to move on in its practice. Partnerships with other schools play an important part in this because it means that the school's own practice is always under external scrutiny. As a staff they have agreed that every term they will review what they have done that is different and how they have moved on. In addition to school-to-school support, Dearham is a strategic partner in a teaching school alliance and contributes to NPQH training and assessment. Sam states that it is seen by the LA as having the capacity to help other schools recover and is valued by peer headteachers, both primary and secondary. The school is expanding to become two-form entry for which additional accommodation is in sight. The increase in size will add to capacity for school improvement and provide more leadership opportunities. Sam states the future looks bright.

Case study 5 - Dedham Church of England Voluntary Controlled Primary School, near Colchester

Primary leadership case study: clear vision and the ambition to provide outstanding education in a rural primary school

Dedham Church of England Voluntary Controlled Primary School is in the village of Dedham near Colchester in Essex. It serves the local village community and also many pupils who travel from neighbouring villages. It is a one-form entry school with 204 pupils on roll. It was judged 'outstanding' at its most recent inspection in 2012 under the new Ofsted framework, and all year 6 pupils attained level 4 or above in reading, writing and mathematics that year. Headteacher Heather Tetchner has been at the school since 2007.

Headteacher: Heather Tetchner

Chair of governors: Jason Skelton

“Outstanding leadership and management and excellent relationships underpin the school’s success. Leadership from the headteacher is resolute and determined. Teaching and pupils’ achievement have improved considerably since the last inspection. The uncompromising vision of a school at the heart of its community and the mission to ‘nurture a lifelong love of learning’ are met very effectively. Teaching is outstanding. Lessons are highly motivating because teachers link subjects together very effectively to make learning relevant. Within the innovative curriculum, the provision for pupils’ spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding. By the time they leave at the end of Year 6, attainment is at a much higher level than found nationally. Pupils’ behaviour is outstanding. Enthusiasm and perseverance are key features of pupils’ exceptionally positive attitudes to learning. Their excellent social skills, good manners and respect for others prepare them very well for their futures.”

Ofsted, 2012

Portrait of the school

This rural primary school is central to its village community. Parents remember attending the school themselves. Due to its reputation, it attracts pupils from neighbouring villages and a third of pupils come from out of the school's catchment area. On the school site there is room for a vegetable garden ("Vegilot"), nursery garden ("Creation Station"), sensory garden, quiet garden for reflection, and a Forest School area. The single storey building has seven teaching areas, a library, ICT suite and pupil support area.

Pupils aged 4 to 11 attend the school, grouped into seven classes. Pupils' socio-economic backgrounds are generally favourable. The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals is low, and the percentage of pupils with special educational needs is well below national averages. Nearly all pupils come from White British backgrounds.

The focus on pupils' attainment is balanced with emphases on the arts and music, Christian values, and support for pupils' social and emotional development, in line with the school's mission statement, and promotion of lifelong love of learning. The combination of very high standards and strong values provide the bedrock for a successful primary education for its pupils.

The school had enjoyed a good reputation for a number of years, with Ofsted in 2004 and again in 2007 judging the school to be 'good'. When Heather Tetchner arrived at the school as head in 2007, she and the governors had decided that there was the potential for the school to be even better. The school has been on a steady trajectory of improvement since then.

Leadership and governance

In 2012 Ofsted made the following comments about the leadership and management of the school:

“There is no complacency in this successful school. Since the last inspection, the headteacher has maintained the high levels of achievement and pupils’ personal development. She has driven improvement relentlessly; pupils’ attainment has risen further and the curriculum has improved considerably. Attention to detail and excellent management systems are at the heart of the school’s success. The school tracks the progress of individual pupils rigorously. Senior leaders and teachers know exactly how well individuals and different groups of pupils are learning. The headteacher holds teachers to account for the progress their pupils make and ensures they attend appropriate professional development opportunities.”

Ofsted, 2012

Heather was an experienced headteacher when she arrived at Dedham. She had spent 17 years as a head in Essex before 2007, first of all as the head of what was then a one form-entry infant school. When the infant school was amalgamated with the neighbouring junior school, she successfully applied for the post of headteacher of the new two-form entry primary school.

During her previous headships, Heather also acted in a part-time capacity as a school development adviser for six schools for the local authority. She acknowledges that getting into other schools and observing other practice allowed her to reflect on her own qualities as a leader and the practice in her own schools: “Having the privilege to go into other schools was one of my key influences.” She has also had experience of working with other agencies, line managing social workers and educational welfare officers for her local consortia of schools. She currently acts as an external assessor for the performance management of other heads.

When the headship vacancy arose at Dedham in 2007, Heather was happy at the school where she was then the head. Dedham were unable to appoint after two rounds of recruitment and advertised for a third time. Heather was told about the vacancy “and I just thought I would go and have a look”. Then she saw the scale of the challenge “... and was gripped”. Once Heather got into the workings of the school at this level she could see the potential for the school, and most importantly what she could do to improve it. Her experiences as an adviser working with other schools, based on the foundations of a successful career as a head, have forged her clear convictions: “I am not the sort of person to stand by and watch children receive an education that does not match their abilities.”

Heather knows that she is passionate about the education that children receive, and this runs as a strong thread through her career and seven years at Dedham. She is also a self-aware leader who recognises that, for some, these convictions and her passion will be challenging: “I know I work at a pace – but these pupils only have one chance. Some staff would say I was a bit like a bull at a gate when I arrived – although colleagues might say I had softened over time. I’m sure some staff found me rather scary”. It was little surprise that Ofsted in 2012 described her leadership as “resolute”, “determined” and “relentless”.

Moving the school forward was not plain sailing. She very consciously set out to make the school outstanding: “I knew the school could get there”. But having set out her vision, a certain amount of stubbornness was required to implement it. And when the going got tough, she had the courage of her convictions and her career and experiences to support her: “as an experienced head, I knew what I was saying was right”. Governors and staff voiced similar themes when describing Heather’s leadership: passionate, committed, sets high standards, a robust manager who does not shy away from difficult conversations, and inspirational.

Heather values the children in her school and also values the opportunities that can be offered through the education provided at Dedham. Her passion for every child to receive the best extends to her keeping records of the many positive comments made by staff and people from outside the school about her pupils. She keeps a “treasure chest” in her room containing letters, notes and books recording the messages of support and commendation about pupils at the school.

She was clear about the reasons why some primary school leaders lose their way and then under-perform: “They get tired or they lose the passion; and sometimes they just get too isolated”. In 2013, Heather successfully applied to become a national leader of education, and Dedham has now been designated as a national support school.

Alongside Heather, the senior leadership team is made up of the deputy head, a senior teacher who is also the special educational needs coordinator and inclusion manager, and the school business manager. The team is very important to the outstanding education provided at Dedham. “I could not do what I do without them”, said Heather, “and we’re fortunate; we understand each other’s strengths and we think in different ways”. The teams meet every fortnight and have a rolling agenda undertaking self-evaluation and reviewing aspects of the development plan. New ideas are encouraged: the deputy headteacher, recently returned from some professional development, enthused about the idea of staff videoing their own lessons so they could review their own practice, and then discuss what they had learned in a coaching session with the deputy. The idea is being pursued. The chair of governors remarked that “the culture is ‘we can change things and do them better’, and that culture comes from Heather”.

When Heather was out of school in 2013 supporting another school, the deputy headteacher assumed headship duties at Dedham for the two days of the week Heather

was absent. This was strategically planned with governors and staff, and also communicated to parents. It was a good development opportunity for the deputy headteacher.

Governance

In 2012 Ofsted found that:

“... the governing body has a very clear picture of the school’s strengths and areas to improve based on a detailed understanding of the school’s budget, information from school leaders at all levels and their own analysis of pupils’ attainment and progress. The governors set the headteacher measurable targets for improvement based on precise evaluation of pupils’ achievement; governors hold her very much to account for meeting these targets. The governing body is very proud of the school, supports its work but is not afraid to challenge leaders.”

The governing body understands the school through each being linked to a specific subject area. Formal and informal monitoring forms are used to record their reflections from subject-related and other visits to the school. Governors also receive monitoring reports from subject leaders about progress and actions.

The current governing body recognises that it had a significant number of vacancies six years ago. The governors now believe they are “sufficiently qualified to challenge what is in the [school development] plan” and have a range of relevant expertise in their backgrounds: lawyers, a banker, a management consultant, a local entrepreneur, the vicar, the director of a local business, two teachers, and an author of children’s books. Beneath the governing body they work as a resources committee (which leads on finance, premises and personnel) and a curriculum committee. The curriculum committee is attended by the deputy headteacher, allowing him the opportunity to present and explore the school data directly with governors. The deputy prepares a detailed data report for governors and senior leadership team analysing the progress of pupils using average point score data by year group and pupil groups. Governors recognise that the budget is tight with a relatively high proportion spent on staff costs “but we realise that our teachers are our most important determinant of success for our pupils, and we need to use our current funding on our current pupils” (chair of governors). Additional funds generated from the community are highly valued, as is the income from Heather’s external work supporting other schools.

Governors remained completely supportive of the changes that Heather and the senior team implemented over the previous seven years. They have also been supportive of Heather’s work with other schools, due to the knowledge and learning it brings to the school about other practice and also the useful additional income. The governing body has looked hard at the pros and cons of academy conversion and is not currently persuaded there are sufficient benefits to take this step. Despite the school being over-subscribed, it will not be expanding in the foreseeable future.

School improvement: from good to outstanding

The school was inspected six weeks after Heather took up the post of headteacher in 2007. In 2004 Ofsted judged Dedham to be 'good', and the team came to the same conclusion in 2007. Ofsted in 2007 said that Heather "... has an exceptionally clear vision for the school that combines aspects of the school's successful practice with new developments to enhance the quality of education and maintain high standards". Heather said that she had set out her stall in the revised self-evaluation form and the new school development plan that she completed as soon as she had arrived: those documents and other evidence had convinced the inspection team that the forward direction was sound. They could also see the progress that needed to be achieved. Heather then set about the challenge of taking the school in that direction.

One of the most important early steps was "making people feel accountable for what was going on in their classrooms at every level". This was a real challenge as the culture amongst some staff then was "... but we've done it like this for years". Lesson observations were a key area to develop. Heather announced at a very early staff meeting that her approach during her first term would be to give staff notice that she was coming in to observe them. After that, the observations would be unannounced. This set the tone and gave an explicit indication of what Heather expected and what she would be doing to monitor practice: "I feel passionately that the children should have the very best every day, and I need to know that the 'bread and butter' lessons are high quality."

Not all staff stayed the course, and for some "it must have been a huge culture shock". Four of the current teaching staff were at the school in 2007, the other five are Heather's appointments. Heather consciously did some teaching from the start to demonstrate what she could do, and also as a way of monitoring what was going on in the classrooms. She still does this: "you lead by example and I won't ask my staff to do something I wouldn't do myself".

One of the other key interventions was implementing a monitoring schedule, focusing on the accountability of subject areas, and crucially enabling the senior leadership team to review what action was being taken in response to issues that were identified. Linked to this was the process of teacher performance management. When Heather arrived, all staff had similar objectives. They quickly became more personalised for each member of staff, with all staff having one objective related to giving feedback to pupils. Some challenging conversations were needed early on: "There were some staff where I needed to say 'actually that's not good enough, and here are the reasons why'. Teachers need to understand what they need to do to improve." The increase in expectations and the honesty of the feedback on teachers' performance were enough to create the changes that were needed.

Ofsted in 2012 said:

“Teachers set very high expectations for their pupils to work hard and persevere. They mark or discuss pupils’ work with them so they know exactly what they have done well, and how they can improve. Pupils respect their teachers’ views and try hard to follow their guidance”.

Heather and her deputy attribute much of their current success to the systems and procedures that they have put into place, focused on the quality of teaching and learning and rigorous monitoring of pupil progress. “The systems and proformas we use to make expectations clear are one of the key things that makes the school outstanding” (deputy head). Ofsted in 2012 agreed and said that “excellent management systems are at the heart of the school’s success”. These comprise a number of key aspects, as follows.

Assessment for learning (AfL)

There has been a sustained focus on AfL by increasing the amount of formative feedback provided to pupils, working across the school to look at the purpose of marking, and ensuring – for example in written work – that there are strong links between marking and pupils’ writing targets. The deputy head, James, together with the school’s English coordinator, developed the details of the school’s approach during a four-day training programme looking at all the different strands of AfL: success criteria, learning objectives, feedback, higher level questions and next steps for learning. There is now specific reflection time built in across all classes for core subjects so that pupils can respond to marking comments; this creates a written and oral dialogue between pupils and teachers about their work. Heather’s view was that the improvements in AfL, linked to increased teacher accountability through the use of pupil-level data and lesson observations, had been the building blocks that had contributed to their improvements.

Over time, Heather observed that one of the most significant challenges has been ensuring that learning objectives for pupils are appropriate to their context. The most important progress made was when she saw them moving from being about the activity (what the children were doing) to being about the purpose of the learning (what was the intended outcome of the learning or what should the children be able to do).

Lesson observations and monitoring

Lesson observations now are all unannounced. Heather uses a proforma, developed by the senior leadership team, to record views about the lesson and judgements against the Ofsted criteria, shading in aspects that best describe the lesson with relevant comments. Feedback is immediate with a copy of the actual form: “I don’t believe in taking notes and then going away and writing something different later on”.

Heather has also built up the capacity of her staff to undertake observations. Subject leaders will observe lessons to review the quality of pupils’ learning in their subject and

the implementation of that aspect of the curriculum. Unsurprisingly there was some anxiety about this from both sides. These monitoring visits by the subject leaders are consequently called “drop-ins” instead of observations. For each subject area, there is a clear schedule of monitoring across the terms, designed to provide a mix of evidence. For example, in term 1 a subject leader might undertake a set of drop-ins; in term 2, they would carry out a ‘climate walk’ to look at the profile of their subject across the school, including examples of display work and its presence in pupils’ books; and in term 3 they would gather some pupil perception information through discussions and feedback with groups of pupils or one-to-one interviews. The pupil interviews might cover issues such as “what have you learned in science this half-term? What have you enjoyed learning about in history?” These termly scrutinies cover all subjects.

Planning the support for pupils

The school development plan is now concise and focused and in the last four years the key priorities have been shrunk onto a credit-card sized version for staff and governors to have with them. The plan is also displayed prominently in the school meeting room. Previously the senior team had not been involved in the development of the plan; the work now is led by them, informed by the evidence from subject co-ordinators and involving all staff.

Despite having relatively few pupils eligible for pupil premium funding (18 in 2013/14), the school has ensured that they make as much progress as their peers. Ofsted in 2012 noted that “the achievement of pupils known to be eligible for the pupil premium is outstanding. There are no significant differences in the achievement of different groups of pupils within the school”. Nevertheless, from autumn 2013 the school took additional steps and has established a pupil premium support team through redeploying a higher level teaching assistant and another teaching assistant. Time out of lessons is provided for the pupils in a dedicated learning space (the ‘study rooms’) for pupils who need extra support. The deputy headteacher is undertaking an interim review of the impact of the support to look at lessons and how the additional support is working.

Empowering pupils and promoting pupil responsibility

Developing pupil responsibility is very important to Heather and the school, blending traditional and modern methods. Alongside the school council there is a house system, house points and a head boy and girl. Specific projects also generate responsibility: for example, pupils developed the designs for new toilets across the school by visiting other schools, including researching and advising on how to incorporate safe locks on cubicle doors. In 2012 Ofsted noted that “the headteacher loans each class £25 for setting up an enterprise to generate funds. Pupils prepare a business plan, advertising literature and keep accounts. Scrutiny of photographs and accounts indicate well-organised and very profitable ventures where pupils use their skills to good effect. Many older pupils have a leadership role in the school, such as ‘problem solvers’ and house captains”. Year 6

'Reading buddies' provide support to reception children and promote the sense of community.

Pupil responsibility is also supported by a strong focus on behaviour, politeness and Christian values. In 2012 Ofsted said:

"Behaviour around the school is outstanding; it is a very harmonious community. Pupils are polite and friendly to those they know and are welcoming to visitors. Dinner times are very social occasions where older pupils help the younger ones and model good table manners."

Displays remind pupils of the six core Christian values of the school: wisdom, empathy, worthiness, inclusion, spirituality and honesty. A strong emphasis is placed on links with partner schools in Tower Hamlets (Elizabeth Selby Infant School) and Kenya (Gatunduri Primary School): as Ofsted (2012) noted, these "... help pupils gain a clear understanding of similarities of aspiration as well as differences between their own lives and those of others". The links involve visits to the Kenyan school by Dedham staff, and charitable work for the school. Extra-curricular activities are enhanced through effective arrangements with the Children's University to gain credits towards their 'passports to learning' when they attend clubs and other out-of-school activities. Pupils were unfailingly polite and eager to talk about their school, with one pupil commenting that "we get amazing learning in skills for life".

Looking outward

Heather has built on her previous work as a school development adviser for the local authority by supporting four schools in her time as headteacher at Dedham. All the schools were in vulnerable or challenging circumstances. Most recently, Heather supported a very small primary school on the border between Essex and Suffolk. Her support was sought by the local authority when the headteacher and deputy both went on maternity leave; Heather was brought in “to steady the school”. Heather was working two days a week at the school for nine months during 2012/13 with the existing staff and governing body, with some additional time from the Dedham English co-ordinator and special educational needs coordinator. Heather was at pains to ensure that during her time at the school she did things “in consultation with the existing head so she didn’t come back to a school that she didn’t recognise”. Governors at the school commented that Heather “didn’t expect us to fit to her ways of doing things” and “has been very good for us and shown us what we have”; “and asked questions, and then said ‘it could be even better if ...’”

Heather has now been contacted by the diocese to act as the chief executive of a new diocesan multi-academy trust. The trust will initially incorporate one school that is currently in special measures; a further two primary schools are expected to join. While Dedham will not be joining the trust, the diocese has been able to secure leadership from Heather. Governors at Dedham are supportive as they see it as a natural extension of Heather’s work in supporting other schools. Heather has already visited the school to speak to staff, observed lessons and reviewed the school’s data.

The school is now also part of a local collaborative partnership with three other schools, one of which is in an Ofsted category. This partnership is to support pupils and share good practice across the four schools.

Looking forward

Planning for the new curriculum is one of the school's 10 priorities in this year's development plan. The current year 3 and year 4 classes are implementing the revised curriculum this year to pilot the changes. The year 3 and year 4 teachers will be using the school's non-pupil days to share learning and to help the school prepare for implementation next year, identifying any issues that will need to be dealt with, including new resources that will be required.

The school will be continuing to work with the existing assessment levels to identify progress for staff, pupils and parents. Changes in the collection of data will come through considering different approaches with their data assessment systems, Essex Target Tracker, and discussions at regional CPD events.

Now that Dedham has been designated as a national support school, Heather has been contacted to become a strategic partner for a teaching school in cohort 4. It is, she states, a challenge the school would relish.

Case study 6 - Greenwood Academies Trust, Nottingham

Primary leadership case study: primary school recovery within an expanding academies trust spanning 3-19 provision

The Greenwood Academies Trust evolved from Greenwood Dale School, whose headteacher, Sir Barry Day, was one of the first national leaders of education from 2006/07. The Trust has embraced an increasing number of secondary and primary schools in the east Midlands, focusing solely on improving inadequate schools and schools that require improvement. By September 2013, the Trust had oversight of 22 academies, 15 of them providing for pupils of primary age in locations from Skegness to Derby and from Northampton to Nottingham. A feature of this case study is the 3-18 vision which, allied to a commitment to social justice, drives the work of the Trust.

Chief executive: Sir Barry Day OBE

Primary executive principals: Lynda Valentine

Emma Hadley

Portrait of Greenwood Academies Trust

By summer 2014, the multi-phase Greenwood Academies Trust included 24 academies, including two free schools, the majority of which provided for children of primary age. Two more primary academies are due to open in September 2014. The flagship school, Nottingham Academy (3-18), was forged from the outstanding Greenwood Dale School (11-18) and the neighbouring Jesse Boot Primary School (3-11), together with Elliot Durham secondary school that Greenwood Dale had been supporting. For Barry Day, former head of Greenwood Dale and now chief executive of the Trust, the imperative of all children having access to excellent education – particularly important in areas such as the Sneinton-Mapperley-St Anne districts of Nottingham, where children have few other worthwhile opportunities – made a convincing case for all-through education from 3-19. His view was shared by the headteacher of Jesse Boot Primary School, Lynda Valentine, and her governors, leading to the amalgamation and opening in 2009 of the new Nottingham Academy, which also absorbed one of the supported schools, Elliot Durham. As Lynda explains:

“The governors of Jesse Boot voted for the amalgamation, being more concerned about the future of their children than the loss of their sovereignty. Our children need outstanding schools; they will not move on in their lives otherwise because of the nature of the area. It won’t happen for them outside school so it has got to happen for them inside the school. No matter that no-one can read in the community because the school will teach them. Education doesn’t happen outside, it happens inside. We have to explain to parents what we are striving for and make sure that they have high expectations, and that when their children are in school, they are there to learn and help others learn. So their behaviour has to be appropriate.”

Barry Day is passionate about providing great education for disadvantaged children. His drive for social justice has led him and his schools, colleagues and governors to share their success and expertise with schools deemed inadequate by Ofsted. He was one of the first national leaders of education and was one of the first generation of system leaders that began to emerge 10 to 15 years ago.

Success in transforming schools breeds success, and Greenwood Dale – and latterly the Greenwood Academies Trust – have been in demand to sponsor failing schools across the east Midlands. A model for planned expansion envisaged the establishment of hub schools in areas beyond Nottingham, with executive principals having oversight of the performance and improvement of the schools in these clusters.

The Trust provides an opportunity to see primary leadership at work in a system-wide context. This case study focuses on the work of the two primary executive principals in the Greenwood Academies Trust but begins by considering the first ‘hub’ school.

Nottingham Academy

The Nottingham Academy is the result of the combination of the former Elliot Durham School, which was the third worst-performing school in the country back in 2007, and the Greenwood Dale School, an outstanding school highlighted by Ofsted in 2009 as one of 12 outstanding schools serving disadvantaged communities.¹ The academy was formed in 2009 in existing school buildings and opened in 2012 on its new purpose-built site which also incorporated Jesse Boot Primary School.

The first inspection report on Nottingham Academy represented a tale of three schools: Greenwood Dale secondary (previously judged outstanding), Elliott Durham secondary (previously satisfactory) and Jesse Boot (previously good with outstanding leadership). The report judged the academy overall as good, with outstanding leadership. References to primary education in Nottingham Academy were unequivocal about its outstanding quality, outcomes and leadership. This was important to the Trust's mission to support underperforming primary as well as secondary schools. The inspection report captures the ingredients of highly efficacious primary teaching:

“Pupils in the primary school make outstanding progress and their attainment is above average by Year 6. Teaching is outstanding in the primary school. Teachers have an exceptionally thorough understanding of pupils' strengths and areas for development and plan very precise activities to enable outstanding progress. There is notable consistency of approach throughout the school in terms of guiding pupils in improving their work. This is successful because pupils know exactly what is expected of them and teachers have a very clear understanding of how to use success criteria to allow pupils to see where they can improve their work. Lessons observed were almost always excellently paced and pupils worked hard to meet their teachers' expectations. Teachers provided constant feedback, often pausing to reflect on how to improve an individual's work or to offer additional guidance to enhance pupils' understanding. Lessons are interesting and engage pupils in learning themes that motivate and capture their imaginations.”

“The curriculum in the primary school is outstanding because every opportunity is taken to very effectively develop pupils' literacy and numeracy skills. No opportunity is missed to encourage learning for example the innovative approach to homework called 'Passion posters'. This involves pupils creating a poster demonstrating what they know. These are frequently highly creative, exceptionally well presented and demonstrate a real sense of pride in their work.”

Ofsted, 2012

¹ Ofsted (2009) *Twelve outstanding secondary schools: excelling against the odds*, Ofsted: London.

Primary system leadership

Lynda Valentine has all the credentials for a primary system leader. When she first started teaching, she imagined she would make her contribution to Nottingham schools and then find a school in somewhere like the Lake District. As she became immersed in urban education, this vision no longer appealed.

Having always been junior or primary school orientated earlier in her career, becoming deputy head of a primary school, Lynda sought to gain experience of the early years by taking on the headship of an infant school in a challenging mining village struggling to survive as a community after the pit closed. She then moved to the headship of a Leicester primary school for experience of multi-cultural schools and teaching English as an additional language. The school was “quite a challenge, a cause for concern with the local authority” but she led that school to be judged outstanding with no key issues, named in HM Chief Inspector’s report as a most improved school. She reflects:

“I really enjoyed being there. The multi-cultural aspect was wonderful; very challenging but in a community that desired the very best for children. Turning it around was about detail, structures, systems and changing the culture of what was going on there. We created a very strong leadership team and the deputy and assistant headteachers have gone on to headships. We also did a lot of research and were involved with the ‘Improving the Quality of Education for All’ project. We had few opportunities to appoint new staff but most of them came along with what we were doing. It was the hardest and most challenging four years in my career.”

Lynda was then encouraged to do it all again in another school, this time in Jesse Boot Primary School in Nottingham. She moved Jesse Boot from bordering inadequate to good by the time it was amalgamated within the Nottingham Academy, quickly becoming outstanding. The rationale for the amalgamation was indicative of the philosophy that drives the work of Barry and Lynda – and now other leaders in the Trust. Together, they wanted to provide for children in the neighbourhood throughout the course of their educational life. Nothing but the best was good enough.

The 2012 Ofsted report judged leadership of Nottingham Academy to be outstanding, with inspectors commenting that:

“The work of senior leaders is driven by a pursuit of excellence to provide every pupil with the best education possible in a calm, controlled environment. Monitoring performance, planning for improvement, responding to any issue that might prevent success is robust, rigorous and highly perceptive. This is the case for all three schools that form the academy. All leaders, including the Trust Board and Academy Council are highly ambitious for the academy. The improvement of teaching and pupils’ learning lies at the heart of all action.”

Lynda had supported other schools as a school improvement partner (SIP) and as associate headteacher of a school in Leicester City and had supported schools in Bradford and Sheffield. The primary section of the new academy rapidly found its feet and she was appointed the first of two primary executive principals to oversee the leadership and improvement of the growing number of primary academies that the Greenwood Academies Trust was sponsoring across the east Midlands. She was joined by Emma Hadley, who oversaw the Trust's increasing sponsorship of schools in Lincolnshire. By September 2013, the Trust included the following primary provision.

- The Nottingham Academy, 3-19
- The City of Peterborough Academy Special School, 3-19 (This is a free school project)
- The Ingoldmells Academy, 4-11
- The Houghton Regis Academy, 9-13
- The Mablethorpe Primary Academy, 3-11
- The Mansfield Primary Academy, 3-11
- The Skegness Infant Academy, 3-7
- The Skegness Junior Academy, 7-11
- The Queensmead Primary Academy, 3-11
- The Sunnyside Primary Academy, 4-11
- The Woodvale Primary Academy, 3-11
- The Kingswood Primary Academy, 3-11
- The Corby Primary Academy, 4-11
- The Skegby Junior Academy, 7-11
- The Welland Academy, 4-11

School improvement: strategy and impact

Strategy

When asked to sponsor another academy, the Trust has a positive but searching approach. This starts by finding out exactly what they are taking on – due diligence – closely informed by all the available reports and data. They start with the expectation that the principal knows the school well and knows what he/she is doing. A school review is likely to provide a starting point, for the process of joint observations brings two perspectives to bear on what is going on and what needs to be done. There are high expectations, and no place for a principal who does not feel able to move the school forward. Others have leadership strengths but need more direction and guidance. Some schools had not realised what was going on beyond their walls; they had not been networking effectively, seeing other schools and searching for ways of improving practice. Sponsorship by the Trust changes all that. The chief executive is a strong and visible presence, particularly at the initial stages, reassuring the staff and parents about the future of their school and the children.

The work led by Lynda and Emma operates firstly with the principals of the primary academies. The executive principals spend time visiting their schools and working with their networks of primary principals, prioritising, planning and designing the work that is needed. Lynda has created a team of ‘consultants’: expert primary teachers in the mould of specialist leaders of education’ drawn largely from the Nottingham Academy. Her work with principals leads to decisions about how the consultants can be deployed to contribute to improvement.

The two executive principals work together to plan next stages, principals’ networks, the structured conversations they will have with principals throughout the year, performance reviews and performance development. The executive principals meet the chief executive formally every two weeks (and informally much more often) and periodically update the Trust Board on progress, risks and proposed actions.

In describing her work, Lynda comments:

“As a school improvement partner, you went in, met, listened, talked and left. But this work requires you to do something about what you are finding, not leaving them alone and unsupported. We (the Executive Principal and teacher consultants) also offer a ‘review of practice’ schedule of observing everyone within the school, interviewing subject leaders and pupils, looking at lessons and offering advice.”

Typically, there could be four such school reviews in a term, each consisting of four reviewers for two days undertaking joint observations. Each team consists of an executive principal and one of the consultants together with two members from the school. The Trust has drawn up and consulted on a new performance review policy,

which is being supported by a training programme. Lynda is executive principal for eight schools with – at the time of writing – another on the way which is in special measures. The Trust has been asked to take the school on board.

One of the keys to improvement is to use good classroom staff as consultants (Figure 6-1) across the Trust in contrast to some of the people used by local authorities who have been too long out of the classroom. The executive principals are ‘hands on’ in terms of the leadership of individual academies, but the consultants are central to improving standards in core subjects and have the credibility that comes from having done it themselves in challenging circumstances.

Figure 6-3: The role of teacher consultants

Consultants in Greenwood Trust primary academies

Lynda explains how the consultants operate. “The consultants are coaches, mentors and evaluators. They offer opportunities for teachers to come in and see good practice, will model good practice themselves and be able to demonstrate this in lessons. If a teacher requires a consultant, they will first observe the teacher, then do a bit of team teaching; they will look at their role; show them good practice in Nottingham Academy and sit down and help them plan their work. They form a close relationship at the ‘chalk face’; this is quite different for teachers than attending courses. The consultants are expected to be at the cutting edge of their profession, providing seminars about the new curriculum as well as practical skills in teaching phonics, punctuation, grammar, mathematics and so on. The executive principals work alongside the consultants. The principals also express the needs for their schools and the consultants help meet them. We are now looking to expand into having lead practitioners. We are now in a position to recognise really good practice in our different schools and identify lead practitioners in the family of schools. “We also have a SENCOs’ group where all of our SENCOs get together to discuss and share good practice. We now have our brand new special school, a free school, in Peterborough, co-located with a brand new 11-18 academy which opened this academic year. We intend there to be close synergy between the two.”

In the smaller group of east coast schools, Emma uses a different approach. “When moving round the academies I see one person in a classroom doing something fabulous, I arrange for them to share it with the other schools. There is no sense of competition and no reluctance to share ideas. We do that from the principals downward. If you haven’t got the principals on board, the things that need to happen – the ‘givens’ – won’t take place. Through these mechanisms we are disseminating the best ways to teach key elements and manage improvement. I perceive that primary schools are more ready to share in this way than secondaries, which are often more pre-occupied with systems whereas primaries are more focused on the quality of learning! That’s one of the attractions of 3-18 schools.”

Impact

Many of the primary schools are recent additions to the Trust. The impact of intervention and support is measured primarily in terms of progress measures, results and Ofsted monitoring reports, together with Trust-wide monitoring and review. The Ofsted monitoring of Skegness Junior Academy which opened in September 2012 found that the academy was making reasonable progress in raising standards, reporting that:

“Appropriate support has been offered by the Executive Principal and other senior leaders from the Greenwood Dale Foundation Trust. This has enabled the academy to get off to a good start. The principal of the academy has appreciated the support of the Trust in many important areas. These include helping to establish a strong ethos, raising expectations of staff, parents, carers and pupils; introducing rigour to systems for monitoring and evaluation and for holding staff to account. The Trust’s support with financial management and the management of human resources has enabled leaders within the academy itself to focus solely and successfully on raising pupils’ attainment.”

Ofsted, 2013

Skegness Junior and most other sponsored academies are already performing better than they were before they joined the Trust (Table 6-1) despite the short time they have been part of the Trust.

Table 6-1: Results of some sponsored Greenwood Primary Academies (2013) compared with their precursor schools

Academy	Sponsored as an academy	6 year fsm	L4+ reading, writing and maths 2012	L4+ reading, writing and maths 2013
Houghton Regis	September 2012	55%	-	62%
Mablethorpe	September 2012	45%	-	67%
Mansfield	September 2012	64%	44%	58% (+14%)
Skegness	September 2012	47%	68%	75% (+ 7%)
Queensmead	February 2013	58%	56%	66% (+10%)
Sunnyside	February 2013	20%	63%	67% (+ 4%)
Woodvale	February 2013	47%	61%	72% (+11%)
Kingswood	April 2013	51%	52%	65% (+13%)

The combination of executive principal and a team of expert teacher consultants is clearly generating a momentum for improvement across the schools they cover and through the professional development events they lead. Examples include:

- The enthusiasm of subject leaders from sponsored academies when introduced to 'Big Write' and 'VCOP'
- The power of using visits to expand the horizons of children from backgrounds with very little cultural mix
- The positive response of principals to the joint school reviews which identify strengths and areas to develop
- The example set by modelling: marking and feedback which are very specific and detailed and giving children the opportunity to do something about it; 'levelling' of work every week; work scrutinies and assessment of standards in books
- The professional enrichment that comes through networking and seeing and working with other highly skilled classroom practitioners. There are other effects: "one guy went and bought a suit and tie!" because the Trust has a strict dress code for staff.

High expectations are embedded in the climate of improvement. Lynda sees the initial challenge for many of the schools as surpassing a notional threshold of 75% level 4 combined passes, believing that after that "you are on your way" and that they know how to push attainment into the 80s and 90s. She encourages sights to be set on raising the proportion of children who reach level 5 and believes that all gifted and talented children should have access to level 6 challenges. She is looking carefully at intervention strategies which, if used, have to be measured and of high quality. She prefers children to stay and be supported by teachers and learning mentors within their class as far as possible.

A vision for 3-18 provision

The other primary executive principal, Emma Hadley, came into the Trust with her school on the east coast and is now the first of the executive principals working across the 3-18 age range in the Trust's growing number of academies in that area. She is piloting a model in which one executive principal takes responsibility for all the academies within a geographical area, regardless of age range. Thus Emma is executive principal of schools which include the new Skegness Academy and the feeder infant and junior schools. She is highly respected by the principal and staff of the secondary academy, in which she is based, and which currently houses some older children from the infant academy while their school is being completed.

The chief executive, Sir Barry Day, has long been committed to seeing that the children in a poor area have access to top quality education throughout their schooling. The formation of Nottingham Academy is a manifestation of this vision. While recognising, in

particular, how much secondary practice can benefit from the example of the best primary practice (and, no doubt, vice versa) he is particularly interested in mitigating the adverse effects that transition from year 6 to year 7 can have on many children. This resulted in basing year 7 in its own class-based unit, a principle which is extended to all secondary academies in the Trust.

Some related questions are being explored. When children come into year 7 of Nottingham Academy or other secondary schools, they come from a variety of primary providers that may vary greatly in quality. Children in the primary section of Nottingham Academy, for example, attain highly and produce some very good writing. This raises the challenge of how to teach them in year 7 along with other children who have made less progress. The Trust is exploring questions such as whether high attaining year 7 entrants (level 5 or higher) should have an 'express' year 7. Should they go straight into year 8?

Another of the expectations that has been carried on from the founding Greenwood Dale School to all secondary Trust schools is that senior staff, including principals, teach the most challenging pupils at key stage 4.

Executive vision and governance

Over the last four years the Greenwood Academies Trust has grown from one large foundation school to a large multi-academy trust. To date, it has scaled up judiciously, always creating sufficient capacity to handle demand. Thus it has retained the confidence and support of the Department for Education (DfE), which frequently turns to the Greenwood Academies Trust to sponsor more inadequate schools. The central team is kept under review to ensure that staffing and structures are sufficient to support all the academies without increasing the flat rate charge on them. The academy principals are pleased with the level of support available to them and would not want to see this reduced. The challenges they face do not diminish. Most of the schools serve areas with far higher than average disadvantage. Social breakdown, inward migration, pupil mobility and language acquisition issues are not diminishing but, as Barry says: “We do a good job with our academies but the pressure in terms of what the country and local community expects gets progressively more challenging.”

The chair and board of the Greenwood Academies Foundation Trust – the sponsor – have a unity of moral purpose with the chief executive. This is expressed in their mission: “to become the leading Academy Sponsor, raising standards in areas of social and economic deprivation and/or educational underachievement.” To this end, the Trust will only sponsor schools that have been judged inadequate by Ofsted and deemed to require special measures. The Trust’s vision is recognisable in the progress of its individual sponsored academies, as noted by Ofsted:

“Leadership of the academy has been strengthened. The establishment of the Greenwood Dale Foundation Trust vision and ethos has raised expectations that all pupils can achieve highly. The responsibilities are clearly set out for the part that leaders at all levels must play to achieve this. Rigour has been brought to the systems for checking the effectiveness of everyone’s work and to the ways in which everyone is held accountable for pupils’ success.”

Ofsted, 2013

Membership of the Foundation Trust Board includes a balance of five staff and community members from the former Greenwood Dale School and five trustees who are board-level members of relevant professions. The latter provide a wealth of business and public sector experience.

The operational entity is the Greenwood Academies Trust (GAT), answerable to the Foundation Trust, which employs the staff and holds the assets of all the academies. The GAT is equivalent to an academy governing body except that its academy is not one but many. Each academy then has its own advisory council. The councils are small groups with staff and parental representation which help inform the Board of Trustees on policy and priorities but which have no legal responsibilities. The councils support, advise and act as a critical friend to the principal, represent the interests of the community in the

running of the academy and represent the academy in its community. In relation to Mablethorpe Primary Academy, which joined the Trust in September 2012, Ofsted subsequently reported that:

“The academy council has been formed and includes a representation of parents and carers. Representatives of the council have a clear understanding of their role but have not yet had time to make a strong impact on improving the academy. However the senior principal and the executive principal ensure that the academy’s leaders are effectively held to account for the academy’s performance. Clear systems of accountability have been established at all levels, including an appropriate system to manage the performance of staff.”

Ofsted, 2013

Mablethorpe, like several of the other schools now sponsored by the Trust, had appeared to be overlooked by the local authority since it was seldom visited before it went into an Ofsted category and felt it had been forgotten. The turn-around of attitudes and confidence in the school since becoming a sponsored academy has been described as “remarkable”.

Looking forward

A structure is emerging along the lines of the 'hubs' envisaged by the chief executive and chair some time ago, although not all the sponsored academies fall into neat geographical clusters. The executive principals and teacher consultants have to cover a lot of ground in getting round their schools.

Any consideration of the future of a demonstrably successful organisation such as the Greenwood Academies Trust cannot ignore the leadership succession. The aims, ethos and values of the trust and particularly its moral purpose stem directly from Barry and the example he sets. He has attracted people to leadership and governance who share his beliefs and values. As Emma says:

“His moral purpose is absolutely genuine. I honestly wouldn't have joined the trust or have let the school join if I thought this was merely a business. I am not naïve. I do understand that as the trust grows we have to have a business model in the way we work but what I most admire about Barry is his passion for children and students having better life chances. Even though it is a huge challenge, he remains close to the action. If he comes and spends days on the east coast, it is about the education. He is in classrooms, checking teaching and learning and talking to students and staff. I genuinely believe in his authentic moral purpose. To work for, he is honest and frank. I can deal with that. If there is praise, you know he means it. If you need to improve something, he lets you know that and you take it seriously. So I have a huge amount of admiration for Barry and worry about how the organisation would be without him. He is remarkable in my opinion.”

It is not surprising that succession planning for Barry concerns the board more than anything. It is top of the risk register. Fortunately, with a deputy chief executive, a growing cadre of executive principals from both primary and secondary backgrounds, and a board that shares the chief executive's values, the Trust is not short of executive capacity.

Growth and staffing issues can beset expanding chains. The Greenwood Academies Trust aims at measured growth, taking on more schools preferably if it can form or be near to a potential hub. The primary dimension is growing quite quickly, making greater demands on the primary executive principals and the recruitment of principals. The Trust is concerned to preserve the vision and values of what it wants to promote. Consequently growth requires the Trust to find people of the right quality, position and standing otherwise quality will be lost. For this reason, transference into senior vacancies is preferred to outside appointments. Staff working for the Trust are looked after and where possible are promoted from within.

On the future of governance, Barry is clearly of the view that local accountability has not worked. “Local councils have no powers” (or have powers but do not use them), “neither do local governing bodies”. The advisory councils should be “looking at what you can do

for those pupils”. He does not detect much national confidence in governors providing sufficient leverage to improve the system.

Case study 7 - John Donne Primary School, Peckham

Primary leadership case study: where two heads are better than one

John Donne Primary School in Peckham has gone from strength to strength under the leadership of its two headteachers. The partnership is one of equals and works well in all respects. As a national support school, the two headteachers are national leaders of education. The co-headship arrangement is funded on the premise that school support income pays about half of the two full-time equivalent posts. This stems from the time when the two headteachers worked half their time on behalf of the local authority school improvement service. The school recently became an academy.

Co-headteachers: Evelyn Holdsworth and Nick Tildesley

Chair: Tim Higginson

“John Donne is an outstanding school which enables pupils from diverse backgrounds to make rapid progress in acquiring basic skills and knowledge, while at the same time equipping them with an impressive range of personal qualities. As a result, pupils leave school as confident and articulate young citizens, well prepared for the next phase of education. All this takes place within a very caring, supportive environment, with the school typically being described by parents as a ‘patient, loving and dynamic place’, and a ‘beacon of light in our community’.”

Ofsted, 2011

Portrait of the school

John Donne, a large and expanding primary school almost within earshot of Millwall football ground, has a multi-ethnic population, high social deprivation and high mobility. Results for the last three years have been well above national average. In 2013, 86% of year 6 attained level 4 or better in all of reading, writing and mathematics. Two thirds of that year group were eligible for pupil premium and nearly half spoke English as an additional language. Disadvantaged pupils make as good, or better, progress as the rest, eliminating the achievement gap between the better and worse off children at level 4B.

Leadership and governance

The school has joint or co-headteachers,² each of whom gives half their time to the school and the rest to school improvement outreach work. The model is distinctively different from those represented executive headteachers and heads of school, being a genuine partnership of equals. The two leaders have worked together in school support and turn-around for some years and it is difficult and perhaps invidious to separate their complementary contributions to John Donne.

Colleagues and governors say that the two headteachers work very well together. The school runs very smoothly under their apparently seamless dual leadership. They have complementary personalities and strengths but a shared commitment to ensuring the progress, success and well-being of every child.

Nick is described by his colleagues as “warm and outgoing, with a deep grasp of what is going on in the school.” He brings people together and “inspires great devotion in staff” who appreciate his many attributes. He is compassionate and exudes laughter and enjoyment. He is seen as a good listener; someone who synthesises people’s views but has the strength to say ‘no’. Children and parents are very responsive to him. He clearly oils the wheels of the school but shares the strategic ambitions of his headteacher colleague and governors which relate to growing the school upwards into the secondary phase and developing its academy partnership role. Nick has previously been the acting head of another school as well as joint head for several years, bringing a leadership focus to a number of schools and some complicated issues. He works with a group of 22 heads who are signed up to a Southwark school improvement partnership, each of which makes a financial contribution to the group.

Evelyn is seen as “reflective and strategic”, appreciated for her experience, warmth and wisdom. She has an astute mind and was described as “visionary” and “creative”. She sees the broad picture, loves the school and has very high expectations of the school, staff and children. She encourages people to try things out and is strongly committed to staff development. Like Nick, she is very motivating, also caring and nurturing: very supportive.

For some years, she led the Southwark intervention and support team, has been a substantive head in her own right and, with Nick, has pioneered the dual role of heads of a school in challenging circumstances and school improvement advisers for the local authority. There is no sense of the two heads being senior and junior partners in the school. They share the same passion for education.

² Also featured in an article in *The Guardian*: <http://www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/teacher-blog/2013/dec/01/co-headship-schools-shared-leadership>.

Governance

The support of the governors has been key to making the co-headship work. The chair, who is chief executive at Greenwich and Lewisham NHS Trust, was clear that he wanted “world-class experience in the school and if it takes two of you to be doing that then go and do it because the benefits and the capacity to do it outweigh the additional cost”. The governors support the school strongly in providing opportunities for staff to advance their professional development internationally as well as in the school and through local and national provision. Governors recognise the benefits to children of such experiences; they are extraordinarily visionary for a group of lay volunteers.

The co-headship models what the school is aiming to develop in terms of sustainable, collaborative, cooperative and highly effective leadership. This model is further reinforced by having two deputy and two assistant headteachers, together with paired classes in most year groups. Leadership development is strong, with one deputy undertaking the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH), the other an MA in teaching and learning. The co-heads are not clones; they do different things with different people. One says: “We don’t sit on the same chair but we do share the same passion for education.” The other adds: “And that’s quite hard to find. Other schools say we want to go for this model. It’s not just about finding two people you can stick in the same room; it’s much more complicated than that. It’s actually two people who can offer different things, bring a breadth of experience to the school but also share something which is fundamentally important, which are the values that drive the school forward.”

Figure 7-4: A perspective on succession planning

The co-heads and chair of governors are aware of the fact that nothing lasts forever and one of the really dangerous times for a school is when people leave. When a headteacher leaves, the usual practice is to advertise, appoint and bring somebody else in who has a completely different set of cultural expectations and practices, and different ideas about the way things should run. “That’s when you get turbulence and key people may leave. This has happened frequently in schools locally. It causes serious meltdown and the school becomes very destabilised.” One of the co-heads added: “We are interested in the concept of using our involvement in recruitment into the School Direct programme to find trainees that have the potential one day to become headteacher. Take John Lewis as an example. They would not be looking at Marks & Spencer for their next senior replacement. They would look within their own workforce having developed their workforce and given them the opportunity to go outside and come back so that you keep your culture strong. So that’s what we’re reflecting on at the moment.”

School improvement: becoming outstanding

John Donne had been in special measures twice before the joint heads took over. It was seen by those staff who are still at the school as “an unhappy place with a divisive staff”. It had been judged inadequate by Ofsted and the local authority considered that it remained a school causing concern.

The co-headteachers focused on raising standards, gathered talented leaders and improved the school’s outcomes by 15-20%. Level 4s in English and mathematics have improved from 72% and 73% in 2009 and 2010 to 92% and 87% in 2011 and 2012. They have exceeded 90% achieving level 4 in reading, writing and mathematics in 2013 with value added of over 103. This is exceptional, given the profile of the school, which includes seriously disturbed children. They never turn anyone away and the school has found the key to re-engaging some very disturbed – and disturbing – children. Disadvantaged children achieve as well and sometimes better than more prosperous children. The school proves that if all children and groups are engaged properly, there should be no gaps and all children should do well.

The complex composition of the school’s roll brings advantages as well as challenges. Although there are parents who are fairly new arrivals in the UK and a high proportion of families living in social housing, they are aspirational. The school has a large proportion of West African children, for example, and their parents want them to do well; they get the ‘educational dream’. Where the school has to do more chasing up of absence or ‘general malingering’ it is often White British children and families that pose the harder challenge. Where children are not achieving what is expected of them, the staff recognise where the problems lie and intervene and support such children and their families.

Professional learning

The school is committed to remaining outstanding and knows what this involves. It loses no opportunity to broaden its knowledge base and is strongly supported by the governors in doing this. There is a range of strategies for professional learning including staff conferences, ‘deep learning’ themes and strategies for sharing good practice. Leadership development is a high priority. The senior leadership team models distributive leadership and provides leadership opportunities within and beyond the school. These are complemented by professional development opportunities, which in 2013 included:

- Practice-based master’s in teaching and learning (four staff)
- Master’s in process consultancy (2)
- Aspirant Leaders (National College for Teaching and Leadership) (4)
- NPQH (1)
- Certificate of School Business Management (CSBM) (1)
- National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) Level 4 in business management (1)

- Ofsted additional inspector training (2)
- Local leaders of education (2)
- Specialist leader of education for early years (1)

The school has close links with several local schools and courses staff have run include:

- Phonics
- The Early Years
- Creativity
- The Global Curriculum
- Sustainability in the Curriculum

To take one example, the school's approach to phonics teaching is highly structured and systematic – based on 'Letters and Sounds' – yet involves the whole curriculum. Phonics teaching draws from a sophisticated resource bank, created by one of the deputy headteachers in which each letter-sound combination is embedded through a collection of objects whose names embody the sounds.

Figure 7-5: 'Fabulous phonics'³

The approach to phonics involves immersing the children in learning letter sounds by linking the sounds with all their activities. They teach just three letter sounds a week, giving an initial day's focus on a letter. This means that everything done in the course of that day uses that letter and emphasises the sound it represents. The letter features, for example in songs, stories, rhymes, classroom themes, sensory activities and the food the children eat. Ruth has assembled a bank of boxes of small toys for every letter and sound. The approach is reinforced by explaining to parents what the school will be doing with their children and closely linked to curriculum themes and the internal and outdoor environment. Children make and take home objects related to the sounds they are learning and collaborate in making a picture of the theme. The learning provides a stimulus for writing and a weekly 'Big Write'.

The approach loses nothing in rigour while making phonics teaching and learning a natural and central part of the curriculum and the total experience of school. Teaching is thorough and reinforcement continuous. Teachers are encouraged to be creative, which

³ Developed and produced by Ruth Moyler, deputy headteacher and early years specialist at John Donne Primary School.

reduces some fears that can be engendered by more prescriptive approaches. By the end of key stage 2, 97% of year 6 children attained level 4 and above in the reading test and 76% attained level 5 and above. Language development – reading, writing and communication skills – is reinforced by the extensive programme of out-of-school visits. Every class has an educational visit at least each half term.

Looking outward

International links

A second aspect of the diverse strengths of the school is its global engagement. The school has links with others including schools in Shanghai, Portugal, Sweden, Finland, India and Africa. It is a recognised ‘international school’ and uses the international dimension to enrich the learning of both pupils and staff.

Figure 7-6: Different classroom cultures

Overseas visitors

Teachers visiting from Shanghai were completely astonished by some of the school’s approaches. For example, they participated in an assembly which involved the story of the three little pigs. The John Donne teachers were pigs and one of the headteachers was the wolf (on one of the climbing frames). This type of role play happens fairly regularly. The Shanghai teachers observed that they would “stand and talk for an hour to the children about how they should be, how it’s done. You should never be seen to be anything less than completely serious”. They came to look at how to build community, how to have good relationships in the school, how to engage pupils more thoroughly because they were talking about how they have a lot of children who drop out of the system and don’t engage and don’t come to school.

Visitors from Korea came to find out how to develop more creativity. They were looking at the displays saying “this is amazing, when do you do it?”, and staff said “the teacher does it after school”. “After school? There’s no after school, you’re either in school or your home.” As in many other countries, teachers do not spend time in the school after the school day. The school drew the conclusion that “although we could do with raising our standards to be like Shanghai, we’d need to cut out the other stuff you do about personal development, engagement and a host of other skills.”

School dropout is a big problem in some countries the school has visited, from Portugal to Sweden. As one says, “in Sweden the cultural climate is such that if you tell a child off in any way you will expect to have the parents up at the school to complain about sanctioning their child and there has to be a meeting the next day about the child’s special needs ... Seeing schools at work elsewhere provides insights that don’t come through in papers, analyses or any of those things: what’s it really like to be there.”

The school has been engaged in a two-year leadership project with Swedish schools. A drop in relative school performance internationally caused the government to introduce more centralised control of local authority maintained schools with consequences which are described by the John Donne co-headteachers as “devastating for schools”. “You

have headteachers who are frozen, immobile, unable to make a decision in any way because they go back for their performance management to the local authority who basically says whether or not they keep their jobs.”

The headteachers have candid views of systemic changes in Sweden (where publicly funded private school and multi-school organisations proliferate). “Allowing the free school system to be profit-making has given the Swedes a new dilemma. Large organisations are taking over free schools like care homes in order to make profits so that has thrown up a new issue ... it's fascinating culturally. It also appears that children are basically at liberty to do what they will. This creates a huge issue for schools because they don't quite know how to cope with this anymore. Is it spinning out of control? Certainly Sweden's PISA [**Programme for International Student Assessment**] performance is not what it was.” As system leaders, the co-headteachers find it stimulating to observe policy development and its consequences at first hand in other countries.

The school has just completed a two-year project with Portugal on meeting the challenges of multicultural classrooms in the Algarve where there was concern about an increasing number of children coming in who didn't speak Portuguese. As one of a number of activities, the school sent some of its teaching assistants to do job shadowing with teaching assistants there. One of the co-heads explained: “One of the things we learned was how tired you get when you don't speak the language that is being spoken in the classroom. We do not pay enough attention to that when we have children who come who are new to English or who have not got a good understanding of English. You can't expect them, simply because you tell them twice, to know what's going on. At the end of the day they're exhausted.” The school considers it much easier to teach when there are children in the class with many different home languages. The staff who went to Portugal considered it far harder when “you've only got three children in your classroom who don't speak the language and you have no idea what to do with them”. Overseas visits enable people to see things in a different way and to do their work better when back in the school.

There are always ongoing benefits for the children in John Donne. As one of the co-heads said:

“We have lots of visitors from all over the world who go into classes and talk to the children about what education is like in their own country. We had a big group from Shanghai the other week. That was fascinating for the staff and for the children to talk to each other about what school is like when you're in Shanghai. Specific links include one with the Algarve where our project is to link children up by use of radio so the children can tell stories and link with each other very easily via video links and emailing. The 'radio' involves making radio programmes, telling stories as if you're doing a radio play and sending it to them and vice versa. This is great for self-confidence and language development.”

Supporting other schools

Some years ago, Southwark – which then had a contract with WS Atkins – was looking for headteachers who could undertake school improvement intervention work. Evelyn was at the time leading a one-form entry Catholic primary school and – five years ago – became leader of a local authority intervention team of 11 primary and secondary school leaders as part of a Neighbourhood Renewal drive. Evelyn was an advocate of collaborative leadership and the team worked mainly in pairs.

Evelyn took on Pilgrim's Way Primary School in 2005 when standards were low. She brought in Nick, then a deputy head in another school. They cleared out ineffective staff, appointed experienced replacements and set the school on the road to recovery. The school was satisfactory when inspected in 2007 and a new head was appointed. The report commented that: "since September 2005, the school has made a good recovery from a difficult period when standards were falling. This is because of effective leadership from the two senior managers deployed by the local authority." The school was consistently good when inspected again in 2010.

The co-headteachers have worked with a wide range of schools across several local authorities from Southwark to Stockport: schools requiring improvement, schools with new or absent headteachers and so on. The governors of John Donne are very much in favour of staff of the school going out to support others. They see themselves as a community which should be helping others. The school has very good capacity to do so, with two deputy headteachers, a strong senior leadership team and a range of expertise across the curriculum and age range. The school has several SLEs whose expertise ranges from subjects of the curriculum to the early years foundation stage. Many of these staff have engaged in school partnership work to share their expertise. The school is also pioneering a year 7 transition programme – something of a challenge considering the large number of secondary schools to which children transfer.

The school's recent conversion to an academy may have dampened Southwark local authority's readiness to use the school as much as previously in brokering school support partnerships, although discussions are ongoing. The school is well placed to provide executive headteacher capacity, for example.

School support work involves a range of staff in contributions that can involve a high level of commitment. Working with a local school that had gone into 'requires improvement', one of John Donne's assistant heads said: "I'd really like to work more permanently with that school, to offer them some of the opportunities I have had and also to learn something different", so she will be seconded as acting deputy head for a year. When (or if) she returns to John Donne, it will be with a wealth of added experience.

Looking forward

Maximising potential

The school has the capacity to do more as a national support school and is exploring this with the local authority. It is associated with a northern academies trust, but has no wish to join and so lose its sovereignty. One of the hopes and indeed incentives for becoming an academy was to sponsor a free school, thus growing the school's ethos and excellence into the secondary years. The first application has not been successful owing to issues concerned with the cost and siting of a secondary free school. Other possibilities include teaching school work, since the school is already strongly involved in School Direct provision of initial teacher training and other stands of this work.

Curriculum and assessment

The school is well prepared to absorb changes to the national curriculum and assessment arrangements. They see the main problem with assessment thinking as over-adherence to the importance of particular levels at particular stages. The important thing, the school believes, is what you do with assessment data ... how to use it to help create world-class learners. "The problem was over-emphasis on tests and the outcomes of key stage 2 tests. It's really hard ... One child can make the difference."

A verdict on co-headship

Co-headship works in the case of John Donne because of a strong shared philosophy and ethos and substantial experience of working together previously on school improvement projects. The synergy between Evelyn and Nick is such that they do not take responsibility for specific areas but work authentically together. It brings added strength and depth to school leadership. There is no doubt that the chair of governors expects that added value – in the form of giving the children of the school a world-class education experience. But in more immediate terms, it makes headship less stressful, leadership more potent and succession-planning more achievable.

The arrangement brings substantial extra capacity to the school as a national support school and provides a collaborative leadership model which other leaders within and beyond the school can emulate. The structure is costly, but the school has grown and its income is boosted by outreach contracts. But only a true professional partnership can work; the potential for detrimental fall-out from a co-headship split is probably a lower risk than that of a comfortable and increasingly complacent 'stitch-up' in a school's management. Both risks are minimal in John Donne, where continuous improvement and constant innovation are the watchwords.

Case study 8 - L.E.A.D. Academy Trust, Nottingham

Primary leadership case study: growing an urban schools partnership with global reach

This case study is about leadership of the L.E.A.D. Academy Trust, founded on what is now Huntingdon Academy, a primary national support school and teaching school in Nottingham. The multi-academy trust has evolved from Huntingdon initially sponsoring two other academies and then by way of a transitional and short-lived 'umbrella trust' whose member academies were linked by a partnership agreement. The Trust included nine partner academies by September 2013 and could have grown very much larger if it accepted all the schools that wished to join. The Trust is led by the chief executive, who was headteacher of the outstanding Huntingdon Primary School and converter academy. There is an overarching Trust Board, but the academies in the Trust retain their individual non-executive governing bodies.

L.E.A.D. represents *Lead, Empower, Achieve and Drive*.

Chief executive: Diana Owen

Chair of the L.E.A.D. Academy Trust: Mark Blois

Portrait of the Trust

The L.E.A.D. Academy Trust is a growing body of primary academies which utilises the strengths of each member school to the mutual benefit of all. It was founded on the experience of Huntingdon as a national support school and academy sponsor together with a belief in the power of partnership as a catalyst for school improvement and better outcomes for young people. Reconciling these two approaches, which for the headteacher of Huntingdon meant combining the roles of executive head and partner head, was attempted initially using a hybrid organisation, the 'umbrella trust', which brought schools together through a partnership agreement.

This proved to be too flexible to ensure that the objectives of driving school improvement and raising standards in all member schools were achieved. The organisation quickly evolved to the formal establishment of a multi-academy trust (MAT) with the cooperation and agreement of the member schools. The process benefited hugely from the professional expertise in education law of the chair of governors of Huntingdon Academy, Mark Blois, who is now chair of the Trust Board.

The academies in the L.E.A.D. Academy Trust include:

- Huntingdon Academy
- Edna G. Olds Academy
- St Ann's Well Academy
- Sycamore Academy
- Warren Academy
- Windmill L.E.A.D. Academy
- Millfield L.E.A.D. Academy
- Hogarth Academy
- Bishop Alexander L.E.A.D. Academy

Within the Trust there are two national leaders of education and two local leaders of education. Three of the headteachers are trained Ofsted inspectors. The Trust has a directory of other professionals with a broad range of expertise, including specialist leaders of education and former Her Majesty's Inspectors.

Vision and core principles

The L.E.A.D. Academy Trust aims to ensure the leadership that will provide the highest-quality education to enable every pupil to realise their full potential. Its member academies also realise the need for children to be motivated if they are to succeed in life and are committed to providing a stimulating curriculum and environment which will

prepare them for their futures with confidence and determination. All member academies sign up to the core principles shown in Figure 8-1.

Figure 8-7: The core principles of the Trust⁴

Lead: to show the way; to be first or foremost

In every aspect of life the ability to lead is essential. Strong leadership is the key to the success of our schools. We will develop leadership skills in everyone who attends one of them, ensuring the development of pupils as leaders of their own learning.

Empower: to give power to; to enable

At L.E.A.D. Academy schools pupils are empowered to have high aspirations for their futures. We nurture and challenge pupils to take responsibility, make decisions and work together so they grow into confident and resilient young people.

Achieve: to accomplish; to get or attain by effort

We believe in achievement in its broadest sense and that enjoyment of learning is crucial to success. We continually look for and reward achievement in every individual in our schools. We also know that a strong command of English and maths is vital as a foundation for the whole curriculum and prioritise learning in these core subjects.

Drive: to cause and guide progress; to impel forward

We will provide the very best education and training for every individual in our schools and will ensure that this is delivered. We value excellent teaching, underpinned by high quality professional development and will constantly move forwards, using and instigating the best ideas and practice.

These principles are much in evidence in the classrooms of Huntingdon and Edna G. Olds, two of the academies visited in connection with this case study. Older children know and can explain the L.E.A.D. initials and how they apply to them.

⁴ Trust website: <http://www.leadacademytrust.co.uk/about-us/our-vision>

Leadership and governance

Diana's journey from taking on Huntingdon as her first headship to becoming the first chief executive of the Trust reflects an unrelenting commitment to social justice and school improvement. She was deputy headteacher and a full-time year 6 teacher in another school in 1998/99 when the headship of Huntingdon primary school was advertised. The school was in a poor way: in special measures and due to close. She considered the job but decided not to apply. The post was not filled and was re-advertised. What happened next is best told in her own words.

“I was walking around Nottingham and saw all these banners saying ‘Save our School’. The community really wanted to keep their school and wanted it to improve. I had a change of heart; I was ready to lead a school but was very naive and did not realise quite how bad things were. The buildings were horrendous; it felt wrong and unjust that they had got into such a terrible state. But it was seeing the parents and children who so passionately wanted all that to improve that moved me. Certainly it made me look again and reassess what I wanted to do in education.”

Her approach to leadership was characterised by absolute determination to transform the school, a pragmatic sense of priorities, a strategic approach to dealing with them and a commitment to involving the community fully in the mission to recreate and shape the school. Step by step, the school was transformed and it came out of special measures in 2000.

- The first priority was to demonstrate what could be done. The head and the newly appointed site manager spent the summer holidays refurbishing the entrance and the school hall; the entrance because it was the first aspect that pupils and parents would see and the hall because that was where she would hold the first assembly.
- The school's mission statement was drawn up co-operatively and finalised in a day's workshop involving pupils, staff, governors and parents.
- Quality of teaching was top of the list of ongoing leadership drives. The head recalls: “having the HMI monitoring visits was one of the most helpful things because it really helped us focus on priorities”.

Although the school came out of special measures quite quickly, it remained quite vulnerable despite being judged ‘good’ when inspected in 2002. In 2007, the school was judged ‘outstanding’. Two thirds of the staff that were in the school when it required special measures were still there when it was judged outstanding. Inspectors wrote: “The quality of education provided by this school is outstanding in almost every way. Its improvement in recent years has been remarkable. The school is a very special place that gives pupils an excellent start to their education”, later commenting that “leadership

and management in this school are of the highest order". The school has remained outstanding ever since.

Empowering leadership

'Empowerment' of both children and staff, now part of the L.E.A.D. vision, has long been a feature of Huntingdon. A teacher who started her career at the school 10 years earlier and is now a professional tutor explains how Diana brings this about.

"I find Diana a very motivating and exciting person to work for, with big vision. She's encouraged me not to fear anything really. She's given me all these opportunities – 'Will you go to this school and present this for me?' or 'Will you have these teachers come in and watch?' and she's taught me that there's nothing wrong with putting yourself outside your comfort zone, having new challenges. I admire her immensely for it, and I see that she does that all the time. I'd like to think that I've modelled myself on this approach and got to where I am because of it rather than playing safe all my career and thinking 'No, I don't want teachers watching', or 'I don't feel comfortable going to another school'.

She asked me recently to go to the National College and give a talk on becoming a new person into leadership. Your initial thing when someone says that to you is 'gosh really? I've only been in the role for a couple of months'. But she's so confident in you, and I know she wouldn't ask me to do that if she didn't think I could do it, and so I went and did it and I was really proud of myself at the end. The links she has with so many other people provided me with that opportunity and I've then got contacts from that. She's just always been so enthusiastic, in staff meetings – you just sit down and afterwards you're thinking 'yeah, that's really good'. She's really good at getting you on board."

This approach extends throughout the school. In every class, children are encouraged to welcome visitors and explain what they are doing. There is strong encouragement for them to put forward and share their views in lessons; talking for learning is important, and this is stressed with both experienced teachers and new teachers in the school. In describing her approach to coaching new teachers, the professional tutor indicates the learning behaviour expected from children.

"When I coach new teachers I don't like to bombard them with everything straight away. First of all they need to know what behaviour we expect of the children. With new teachers, for example, we master expectations of behaviour first: the respect the children have; the confidence to share their ideas because they know the other children in the room are going to listen, and making sure that they are looking at the teacher when she's talking. When they have mastered these principles, we build in the effective use of the teaching assistant, challenge for the higher attainers and differentiation."

“I’m a big believer in the children being engaged and having talk in their lessons, so we bring in the response partner work and body language needed for response partner work. And we make sure we get it right, so I talk to the new teachers, and I’ve worked with more experienced teachers in the school as well, about the fact that there’s good talk and there’s bad talk – a noisy classroom doesn’t mean an unfocused classroom, if the talk is relevant. A talking classroom is an active learning classroom, so we bring a lot of that in. And that links to the research that we are doing on this as well ...”

The last inspection report (November 2011) reflected the approaches illustrated above when it opened with the view: “This is an outstanding and highly inclusive school where pupils develop a love of learning.” The report later finds that: “Pupils know exactly what they are expected to learn in each lesson. The strong emphasis on learning through practical activity and first-hand experience makes learning exciting for pupils. One reason for the excellent behaviour is that pupils get so involved in their work.” Inspectors found that “all those with leadership responsibility, including the governing body, monitor and evaluate the school’s work assiduously and have an accurate picture of its performance. Planning is sharply focused on raising pupils’ achievement and accelerating progress. Governors have links with each subject of the curriculum and thorough knowledge of pupils’ attainment and progress. This enables them to make a real input to school improvement decisions.”

Looking outward

After the school was first judged outstanding, Diana knew that it could not stand still. She had been recognised as a 'Chartered Urban Leader' in a short-lived programme in which successful headteachers came through a one-day assessment centre. She has also been a primary strategy consultant. As a result of the school turning itself around and then being recognised as a school of very high quality, the staff at Huntingdon felt they were in a good position to share their experience with other schools in Ofsted categories. They had 'been there', could empathise and offer support, and – crucially – knew what to do to transform a school. With the governors' support, the school applied to become a national support school in 2007, and the head a national leader of education. This active role meant that not only the headteacher but also the staff became actively involved in partnering schools causing concern, helping their recovery.

The then chair of governors strongly supported the school's designation as a national support school. A city councillor, he was committed to children having the best possible education and the other governors followed suit. For both governors and parents, levels of trust and confidence in the school had grown enormously and they could understand why it was important for the school to share what it had learned with other schools so as to benefit more children. The governors at Huntingdon knew both that they could not hold their outstanding leaders and teachers back and that such 'outreach' work provided enhanced professional development for staff. Commissioned outreach work also allows the school to build extra capacity and resilience. The governors and parents are proud that their school has earned not only a regional but a growing national reputation for its excellence.

Despite this support, everyone understands that Huntingdon will not allow its outreach commitments to work to the detriment of children in the school. There have been occasions when the school has had to decline requests for help if to agree them would have put the school under pressure.

The school improvement journey began with the head supporting another school in special measures (for two days a week over two terms) when Huntingdon was a 'good' school. Huntingdon was then asked to help two schools causing concern in Leicester. Now it was not only the head but also staff working with these schools on everything from playground design to subject leadership. But difficult decisions were looming for Huntingdon.

Becoming an academy and sponsoring another school

The academy prospect was triggered when Huntingdon, by now an outstanding one-form entry primary school in the very disadvantaged St Ann's area of Nottingham, was first asked to expand to two forms of entry but was then passed over for expansion funding in favour of other schools in the area.

Neither the headteacher nor the governors had previously wanted to seek academy status but the school was full, heavily oversubscribed and losing the opportunity to offer more children a first-rate education. They felt that conversion to academy status was the only way forward for the school. This was a period of great stress for the headteacher and great tension for the governing body. But the governors backed the school, which became one of the first primary academies in Nottingham. The very supportive chair of governors at that time (who was also an elected member of Nottingham City Council) was in a particularly difficult position and relinquished the reins when the school gained academy status. Diana describes going it alone as an academy as a “very scary moment”.

While Huntingdon was following the path to academy conversion in 2011, it was already working closely – in its capacity as a national support school – Edna G. Olds primary school in Lenton. The link started in September 2010 at the request of the local authority. Edna G. Olds school was a cause of considerable concern having had a crippling rate of leadership turnover: seven headteachers in five years. There were substantial staffing issues and the school was described as a “sad place to be”. It has since been transformed.

The local authority wanted Diana to take charge full time from September 2010, but – faced with staff on maternity leave and other changes in Huntingdon – Diana insisted on there being a head of school that she could support for about half the week. Eventually a suitable head of school was appointed, making Diana’s role as executive headteacher more sustainable. The head of school later became the substantive headteacher. Her strong steer has been reinforced by the vision and ethos of the L.E.A.D. Academy Trust and raised staff expectations still further. The leadership structure has been reorganised astutely so that skilled practitioners can take a more direct lead in taking the school forward. On the 1 October 2011, Edna G Olds converted to an academy. Two years later, Edna G. Olds was inspected again and judged to be a good school on all counts. The inspection report found that “the LEAD Academy Trust has a secure overview of the school’s work and has supported the school effectively over the last two years, particularly in developing the skills of the leadership team.” The headteacher of Edna G. Olds Academy provides an insight into the improvement journey. This started by feeling that a crucial part of her role was to embed the key principles of L.E.A.D. very quickly, because – applying these – she could see the potential to “completely turn the school around”.

“This has involved uniting a team. Everybody is working towards the same agenda, and I think that’s where L.E.A.D. has been so fantastic. Not only have I had what I would consider to be a great induction as a new headteacher – the cross-collaboration, the partnership working, everything else – it’s enabled me to strengthen philosophies that I’ve always carried through my teaching. We have actioned things at a faster pace than would ever have been possible with a single head in one school at one time, particularly from where the school had come from.

The core group from LEAD have really helped me stand up against some quite testing times.

“One of the keys is my relationship with Diana. When I was first appointed head, Diana was executive head. So you’ve immediately got a leader that’s leading by example, and you’re following that ambition and drive. Because we’re very close and we work so closely, the journey the school has taken so far has been rapid. This journey of improvement has been helped because you immediately feel this sense of purpose, and it’s about the children. That is the most important part of L.E.A.D. In Huntingdon, we have a partner school that’s outstanding. You know, when you’re delivering a key message or doing CPD with young teachers, teachers who’ve lost their drive and their ambition, you’ve immediately got a centre of excellence to sign them up to. So rather than reading in a book what they should be delivering, they go and experience the practice. My own feeling is, every single person in this school is important and valued. So we’ve had the teaching assistants and the class teachers going across to L.E.A.D. schools and visiting. They’ve seen the different element of work, they’ve developed friendships, and actually that school-to-school support has been completely natural. It’s been open and honest, and I don’t think you always get that.”

Huntingdon was also inspected while heavily engaged in supporting Edna G. Olds and received a second successive judgement of outstanding. Huntingdon also took in many children when another local primary school closed. “The results dipped slightly and triggered the inspection so it was something of a relief to be judged outstanding again.” said Diana. Edna G. Olds was judged ‘good’ by inspectors in November 2013.

The evolution of the L.E.A.D. Multi-Academies Trust

When Huntingdon became an academy in 2011, they had the opportunity to join another highly regarded academy chain in Nottingham but the final sticking point for Huntingdon was reluctance to lose their autonomy. It was clear that other schools that were partnered with Huntingdon wished to retain a close association with the new academy. They discussed with the Department for Education (DfE) various mechanisms for forming a group of academies other than through formal federation.

The new chair of governors, an education lawyer, was familiar with the Academies Act and related regulations and was able to guide Huntingdon and its partner academies in becoming an ‘umbrella trust’ linked by a partnership agreement. The umbrella trust became the L.E.A.D. Academies Trust and other schools soon began to approach the Trust to become members. Although the umbrella model allows each school to retain its autonomy, a partnership agreement between the schools ensures that all schools work collaboratively to raise standards. But the umbrella trust turned out to be short-lived. The reasoning was described by Diana and Mark as follows (Figure 8-2).

Figure 8-8: The learning journey towards a multi-academy trust

All the academy groups were multi-academy trusts. There was a certain dynamic: very tight central control, no real delegated powers to governing bodies, and little apparent partnership ethos. We felt the way to broker relationships and draw from each other's strengths was through an umbrella trust held together by a partnership agreement, which would be in accord with our values. It quickly transpired that although the umbrella trust was a nice way of allowing academies to be part of a group, it lacked teeth. Our partnership agreement gave powers of intervention in certain scenarios but it was too loose and cumbersome and we kept encountering new scenarios. Close monitoring was difficult and there were no powers to intervene. The partnership agreement was forged in good faith but a steep learning curve persuaded us that a more formal structure was needed.

There was little opposition to becoming a multi-academy trust, with the associated management and executive powers. We talked to all the heads over several months and they and their governors felt it would be the right decision. Many of the governors who took on academy status found the implications and responsibilities were more than they had bargained for and were happy to leave the big decisions to the Trust board. We were surprised by the number of schools wanting to work with us. But the core principles of L.E.A.D. remained, in a spirit of true partnership working, collaboration, sharing best practice, leadership development and the succession planning that comes from that. We have two outstanding schools in the Trust. The Trust came at a time when Huntingdon was reaching the limits of its capacity in terms of the extended contributions it was making and this was alleviated by the formation of the L.E.A.D. Academies Trust, with a board and a chief executive.

Looking forward

By September 2013, the Trust consisted of seven academies with three more about to join: two in Nottingham and one in Newark. Another of the member academies has been judged outstanding and others are good schools. There is an overarching Trust board which is an advisory and strategic board. Member academies must:

1. Subscribe to the L.E.A.D. aims.
2. Make a financial commitment to the Trust.
3. Work in partnership with the other schools.

There is high demand from other schools to join the Trust but Diana is cautious about unplanned growth. She has always been interested in the urban context, because of the intensity and immediacy of some of the challenges. There has been dialogue with groups of schools in at least two other cities that are interested in joining the Trust. Their motives and drive have to be right, and Diana's initial response is deliberately discouraging. The Trust does not aspire to becoming an empire but is about promoting high quality within its capability. Nevertheless, there are advantages: economies of scale, shared posts and the ability to pool expertise such as business management.

Asked why so many other schools want to join the Trust, one of the member headteachers replies:

"I think it's very simple, there's clarity there. When you pick up a brochure, or look at any part of L.E.A.D. on the website, you see a very clear statement of 'Lead, Empower, Achieve and Drive', together with key core principles. A good leader should want these for their school, irrespective of where your school is situated within the country. There's very clear drive towards doing what we all should be doing, providing the very best for children ... and getting the best from the children ... and not settling for anything less. Yes, each school has its own autonomy, which is really important because every school is unique within L.E.A.D. However, there's a common thread that should be expected to be seen through each of the L.E.A.D. schools, and that's a give and take relationship. I do believe that everybody wants to improve and being part of L.E.A.D. gives us that capacity. There's great networking; L.E.A.D. can deliver and we can all improve."

In 2011, Huntingdon took another major step forward by becoming a teaching school. It is now the hub of an alliance of over 20 schools and other organisations in what is known as the L.E.A.D. Urban Teaching School Alliance. The Alliance recruited to its first School Direct programme for training teachers in 2013, working in partnership with the University of Nottingham. The Trust has also been licensed by the National College for Teaching and Leadership to provide for the range of leadership qualifications awarded by the College. In terms of professional development, six teachers have been accredited to facilitate the Improving Teacher and Outstanding Teacher Programmes.

Reflections on leadership

Diana is conscious of ways in which her leadership approach has broadened and developed as circumstances have changed. Initially she felt she had to be quite directive because so much needed to be done. She is not dictatorial, consciously including people in decisions, but has had to make many decisions quickly. Leadership has become much more distributed, not just within the school but across the Trust. For the system leader, there is also the recognition that one cannot always influence as directly as before. Despite knowing that what works in one school does not necessarily work in another, “you sometimes have to hold back some frustration”. The other need is avoiding a dependency culture: “some schools simply want to be told what to do.”

Strong systems are key. For example, the schools in the Trust have been working towards a model for self-evaluation. They have streamlined their systems to combine the headteacher’s report, self-evaluation form and monitoring reports from the classroom. Monitoring is undertaken at set times during the year. Quality assurance is based on monitoring, self-evaluation and peer review. The Trust headteachers meet together to review performance and identify key issues. Work is moderated for consistency of judgements. The schools are collectively taking responsibility for each other, ensuring that they all move forward and any risks are identified early. Diana reflects on the changes.

“This is a huge change from the days in which schools were their own little islands; they did not work collaboratively for children’s learning. As expectations have increased and children are encouraged to do their very best, so the focus on children’s learning has had an effect on teachers’ learning. This is far more collaborative; there is greater clarity about leadership – it is far more focused on leading teaching and learning. Here, we video lessons and discuss them. There is no coasting and teachers are constantly learning from each other, both within the schools and through contact with colleagues in other schools. Our schools have a clear focus on children, but we are very businesslike about our work in what remains a competitive environment.”

One of the Trust’s senior managers, not a teacher, describes Diana’s qualities as a leader:

“I think the first words are inspirational and aspirational. Those two words are very key. I’ve worked for many different people, many different characters. I have to say I’ve probably not come across anybody with so much drive, and a great personality to go with it, in terms of being very open and collaborative. The beauty of working with Diana is that nothing is not an option. Everything is always a possibility, and anything I take to her ... sometimes they’re off-the-wall ideas I’ll come up with ... she’ll say, ‘Yep, come on then, let’s look at this and see if it’s a possibility’. That’s been really refreshing compared to many people I’ve worked for before, where the door has been slammed on ideas. I have never come across

that here, and you can imagine we've had many conversations. Things move forwards at a good pace, which is also a realistic pace in terms of the capacity we have within the organisation. And she's always thinking about the welfare of her staff as well, to ensure that no one is being ground down. She does look after the staff in that respect."

A positive response to new freedoms

Diana is positive about many aspects of policy. Giving schools the freedom to break away from local authorities that inhibited their freedoms has been very positive from the perspective of Huntingdon and the other schools in the Trust. Academisation has made a "massive difference" to them. Governance arrangements have changed and strengthened, particularly at board level, where L.E.A.D. has appointed eminent educators as well as skilled professionals such as the education lawyer who chairs the board.

The schools nevertheless feel they have made the changes against the odds, with the local authority putting up many barriers to them becoming academies. Funding was disappointing, particularly given the demonstrable impact that Huntingdon was making. The DfE has not always been consistent in its messages and decisions. But Diana pays tribute to the "amazing team of heads. Everyone is enjoying the challenges; there is a real buzz". Some secondary schools have wanted to join the L.E.A.D. Trust. Diana believes that the philosophy, values and principles of L.E.A.D. should not stop when the child reaches 11 years old but should carry on into the secondary years.

An urban education focus

The urban character of the alliance is a reflection of Diana's passionate interest in urban education and ambition for the Trust to build its national and international credentials for expertise in this field. Strategically, the next steps could involve partnerships with schools in another British city and urban schools in another country. But what is becoming more evident is that requests for school improvement help are increasing. The demands on L.E.A.D. services are expanding and the organisation already manages a range of functions beyond its Trust schools, including the teaching school alliance, provision of accredited leadership programmes as an NCTL licensee, the urban leadership programme and urban initial teacher training, for example.

What is evident about the L.E.A.D. Multi-Academy Trust is how much depends at this relatively early stage on the commitment, expertise, shared values and stamina of the chief executive and the chair of the board. The Trust is operating to near the limits of capacity, in terms of financial as well as human capital. The new type of infrastructure that is multi-academy trusts is a powerful lever for national policy to improve schools and raise standards but is essentially self-funding. Core funding comes from thin-slicing the budgets of member academies: a minimal percentage, slightly higher if a school is in an

Ofsted category. The Trust has also established a traded services company, led by a director of L.E.A.D. services, to recycle the proceeds, which are fed back into schools.

Mark and Diana are anxious to populate the board with more innovative business people to help them grow the L.E.A.D. brand and mission. They do not want to replicate local authorities. Schools should only pay for what they need. But L.E.A.D. management is conscious of having a huge range of responsibilities to its member academies and having to work “financial miracles” to meet these. They would like to work more on a corporate group model but need a greater degree of funding in order to build central capacity. This depends on having a critical mass of schools.

Reflecting on the journey they have taken, Mark recognises not only Diana’s remarkable achievements but how difficult it has been to develop the multi-academy trust and engage in so much school support work when she has still been responsible for and emotionally attached to Huntingdon Academy. She says: “This is a lot more lonely than headship!” and feels her responsibilities acutely.

Chairing Huntingdon Academy and the board has been very demanding on Mark. He would not countenance payment but is doing the work because he is passionate about education, is a leading expert on education law, finds it fulfilling to make a creative contribution and is inspired by Diana’s leadership and vision. He considers that they are still at the early stages of seeing schools and school systems evolve on a corporate model. They feel there is insufficient understanding by policy teams of what is involved in the work they are doing and feel there needs to be more encouragement and less impatience.

Case study 9 - Newstead Primary School, Stoke on Trent

Primary leadership case study: raising the achievement and enriching the lives of disadvantaged White British children

Newstead Primary Academy is an outstanding one-form entry school serving children and families in a poor White British estate in Stoke on Trent. The community is very insular, despite its proximity to the city, for there are many children who have not been to the centre of Stoke with their parents and certainly not further afield. There are few families from ethnic minorities, with issues of tolerance evident within the area. Part of the school's success is the compensation it provides for this environmental deprivation through a plethora of visits, both in the UK and abroad. The curriculum is rich, varied and well taught, resulting in very high outcomes for children and unusually high attendance given the context. Children come to school because they do not want to miss anything.

Executive headteacher: Helen Stocking

Trustees: Mrs Eileen Harvey, Mr Alan Irving and Mr Graham Tinsley

“All pupils make rapid progress and reach levels which are well above the national average by the end of year 6. Consistently high-quality teaching and excellent attention to individual needs mean that all pupils thrive and want to learn. Topic work is imaginative and exciting and provides an excellent variety of activities and experiences throughout the year, including many memorable visits. The learning environment is vibrant and of exceptionally high quality. It is a showcase for pupils' excellent work and their experiences. Amazing role play areas in all classrooms strongly promote pupils' speaking and listening skills. The drive and determination of the headteacher, matched by the hard work of other leaders and governors, has placed this school in the top 2% of schools nationally in terms of the progress made by pupils. The very knowledgeable and highly involved governing body skilfully supports and challenges leaders at all levels. This has led to even higher standards for all groups of pupils.”

Ofsted, 2012

Portrait of the school

Newstead Primary School is a centre of the community in a social housing estate. There is little prosperity. Only a third of parents access the internet and while the school provides computers for them to use with their children, there is little interest. Parents' meetings are poorly attended, especially as the pupils get older. Nearly half of the children attract pupil premium and there are many more 'on the edge' of fulfilling the criteria for receipt of this. One result of this context is that many children have very limited horizons; some have not been further afield than the local shops and thus have a limited range of experiences to talk and write about.

Pupil premium therefore is invested largely in educational visits, which have a direct impact on pupils' attendance, learning, progress and self-esteem. London, the Black Country Museum, Manchester Airport and Paris are typical destinations. Parents have become enthusiastic supporters of such opportunities on seeing the excitement of their children and benefits to their progress. The strategy makes parents more appreciative of the school and more ready to engage with it. When they see the standards of work expected of their children, they are sharing and adopting those expectations. The estate's play facilities are also poor and so the school endeavours to counter this through investing in its playground.

The school day starts with a breakfast club and finishes with after-school provision. It is bright, welcoming, well-equipped and provides a high-quality environment for learning. Parents are very positive about the school and it is oversubscribed. The school tackles the community's lack of tolerance for ethnic minorities head on, providing inventive solutions to multicultural education and community cohesion.

Tackling racism and developing multicultural understanding

The school is both relentless and innovative in meeting these challenges. "We forge ahead with visits to mosques and other churches but still have a pocket of parents who refuse to let their children go. This is far better than the mass opposition I faced at first." Helen has challenged community prejudice imaginatively. One example of this is Newstead's joint work with two other contrasting schools. Helen explains:

"I located two schools that are close by and culturally very different to ours. We developed a little programme, called the community cohesion programme. It starts in year 3. We take the year 3 class from each school and split them into thirds so each term a third from one school, a third from another and a third from here are taught here before working for a term in each of the other schools. The schools are very different, the children work together naturally and the arrangement works brilliantly. At the end in July they have a celebration day bringing all the children and their parents together at one of the schools. The children and parents all go on the field and have a picnic together and they're seen by the community either in

my school or in the other schools and we take it in turns. This will be our fourth year. The children love it, and the parents are really accepting of it.”

The children become ambassadors for tolerance; they work and play with each other naturally, but adult attitudes die hard. For example, an Asian family moved into the area but left very quickly after there was a fire in their house. As Helen says:

“There’s only so much you can do. You can educate and educate. We celebrate Diwali days and other festivals. We have a Polish day so we’re encouraging that as well. Parents come to these events. We had a Caribbean day last summer when I employed steel bands to come and play outside. The parents came and enjoyed it. They support me well now but it was very tough at the beginning. It has taken time but I can’t change the world.”

Leadership and governance

Helen Stocking took up the headship in 2008 having started her career as a nurse before deciding she wanted to teach. She studied for her degree over four years while working nights to pay for it, and became a qualified teacher in 2000. She was promoted rapidly, becoming an assistant headteacher in 2004. That school merged and she became deputy of the combined school before moving on to the headship of Newstead. Her work in two professions has taught her two key principles, in addition – she stresses – to having universally high expectations.

“I’ve not been teaching for long but I can’t tell you how similar it is to nursing. It’s about treating people with the greatest of respect, communicating everything to them and not keeping them in the dark, and if you do those two things then this is the result that you’ll get.”

Thus the school has very few senior leadership team meetings. They have school meetings because all staff are part of the school leadership team.

Staffing for leadership

The school feels that it is more difficult to attract staff than it was before it became so successful: a victim of its own success. Perhaps applicants are overawed and put off by the expectations they feel will be placed on them. Like many schools, Newstead posts are predominantly filled with newly qualified teachers, often drawn from students they have trained. These include two who were on the graduate teacher programme at the school and two fourth year BA honours graduates. Once employed, their leadership skills are developed and they move up into leadership positions. Helen illustrated this with the consequences of her deputy leaving.

“Maxine is leaving [to become headteacher of the sponsored academy]. My assistant headteacher will become my deputy and I’ve a senior teacher who’ll become the assistant so the whole thing will start again. I’ve taken someone to a senior teaching role from within. They’ve all stepped up. They can see the progression within the school ... We do a lot here but I’m adamant in stressing it’s not rocket science. I’m guessing that I’m a formidable force to work for and I don’t accept anything but the best really for the children and I guess that it must be quite difficult coming to work with us if you’ve not got your heart in the same place as mine.”

Leadership progression is illustrated by the assistant headteacher. Her leadership pathway at the school has been as follows.

“I have changed a lot. When I started here with a degree in music, I became music co-ordinator. I then took on the religious education side, and assemblies became my responsibility. I dabbled in PE, I did the netball clubs and that kind of thing. I

then moved onto the SENCO [special educational needs coordinator] and also took on the gifted and talented and inclusion management. I oversee all that. I am now assistant headteacher and will become deputy.”

Governance and other support for the reforming headteacher

Initially, Helen felt unsupported by the governing body, some of who were convinced that there was nothing wrong with the school. It was considered she had got her priorities wrong and they could not understand why she was changing it: a case of governors in denial perhaps. This was very difficult but the local authority was helpful in dealing with the politics, reconstituting the governing body and including specific governors who would then stand for chair. A new chair was voted in Helen’s second year.

Governance has improved impressively and the remaining former members have now realised that change was needed. Helen’s tenacity and resilience have paid off. She was appointed to make the school outstanding and has done that. The 2012 Ofsted inspection report is highly complimentary about the governance of the school, which bodes well for the future of the academies trust.

“The governing body has an excellent overview of the school’s strengths and areas for improvement. Its members receive regular and detailed information from all leaders. They also visit classrooms or work as reading volunteers so that they see the school in action. Governors challenge and hold the leadership team to account for the quality of all aspects of the school’s work. Governors are fully aware of how the performance management of staff and salary progression are linked to improved outcomes in pupils’ achievement. They check thoroughly how effectively the school uses its money, including that provided through the pupil premium. Their overview of data enables them to assess the impact this funding has had. Governors undertake training to ensure they keep their knowledge up to date and fulfil their statutory duties, for example in relation to safeguarding.”

School improvement: becoming outstanding

Two years before Helen arrived as headteacher, the school had been judged 'good' by Ofsted. However, the reality when she took up post was very different. The budget was seriously overspent and there was a profusion of staff, for example three or four support staff in each class insufficiently deployed. The learning environment in what had been a newly built school was tatty; for example, there were bits of broken furniture in many classrooms. Safeguarding was an issue, with many holes in the school fencing. When Ofsted came when Helen had been there a year, her self-evaluation judged the school to be 'inadequate'. However, inspectors deemed the school 'satisfactory', based in part upon its capacity to improve.

The quality of teaching when she took up post was predominantly inadequate. Helen observed every class initially but saw only one good lesson; the rest were inadequate: "no learning objectives, never mind success criteria". The teaching atmosphere was, Helen states, typified by teachers who sat powerfully behind their desks in big chairs; staff who would go for cigarette breaks in the playground; marking that was confined to ticks and crosses, and a chaotic foundation stage unit with 60 children running around, she describes, aimlessly while each of the 13 adults had their own big chair. What should have been creative areas for children were full of furniture for adults.

The following drastic actions were imperative.

Eliminating debt through restructuring

The school was heading for a £200,000 deficit when Helen came. It could not afford the wages. It was not possible to grow the roll quickly enough to overcome this so staffing had to be reduced. This placed an imperative on restructuring.

She started by restructuring because of the need at that time to inform staff by October that this would be required. Radical action was needed and the new structure contained 11 fewer posts. Helen felt that at least that number of staff were underperforming anyway. She faced down union opposition, which was strong but short-lived, with the principle that if people are not doing their job and the school cannot afford them, they have to go. In all, 17 staff left the school over the first two years. This turnover also gave Helen the opportunity to appoint as deputy a colleague from her previous school, who proved a valuable ally.

Aligning planning with the budget cycle

The school development plan that Helen inherited did not match what she was seeing. She did not revise this until the restructuring was well under way. She and the governors decided to tie the plan in with the financial year, with the result that the school development plan runs from April to March.

Changing the learning environment, a class at a time

The unexpected departure of a teacher gave Helen the opportunity to appoint a deputy whom she had known from her previous school. Helen's new deputy, Maxine, worked in each classroom in turn and modelled the approach she and Helen sought, moving on when this was firmly established.

Instituting systems and procedures

The school set up systems and procedures for “absolutely everything”, Helen states, but kept them very clear and straightforward. This now means that if teachers or teaching assistants move from one class to cover another, they find a common structure in every class. Everyone has ownership of what is going on; most meetings are with the whole staff because of this. These meetings contribute to ensuring quality and consistency. In teaching phonics, for example:

“The year 1 teacher leads on phonics, which is taught from nursery, so by the time they get into reception they’ve already been taught at ‘phase 3’ and ‘phase 4’ (Letters and Sounds) because they’ve got to be. We don’t have ability groups for phonics. We do daily phonics right to the end of year 2 when the emphasis is more on support for spelling. Children are also listened to every day, from the beginning of their reading up to the end of year 2, by an adult whether it be a member of staff or volunteer. For example, two governors come in several days a week to support the reading. Then from year 3 we have guided reading which is specific to need.”

Working with the parent community

The school tries to attract parents and respond to their wishes in many ways. On the question of homework, for example, parents wanted homework to go in a folder with the homework building up over time so they could see it progressing. Everybody’s homework is sent out on a Friday and returned on a Monday, again at the request of parents. The school also runs an annual programme of family learning courses, employing a home-school worker who runs these from the nursery class right through to year 6. Eight or nine parents from each class come in and volunteer and tell other parents about their experience so that volunteering increases. There is an open house for volunteer readers. A teacher explained:

“What happens is once one comes in and we give them a coffee and make them feel special that mum goes out and tells another and another. And they’re supporting the learning that way. We have literacy mornings and numeracy mornings so the parents come in and see the school in action. It all amounts to a very open door policy. Parents are informed exactly which levels their children are working at so that they can help them.”

Leadership challenges

That first year as head of the school was very bruising. Helen's personal account illustrates vividly the courage needed to change a school that has lost its way.

“Once you have started to make tough changes, you must not stop. If I had stopped and wondered about what people thought about me in those early days for too long I think I would probably not have come back. That's the reality. You have to be strong. But I can understand how people fail, because it's tough, lonely and you're responsible for everything.”

Helen's resilience was rewarded. In less than three years since the previous 'satisfactory' Ofsted report the school was judged outstanding. Staff perceptions of Helen's leadership qualities are reflected in the comments of one who said:

“She's a good listener. She's good delegator, knows what she wants, has faith in staff and trusts them, but also holds them accountable. She knows what is going on at her school, so you can talk to her about anything. We have a lot of professional conversations. She is just one of those people who inspires the children and the staff. It was very difficult for her when she first came but now it's a really nice place to work, and there's humour, but we all get on with the job and we all know what we're expected to do. The main thing is she's actually in it for the children. That's all she wants, to improve the children's development, you know, the expectations, giving them aspirations and the skills to achieve their dreams.”

Sustaining excellence

The school's quality and success stem from the range of factors identified by Ofsted (see opening quotation), which include: the high quality of teaching; attention to individual needs; imaginative curriculum; vibrant learning environment and enrichment beyond the classroom. These ingredients are bound together by the strong adherence to consistency of practice. Nothing is allowed to slip and everything is well thought through (Figure 9-1).

Figure 9-9: Marking it, feeding back and fixing it

The school not only has effective procedures – using red ('tickled pink') and green (for 'growth') ink for marking and feedback but it builds in 'fix-it' time for children to put right or work on aspects identified by the staff, with alternative challenges ('wake up time') for those who have nothing to be fixed. All staff are involved in marking work; teaching assistants were seen marking and commenting on mathematics very effectively. Five different year 5 children work with year 1 children each day to help them with their 'fix-it' work. Marking procedures are totally consistent. Some classes are very large; one year 4 class has 39 pupils, for example. The two support staff and additional adult helpers were working on individual action plans, supporting 'fix-it time' and providing work for gifted and talented children. Everyone has learning objectives and success criteria, printed for staff and included in children's books: one for literacy, one for mathematics and one for topic work. Displays are closely linked to what children are currently doing, their role play and their topics as well as the writing and mathematics walls.

Quality and consistency are aided by a supportive infrastructure that provides everything staff need. A well-designed storage room has been created for staff resources and organised so that everything they need for particular work is boxed up ready for them to take. Helen believes that as much should be organised for teachers as possible so that they can concentrate on working to a very high standard.

Helen is clear about two of the strategies needed to improve standards in underachieving schools. "You need to secure accountability and teach your staff starting points."

"The essence of this lies in a cycle which starts in July, at an INSET [in-service training] day. The whole day is dedicated to moderating standards and quality of work and passing up children from one teacher to the next teacher. We spend the whole day on this, not an hour at the end of the school day in July when you're too tired. We dedicate time to it because it's really important. Both teachers then sign the clear agreement that children are at a particular level and that the work discussed matches the level. That's the first point about securing accountability.

Then when September comes, you don't have teachers dribbling in saying 'I don't agree with such and such for this child's work; it's 2C and not 2A etc.', and they're starting coasting. They have signed up to the standards the children were at and must get on with the job. Then pupil progress meetings take place religiously every six weeks. Each teacher brings their progress evidence for every child to a meeting with the headteacher, deputy and SENCO who have a conversation about the progress of every child in the class. None are hidden.

We make charts of progress and don't lose any of these children. The vulnerable children, such as those in care or on free school meals, are highlighted in yellow so there's no hiding place. If you look through the chart there are as many

highlighted children in the green boxes, i.e. the more able boxes, as there are in the red boxes, but it's that system that you have to get established. You need to be able to challenge your teachers and ask: how do you know this child's moved up a level, where's the evidence? They bring the books, writing, maths, reading comprehension and so on and you can see whether and how the work has been levelled. New cohort action plans are drawn up every six weeks as a result of these reviews. We revise our raising achievement plans every term; these are annexed to the school development plan. So if you hold staff to account and you have the assessment systems and procedures absolutely clear from the start, no children can slip behind or get lost."

Attendance at the school is exceptionally high (97%) given its context. The school is convinced that this is because children want to come to school because they love the curriculum. As the deputy said:

"It is exciting and never boring. They are not subjected to a bit of geography here and a bit of history there. They also love the educational visits. There are so many of them and they write about their lovely experiences. They are excited by the mathematics. The curriculum and assessment are really important pieces, all of which fit together."

Teaching and learning are monitored regularly, as per the school development plan. Each term, the pattern and focus of monitoring is laid out and teachers are told the evening before it happens. There is also constant informal monitoring through drop-in visits to classrooms by the headteacher and deputy.

With all its approaches, systems and strategies being applied consistently and rigorously, the school recognises that it needs to continue to move forward to sustain excellence. It is also working hard on the only issue in the latest Ofsted report, that of improving handwriting. Becoming an academy, an academy sponsor and a national support school are among the major 'next steps' it has taken. But being 'outstanding' is, Helen states, exposing as if the school were in special measures, as she feels that: "everyone is waiting for you to fall off your pedestal". It is clear that despite having a "fabulous" staff, much rests on having a continual driving force at the top of the school.

Looking outward

Becoming an academy

The main incentive to become an academy after the school achieved its outstanding Ofsted recognition was so that the curriculum could continue to develop without external constraints. The curriculum already covers national requirements through a topic-based approach and the governors wished to continue in this direction.

Sponsorship and school improvement partnerships

As an outstanding school, Newstead was approached by the Department for Education (DfE) to see if it would be prepared to lead a multi-academy trust. The DfE thought it was in a good position to help others. This was put to the governors, who readily agreed. The first additional school was Norton Primary, and the Newstead deputy head has been appointed to the headship of Norton. It is a school that had slipped back from 'good' to 'special measures'. Norton has become a sponsored academy from 1 July. Another special measures school will follow in November 2014 as the third member of the Newstead Primary Academies Trust. Helen Stocking has become executive headteacher of the Trust and the deputy headteacher at Newstead has become head of school.

Helen has recently been designated a national leader of education and her school a national support school, partly at the instigation of the lead inspector who saw the school's potential for helping other schools after what Helen had achieved in Newstead. Helen and her staff have actually been supporting schools for some time, two currently and a third that she has recently passed on to another headteacher. But for the time being, she will focus her future school partnership capacity on Norton Primary School.

Case study 10 - Prestolee Primary School, near Bolton

Primary leadership case study: system leadership of outstanding education and support for other schools

Prestolee Primary School is located in the small village of Prestolee, five miles south east of Bolton in Greater Manchester. The school mainly serves the local Prestolee community, and has 267 pupils on roll. Since current headteacher, Mike Tonge, was appointed in 2005 there has been a sustained drive to look outwards and work with other schools. Prestolee was judged outstanding by Ofsted at its most recent inspection in 2011. Outcomes for children have remained exceptionally high, and are in the top 1% of schools nationally. The school is a national support school and national teaching school, and is playing a role in supporting schools across Greater Manchester. Since 2011/12, significant support has been provided to Bowness Primary School where Mike is acting as the executive headteacher. Prestolee is also a national teaching school.

Executive headteacher: Mike Tonge

Chair of governors: Denise Hark

“The extremely clear vision of the headteacher, with excellent support from senior and other staff, leads to the outstanding quality of teaching throughout school. This ensures that pupils of all ages and abilities have excellent attitudes to learning and that their attainment is high. The exceptional curriculum and the outstanding care, guidance and support contribute significantly to pupils’ exemplary behaviour, above average attendance and outstanding spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. The governing body provides good support and challenge. The thorough and systematic self-evaluation procedures reflect the views of all those involved in the life of the school. The progress of pupils of all ages and abilities is outstanding.”

Ofsted inspection report on Prestolee, 2011

Portrait of the school

The community of Prestolee is bounded on two sides by a bend of the River Irwell and on a third side by the disused Manchester, Bury and Bolton canal. It is almost completely surrounded by water. It is a close-knit community and many families with children at the school have previous generations of ex-mill workers who also attended. In 2001 Ofsted commented that “the school’s main strength lies in its good community spirit – the Prestolee family”.

The main school buildings date from the school’s foundation in 1911. A £750,000 programme of building works over the last five years has created a vibrant and welcoming foundation stage and much-used community centre. The community centre has been open for 18 months, has a full-time manager and is open for 50 weeks a year. Part of the purpose of the community centre was so that the school could genuinely offer support to a whole community: from breakfast clubs, to pre-school parenting support, through to age-concern meetings and tai chi classes for grandparents, as well as enabling the community to drop in for guidance and access to other services. Prestolee has strong links to the local church and stained glass has been used in the new reception area emphasising one of the school’s mottos: ‘from first class to world class’.

The majority of pupils at the school come from Prestolee and the local Kearsley area. They are mainly from White British backgrounds with a below average percentage of pupils with learning difficulties and statements of special educational need. The number of pupils eligible for free school meals is in line with national averages. Pupils attain at exceptionally high levels: over the last four years all or nearly all pupils reached level 4 and above in English and maths in year 6 with half reaching level 5, and all pupils made good rates of progress.

Pupils are genuinely enthused about their learning, stating the best things about the school: “it’s fun”; that teachers “make learning really interesting”; and “our exciting lessons – we really enjoy them”. Display is carefully used to showcase examples of pupils’ work and their extended projects (for example, a scale model of a Roman amphitheatre constructed on a CAD/CAM machine). Art work from older ex-pupils now on art courses at secondary schools is displayed to raise aspirations. The learning environments are vibrant and lively, with extensive use of working walls and exemplar marked work. Corridor displays are used imaginatively to raise esteem, such as golden leaves on a tree board naming those children with excellent attendance. On one classroom door, pupils had recorded their ideas on possible future careers including one that read “we are the future”. The library has a central space in the school and £3,000 is spent on books annually. The school has four principles that are seen regularly around the school and in the school’s literature: Every Child a Reader, Every Child a Writer, Every Child Numerate, and Every Child ICT Literate.

The school has achieved several awards, including Healthy School status, the Activemark, a Leading Parent Partnership award, Governor Mark, and the Investors in People (IiP) Gold Standard. The IiP assessment in June 2012 concluded by stating:

“Prestolee School is a vibrant, confident and highly effective organisation, at the forefront of significant development of the traditional model of primary education.”

The school prides itself on its highly effective relationships with both parents and the local community. Ofsted commented in 2011:

“There is an outstanding partnership with parents and carers who are very proud of the school, and the school is at the centre of its own and the wider community. ‘Amazing school, brilliant teachers. Very supportive of children and very parent friendly’, is one parent’s comment which reflects the views of many.”

During an assembly, Mike asked all the pupils “what are my two favourite words?” The children responded loudly and in unison “Community and Standards!” When asked later what community meant to them, the children mentioned two aspects: working with the local community, and the way that the school community works together.

Leadership and governance

Ofsted in 2011 made the following comments about the leadership and management of the school:

“The headteacher provides a calm and clear direction which staff, the governing body, and parents and carers all share. Leadership is strongly devolved throughout the staff team and everyone is eager to play their part. Staff morale is very high. For example, one member of staff commented that ‘I wholeheartedly sign up to our unique school ethos within which high academic standards are at the core!’ summing up the expressed views of many. The thoroughness and enthusiasm of all staff to share best practice is well embedded in all aspects of its work. Rigorous monitoring of performance and well-planned professional development have led to sharply focused and highly valued improvements.”

Mike started his career working as a year 6 teacher in Rochdale and Bury, staying at his second school for 10 years: “I really enjoyed it and it was a huge challenge”. He had been convinced at secondary school that teaching could be a rewarding career thanks to an inspiring English teacher. He had a spell as a deputy in a school in challenging contexts. This was an important period for Mike in learning about the role of the headteacher, and developing views about the importance of education as a means of social mobility.

In 2001, Ofsted inspected Prestolee School and found that all teaching was ‘satisfactory’ with a third ‘good’ but noted that “the teaching is not as strong as it was in the last inspection”. Mike arrived in 2005 and says that the school was comfortable, traditional

and probably coasting. Results were in the top 10 in the local authority and generally seen as good enough. The staffing team was stable. Importantly, the school's geographical isolation was mirrored in its approach: there were no teacher trainees and no relationships with other schools. While it had the feel of a village school and behaviour was good, pupil numbers were falling. The school was surrounded by four other primary schools that were outstanding, so there was pressure from other schools and other places for children to go.

The current chair of governors said the school had previously been comfortable with a "top 10 performance", but it was clear from the start in September 2005 that "Mike wanted more for the school, and people saw the determination within the first week". This sometimes made for a bumpy transition. Several staff handed in their notice in Mike's first week.

Mike has spent eight years carefully identifying and selecting his staff. They are in turn very loyal to him. Members of the senior team agreed about Mike's strengths as a leader, and the words "trusting", "supportive" and "positive" came up repeatedly:

"a good talker, he is innovative and thinks differently; he is progressive"

"friendly and supportive, and he gets really good buy-in to ideas"

"he trusts people to do the job properly and allows us to be professional"

"he's rarely negative: all feedback is couched in a positive way"

"he is experienced and well read: he has a passion for education – not timetabling – and we know his love of learning will help us to take practice to the next level"

Staff clearly have the highest regard for Mike as a leader, want praise from him, and are very keen to do well; "he gets us whipped up" said one. One senior leader remarked: "Is it a bit like a cult? Does it feel believable about how positive we all are? It really is like this!"

Senior team

When Mike arrived at the school, the senior management was a deputy head and the special educational needs coordinator (SENCO). Prestolee now has a broad senior team that has a sense of cohesiveness and collaboration. One of the two deputy headteachers is the operational lead for the school and also leads key stage 1. The other is the lead for the teaching school alliance and also takes the lead on quality assurance across the school. The school's SENCO leads key stage 2. An assistant headteacher takes the lead on teaching and learning across the school and leads on the work of specialist leaders of education (SLEs) for the teaching school.

For the current senior team, one of Mike's most important leadership strategies has been to spot and nurture its members' talents and provide them with every possible opportunity to grow and develop. For example, the SENCO role was offered to a senior leadership team (SLT) member with experience at a special school. One of the SLT was working at the school with a National Nursery Examination Board qualification when Mike arrived. She completed her A levels at night school, and then trained at the school on the graduate teacher programme. Mike places great importance on the selection of staff, keeping in touch with high-quality student teachers once they have left their placements at Prestolee and contacting them when future vacancies arise. One member of the senior team was one such student teacher: "we have had lots of opportunities and doors that have been opened". We were supported to think about other opportunities and training to support our work" (SLT member). Mike is clear about his role as a leader and manager: "my job is to surround myself with brilliant people and enable them to do their jobs by helping them or getting out of their way".

The senior team is conscious of growing other staff as leaders for succession purposes, nurturing staff to be able to take on roles. "It's a culture we have created" said the senior leaders, through developing trust, valuing the staff, creating time for them to have a go, and using emotional intelligence to identify the strengths of the emerging leaders.

The most important influences for the senior leadership team have been getting out into other schools and looking outwards. For example when Mike suggested they publicise what the school was doing in the Bolton Evening News there was some apprehension as this was a completely different culture. Similarly, for one of the deputies being convinced to support other schools was vital as "I needed to be out of my comfort zone which is where the best learning takes place".

The SLT was clear that the school was a great model of distributed leadership: they felt involved in taking decisions, and that in turn ensured they took ownership for changes. The current senior structure for the school was developed by the senior team at a visioning away day. Professional development meetings involving all the staff including teaching assistants developed the focus on teaching and learning and all staff working together. "Staff are super-keen and want change" say the SLT, and considered that an important element of this was continually celebrating their successes. The SLT were genuine in their enthusiasm – "we all feel really lucky that we have been in the right place at the right time".

Governance

"The school is supported by an effective governing body, which has several new members, working in close partnership with leaders and managers and developing increasingly efficient monitoring procedures."

Ofsted, 2011

The current chair of governors, Denise, has been associated with Prestolee for 21 years. She is currently working for the local authority governor services, and has undertaken the National College for Teaching and Leadership's Chair of Governors Programme. The governing body has recently been successful in gaining Governor Mark accreditation, enabling them to reflect on their own practice during the process. The Governor Mark team noted in their assessment feedback:

“There are excellent relationships between the governors and the Headteacher and staff. The governing body brings constructive challenge to the school, for example in asking for a change in style and content of HT reports which have moved from a narrative style to a more hard-nosed data-driven approach.”

Governor Mark assessment, May 2013

Denise recognises that there has been a real shift in ethos since Mike arrived: “there is now a sense around the school that we are leaders, we are special, and we are working to share the excellent practice and not keeping it to ourselves”. Governors needed to be convinced that supporting other schools was the right way to go, however one of the key steps was when the school's then school improvement partner said to them that unless they considered further challenges and work outside the school they would lose their headteacher. At that time, an important role was played by the chair of governors to support Mike in changing the perceptions of other governors about working outside the school. Since then, governors have seen the strong impact from this work, on both outcomes for their children and staff development and see the teaching school as a very exciting development.

There are only nine members of the governing body, and all have specific tasks. The governing body reviews progress through having governors linked to particular aspects, governor drop-ins and reports to full governing body meetings. The chair said they were not inclined to expand the school, but it is being considered. Their key priority was to maintain their outstanding status, and to begin liaising with governors of the schools in their teaching school alliance.

School improvement: early actions

As soon as Mike arrived in 2005 he set about instilling a sense of progress and improvement, based around several key elements.

Pace and urgency

Part of Mike's strategy was to increase both the pace of learning and sense of urgency about change. The school adopted a motto – “every second counts” – that was designed to encapsulate the need to focus on how to make learning as effective as possible.

Provision maps were introduced for all the intervention strategies; over time these would be used by the school to monitor impact. Mike also wanted to make sure that the school maximised the opportunities to intervene, for example by taking pupils out of assembly for additional support.

Expectations

Mike created a set of bottom-line expectations and ensured these promoted a new way of thinking, for example amending the behaviour policy so that it focused on rewards rather than sanctions, and asking significant questions of their yearly development plan such as “why is average good enough?” The school adopted another motto – “from first class to world class” – to offer a sense of the new level of ambition.

Starting to look outside

One of Mike’s key priorities was to begin the process of the school looking outside its own existence and engaging with other schools and other external agencies: “the school needed to expand its horizons”. The intentions were clear: it would challenge current practice; it would allow staff to share in and learn from good practice elsewhere; and there was a moral imperative over time in working with other schools in challenging circumstances. To begin, small steps were needed: Mike engaged local higher education institutions and brought in student teachers on placements. This allowed staff to see what new and emerging practice looked like, and also to have their teaching observed by students.

Identifying staff to lead

Mike was clear that he needed to find three or four staff who would act as beacons of good practice [who he] could build teams around. Mike also wanted to get rid of the sense that you needed to serve a certain amount of time before taking responsibility for things. He looked for early opportunities to give permission for people to take on a range of school improvement tasks across the school. His view was that he was looking for staff “who will not be tired by change, who will be engaged and interested in learning; I want people who are intellectually hungry. We want staff here who will love it and share the challenge.”

Managing staffing changes

There were staff who saw the direction of travel and did not want to go with it; they were supported to leave. Several staff were nearing retirement and acknowledged, Mike stated, that “it was the right time for them to go”. Mike recalled that a senior member of staff “said that she really respected what I was doing, but she did not want to join us in being part of the changes and was therefore going to retire”. Mike’s strong instincts as a firm and compassionate leader are apparent in explaining that he felt that “it was

important to allow people to go with dignity and with their head held high. Part of our job was to help some staff see that teaching was not for them, or that the direction that the school was heading in was not for them. Then support them to make the right decision. Nobody wants to be a bad teacher.”

Training and development

Mike regards continuing professional development (CPD) as a central plank of the strategy in moving the school forward. Identifying the right opportunities for staff, motivating them about external training and whole school development have all been important. Mike also made it clear he wanted the staff to learn about the science of teaching and what sits behind their practice by looking at teaching strategies and high order questioning. Mike commented positively on the training and opportunities provided by the National College over recent years. When Ofsted visited Prestolee a year after Mike’s arrival, the school was judged ‘good’ and already there were signs of the improvements to come. The timing of the inspection provided an important external validation of the direction taken:

“The headteacher and his supporting leadership team provide good strong leadership. Although relatively new to their jobs, the senior leaders have gained the respect of staff, governors, parents and pupils. To date, the leadership of the school has ensured that high standards have been maintained while at the same time introducing new schemes, systems and strategies to support and enhance teaching and learning across the school. There is the right mix of personnel and skills among the leadership to see further good improvement in the future. The senior leadership team has been together for only about 12 months but has made a significant impact on the strategic and operational running of the school.”

Ofsted, 2006

School improvement: becoming outstanding

Following the 2006 Ofsted inspection through to the next inspection in 2011, Mike and the senior team worked to embed the key changes, increase the pace of development, and open up the school to new challenges. Key strategies included the following.

Empowering staff and delegating authority

Once Mike had identified some of his future leaders and navigated the early turbulence, he was in a position to distribute leadership and place authority in the hands of others. One example was staff meetings, now renamed as “professional development time”. Initially Mike led them all; now other staff take the lead, and all staff are encouraged to participate. Staff talk about the “amazing opportunities we have through the teaching school and mentoring ITT placements”. Mike organised a residential professional

development session to re-think their curriculum. He set out the overall aims and vision, and staff then worked in groups on re-designing their provision so that they developed their own curriculum offer.

Mike talks with enthusiasm about his role in building leadership potential, supporting the future leaders, and thinking carefully about how staff work together in developing initiatives. His view is that you need to offer staff leadership opportunities "...otherwise they end up as teachers in their mid-30s in the classroom with performance issues. If they don't want to become a deputy or a head, look at what are the other opportunities that are available to them, perhaps leading ITT and influencing the next generation of teachers".

Communication of the vision

Mike recognises that frequent communication of the messages and the vision are crucial to be successful. "We engage staff through questions and not answers; we aim to be enquiry-led." This approach resulted in the idea of 'link learning', the school's cross-curricular work which is then embedded in the school development plan and into staff objectives. Working groups take the initiatives forward and rather than having a problem finding volunteers, as can often be the case, the SLT said that they needed to make sure initiatives were shared out equally and there were enough opportunities as everyone was so keen to be involved.

Positive morale

Mike and the senior team have maintained a cheerful and positive staff room. Staff support each other, and have social events. They recognise that they have been handpicked, and this creates confidence. Senior leaders inspire student teachers and make them want to work at the school.

Monitoring pupil progress

The introduction of regular pupil progress meetings had been very powerful as a way of reviewing improvements. They used termly average point score (APS) data to ensure accountability, and identify the support needed for individual pupils. As Mike says: "Data is about the children: it describes what they can do, and raises questions for staff."

Reorganising teaching and learning

Prestolee had recruited additional teaching assistants (TAs) to work with year 5/year 6 classes. For example, TAs have worked with smaller groups of level 5 pupils, while teachers have worked with level 4 pupils. The school has also created some joint year 5/year 6 groups. Support groups have also been set up to work with level 6 pupils and extra TAs have been appointed to "to push them on". Moderation of standards across the school has been a key influence: it has provided a chance to celebrate good examples;

and also deliver a consistent message about expectations. There is an absolute focus on learning in the classroom: the use of objectives is consistent and embedded, and pupils know and can talk about their own learning goals. Support from teaching assistants has been crucial to the success of their interventions.

“The outstanding quality of teaching and excellent use of assessment to support learning are the key reasons why pupils of all abilities achieve their potential. Teachers really make ‘every second count’ one of the school’s mottos, through lessons, group work and homework. All activities are taught with pace and flair. They have very high expectations of pupils to tackle all their work with persistence and independence. Relationships are excellent. Teachers make very clear the purpose of lessons and how pupils can reach the highest possible level. They do this in a highly motivating way that holds pupils’ attention, enthuses them and deepens their learning. Highly-skilled teaching assistants are extremely well deployed, to ensure all pupils, particularly those at risk of falling behind, clearly articulate their understanding of their own learning and make the maximum effort to improve their work. The quality of teaching is consistently high throughout the school. Pupils’ progress is regularly and thoroughly assessed and analysed in depth, both by teachers and pupils.”

Ofsted, 2011

Mike reflected that “it has taken eight years to get here and there are still lots of things to do”.

Looking outward

By 2008/09, Mike recognised that the foundations were in place at Prestolee and he could take the school onto the next phase by working with other schools and organisations. This was not simply about extending the challenges and opportunities for Prestolee staff; there was also a collective moral purpose to support improvement in other schools. There have been a number of key elements to this approach.

Working with a local school

Prestolee became a national support school and has worked with Bowness Primary School for some time. Mike has taken the role of executive headteacher, working with an acting headteacher at the school. Bowness is a small primary school situated in a suburb of Bolton not far from Prestolee. It currently has 89 pupils on roll and although numbers have fallen over recent years the current reception class was oversubscribed. The reduction in pupil numbers had resulted in a deficit budget that required significant staff

re-structuring. There are four classes with mixed-aged groups, with higher than average proportions of pupils with special educational needs and almost a third of pupils eligible for free school meals. The school was inspected by Ofsted in 2011 and found to be 'satisfactory', and in 2012 found to 'require improvement'. A further inspection in 2014 noted progress although the school and its leadership still require improvement.

There has been joint training between staff at the two schools, opportunities to observe practice, and support from members of staff from Prestolee (for example working on transition, and supporting teaching of phonics based on Letters and Sounds). Mike said that the key challenge was changing the culture that accepted the differences in practice and standards between teachers and pupil groups: "teachers didn't believe they could do it". For Mike, the work has been an important part of developing his practice as a head: "you have to make explicit what had been implicit in your own school, and in doing so you end up re-evaluating your own school". Staff at Prestolee talk about working with Bowness to effect an accelerated version of what has taken place at their own school. The chair of governors from Bowness is now on the Prestolee governing body, and they have organised joint training between the two governing bodies.

Mike observed that executive and system leadership did require different skills: "you realise your own limitations". The skills of empathy, emotional intelligence, coaching and setting direction are all even more important than they are for a head of a single school. At the same time you have to maintain the overview of your own school at the right level of detail: "you need to know the data, know the classes, know the teachers; not all the minutiae of daily organisation".

Working across the region

Prestolee was involved in the Greater Manchester Challenge and this gave some of the senior team their first taste of working with other schools. Prestolee worked with two schools, one in Tameside and one in Trafford: each project was 18 months long and resulted in much-improved results at the supported schools. But the learning was two-way, and it was a significant step up for Prestolee to be part of a regional group with some highly effective schools. The headteacher admitted: "it was a real shock that we were not yet as good as we thought and others were doing a lot better. We thought 'we need to pick up our game'".

In May 2011, after the Greater Manchester Challenge ended, a schools-based not-for-profit partnership By Schools for Schools (BSfS) was set up by leading Greater Manchester heads, supported by the Department for Education and local authorities. It was tasked with taking forward the legacy of the Greater Manchester Challenge and developing a brokerage system for school-to-school support, and since then has been operating to co-ordinate support and training to schools across Greater Manchester, and provide operational management for regional national leaders of education, local leaders

of education and national leaders of governance. Mike is one of the directors of BSfS, which describes its philosophy as “underpinned by strong moral purpose which recognises that all schools have a responsibility to work together, share expertise and support each other (and particularly the most vulnerable) in order to build capacity in the system and ensure the best possible outcomes for all children across Greater Manchester.” (BSfS promotional material.)

Leading a teaching school alliance

Prestolee was successful in being designated as a national teaching school in cohort three in 2013. There are currently 10 members of the alliance: two secondary schools and the rest primary, in Bury, Bolton, Tameside and Rochdale. The other strategic partner is the University of Cumbria. For the work on initial teacher training, Prestolee is a strategic partner of the Everyone Learning Alliance. Prestolee is co-ordinating the student placements, application and selection, and the work of the school-based mentors. School Direct placements have been a positive experience for both students and staff: involvement in assessing applications, interviews and lesson observations, coaching and mentoring and role modelling work. In 2013/14 the alliance had 17 School Direct placements, and the following year numbers will rise to 45 primary and 10 secondary placements.

SLE work has been another important opportunity for staff in the teaching school alliance, working with Bowness, and also supporting an early years unit in Bolton. They will designate six more SLEs. As part of their CPD offer, Prestolee is designing bespoke training for groups of schools and developing new offers such as training for governors. Delivering the Improving Teacher Programme has also been positive and has helped staff reflect on their own experiences and practice. Prestolee had reflected that the joint practice development model of support, using families of schools data, was deepening partnerships with other schools.

Looking forward

Mike acknowledged that he needed the challenge and stimulation of change and moving forward. It has taken this long to develop the school as he hoped. He said that for the school, “we need to make sure we don’t relax and need the next challenge. Change is very important as long as we tell people why we are doing these things”. Each year the school will be working towards some external validation of their provision, such as IIP or Artsmark.

One of the important challenges for the school is, Mike states, to understand what outstanding might look like in five years’ time: “We need to future proof ourselves against future changes and changes to inspection framework [and consider] what next after outstanding?”

Case study 11 - St Peter's Church of England Primary School, Bristol

Primary leadership case study: satisfactory to outstanding through unswerving leadership

St Peter's Church of England Primary School in south Bristol is a school serving a mainly White British community with well above average economic deprivation. Educational provision has benefited from the amalgamation of an effective infant school with an underperforming junior school under the current leadership.

Headteacher: Livvy Sinclair-Gieben

Chair of governors: Colin Wynne

“Excellent teaching is the main reason why pupils make such rapid gains in their learning. Teachers expect much of their pupils; questions are probing and tasks are creative, imaginative and demanding. Pupils are strongly encouraged to explain their ideas fluently and with confidence.”

Ofsted, 2012

Portrait of the school

St Peter's was formed by amalgamating the nursery and infant school, formerly judged 'good' by Ofsted, with the 'satisfactory' junior school. The schools shared a site, which has subsequently been exploited further, including the development of an area of woodland into 'Forest School' provision. A new head was appointed to oversee the amalgamation and lead the new primary school. This she has done with a clarity of purpose that brought the school rapidly to outstanding when inspected in December 2012. Outcomes have improved rapidly between 2010 and 2012. Precision, perfection and aspiration are characteristics of this driven culture which staff thrive on, pupils respond very well to and parents are closely involved in.

Leadership and governance

The headteacher is an example of local authority talent management and succession planning. She has sought or been exposed to the right opportunities, challenges and experience at the right time, and was fully prepared for this, her first substantive headship. Key elements of her professional growth include moving sideways from deputy headship of an infant school to deputy headship of a primary school to gain experience of the full age range before applying for headships. She was nominated for the Associate Headteacher Programme provided by the National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL) and then placed by the local authority as an associate head to lead a school causing concern, under the umbrella of an executive headteacher. Her leadership pathway is a good example of the experiential model of preparing for headship endorsed by recent research.⁵ As Ofsted (2012) recognised:

“The headteacher is widely acclaimed ... as having been hugely instrumental in improving the school. She leads the way in driving ambition and has succeeded in creating a shared sense of purpose to raise the aspirations of pupils and teachers alike.”

Viewpoints on characteristics of the headteacher’s leadership qualities are very consistent. One summarised three ingredients as “inspirational”, “demanding” and “tough love”. She leads with a passion for the school and ensures that every child does matter. She knows what she wants the school to be and is very clear about how to achieve this. This clarity is rooted in experience, knowledge and skills, including a well-developed understanding of data. She is adept at recognising and developing potential. As one colleague said, “she is hugely generous; she makes everyone feel important and believe that they can do it. She sets really high standards (which can be a bit intimidating) but doesn’t make hard work of it ... just puts the right things in place.”

The leadership team includes the deputy, who was previously at the infant school, and about half the other staff. The deputy is also the special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) and head of what the school calls ‘the virtual school’, through which the support available through pupil premium is deployed. Leadership team responsibilities cover the ages and stages, from early years upward, with literacy and assessment being represented strongly. Leaders benefit from the head’s knowledge, experience and skills in all these areas including two that are self-evidently important in school leadership: expertise as a teacher and a sophisticated understanding of assessment data.

⁵ Matthews P., Higham R., Stoll L., Brennan J., and Riley K. (2011), *Prepared to lead: how schools, federations and chains grow leaders*, Nottingham: NCTL.

Governance

Governance is both challenging and highly supportive. The chair is a highly experienced governor who is very active in training other governing bodies and coaching their chairs. His financial background brings a useful resource management perspective, but being a parent of children passing through the school has given the role added meaning. The governors have been trained well and have been closely involved in the drive to improve the school. They have supported fully the leadership initiatives to improve classroom performance and have taken difficult personnel decisions where necessary. The chair will be standing down soon but succession planning is well in hand.

School improvement: from satisfactory to outstanding

School amalgamation provided a good basis for starting a new chapter in local educational provision. After being appointed, but before taking up post, Livvy was able to base herself in the infant school for a term to prepare for the amalgamation. The outgoing infant school head had not applied for the primary headship, which aided transition.

Livvy identifies the challenges she faced when managing the infant and junior schools. These included:

- managing the perception that one school was stronger than the other when trying to create a new identity for the amalgamated school
- managing change, including human resources and a major building project
- involving staff, parents and the community in establishing a vision that all could sign up to.

Livvy took a very pragmatic approach to changing the culture of the school. She was completely willing to accept the consensus on matters such as the values of the school, for example naming these and focusing on particular values such as 'friendship' in term 1 and 'respect' in term 2. But something else was just as important:

“What I wanted to be clear about was what package we are offering a child coming into the school community and how are we adjusting that package. And that was hard, as there was a culture of ‘but our children need pastoral care’. I said ‘yes, and the best form of pastoral care that we can give them is a level 4’. I actually pulled out statistics at this point and showed them that children who don’t achieve level 4 at primary are less likely to achieve GCSEs. I think that there are reports that a child who does not achieve GCSEs has a 10-year reduced life span. There are some really persuasive poverty facts out there about how if you can’t read you can’t buy sensible food and if you haven’t got maths skills then you are likely to go into debt. I really set out the moral journey for them.”

The transformation of the amalgamated school has also rested on a two-part strategy based on a clear view, informed by Ofsted and NCTL publications, of what makes a great primary school. The first part, Livvy states, focuses on getting consistently high-quality teaching and learning. Consistency rests on detailed attention to practices that are reflected in every classroom and lesson. Displays have real purpose as well as being of high quality. An example is where, in every classroom, some of the best writing from the next year up is on display, showing children what to aspire to. The school is committed to raising aspirations and this is reflected in the rapid pace of many lessons: “blistering pace in some” (Ofsted), alongside an emphasis on learning as exciting and fun. Processes like assessment for learning and lesson planning are rigorous and applied consistently by all staff. In the diligent and thoughtful marking of work, for example, pupils use blue ink for

all their written work; teachers comment and give feedback in purple and pupils respond to the teacher's comments in green.

The second part of the approach is to encourage staff to experiment and innovate once they have demonstrated that they can teach consistently well. This relative freedom is seen as empowering, being reflective of senior leaders' confidence in them. The result is an exciting and innovative curriculum which promotes active and enthusiastic learning and which provides a vehicle for using and extending the basics of reading, writing, speaking and listening, calculating and investigating.

Secrets of success as explained by a group of senior leaders

Livvy believes that it is crucial to have excellent teachers, and members of the leadership team are excellent teachers. Her leaders all understand their key roles well but they also take on wider responsibilities. Each knows all about everybody else's job. Livvy and her deputy have sufficient in-depth knowledge to be able to tell the story of each individual child. They know each child so well that if a member of staff new to the school expresses concern about a child not making progress they can say "well actually we know exactly their barriers, their strengths, what they could be capable of achieving, their family ...". The systems are so established and consistently applied that they do not have to focus on them in terms of development, but can focus on developing innovative practice instead.

The leadership team at St Peter's illustrates how members draw on individual strengths and expertise to create a common approach that benefits from the totality of their knowledge. They explained:

"We found that we were all good at certain aspects of 'assessment for learning' but that nobody knew what it was in its entirety. So we decided to combine all of our skills and make sure that not only were we responsible for the learning but that the children were responsible for their individualised learning and that every member of staff, including learning support assistants, was responsible for moving those children on. That was through something as simple as children evaluating their own learning through to really intense individualised marking. We focused heavily on making marking purposeful."

The school also quickly embedded a range of strategies for the children to share their knowledge. Examples included:

- 'talk partners', encouraging children to discuss their learning and become active participants in their learning, without diminishing the central role of the teacher
- consistent features of all classrooms, which include 'working walls' devoted to the current topic or curriculum area, a display focused on 'Every time we write', displays of success criteria and national curriculum targets and a mathematics display. As one teacher explained: "There are certain things that you will see in

every classroom but there is consistency for the children and for us. It doesn't matter where you go in the school, it doesn't matter if somebody decides to put me from year 6 into reception, I will see those same things in every class."

The school has no reservations about discussing national curriculum levels with pupils, especially in years 5 and 6, where children are very aware of them. Younger children are also aiming for high standards of work. Thus in every classroom there is a high-level writing display that shows children the 'absolute best' of what is expected of them. A feature of this display is some of the best writing produced by the year above. This is labelled to show the features that represent target levels, such as level 5 or 6 in the year 6 class. The headteacher said: "It really pinpoints what is good about that level and how to achieve that level. So in some classrooms, for example, it might be the language of a complex sentence."

An achievement culture

The school has no qualms about a culture of healthy competition. As one member of the leadership team stressed: "we always say that we aim for level 5 or 6 and most of the children want to get there, but it is fine if they get to level 4 as they know that is their expected level – they know that there are elements of 5 in their writing. For example, they could be brilliant at using punctuation so that is their element of 5."

The school's high outcomes mask the fact that there are some children with very significant special educational needs. The school believes that the focus on 'your next target' works for them. If they have small steps, they can see progress and feel they are achieving success. The school calls these small steps 'tiny trickle targets' that are matched closely to the individual. Although some learners, regardless of their ability, will compare their achievements, the school believes that these incremental targets work best with the lower ability learners and they tend to get through them even quicker. A teacher said: "I find that is a real catalyst to them rather than a barrier." The teachers are careful to draw attention to work that contains elements of higher-level work so that pupils recognise their achievements.

Quality first teaching

The school has found that the 'quality first teaching' approach advocated by the National Primary Strategy has been particularly helpful with both children with special educational needs and the most able children. It has been useful not only for the children working in class with their teachers but also for the learning support assistants (LSAs) working with those children. Recently, four children with specific needs were struggling with some of the curriculum because it was not appropriate for them. The school set up a life skills class named 'world class' so that in the afternoons they learnt through a curriculum based on these skills, including shopping and cooking. It inspired them and improved

their confidence, but also focused on their literacy and numeracy skills in practical terms. The teachers who were part of this innovation were delighted with its impact.

Parental involvement

Parents are fully involved from the earliest stages, where they hear their children read. The school issues three reports per year. These give the levels achieved and explain whether the child is above, at or below the level for their year group. The reports also give targets to aim at. Pupils readily hold teachers to account. As one teacher said: “We have targets for our maths and literacy books and if I have marked their books and not updated their targets, the first thing that the children will say is ‘have you not noticed that I have achieved that?’”

The attainment gap

The school has been very successful in narrowing the attainment gap for disadvantaged pupils, from 25% in 2011 to 6% in 2012: half the national average of 13% (Figure 11-1). Some pupils also make dramatic progress – one, for example, attaining level 4 at the end of key stage 2 having been working towards level 1 four years earlier.

Figure 11-10: Narrowing the gap



Another important aspect of the success of the school is the attention it has given to involving parents in the learning of their children. In the early years, parents can participate in learning programmes with their children for arrival at school until 9.15am and large numbers take up this opportunity. One of the many devices for encouraging parents is a reading tree to the branches of which parents attach pegs whenever their children have finished the reading done at home. As the branches of the tree fill with pegs, children are rewarded.

Figure 11-11: A closer view of the virtual school and the use of pupil premium grant funding⁶

Closing the gap through the use of pupil premium grant funding

The school takes very seriously the challenge of closing the attainment gap between children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds and those from more advantaged backgrounds. Thirty-four per cent of children currently in the school are eligible for free school meals and 48% have been eligible at any time during the last six years. A strategy has operated since early 2012, led by the deputy head and assessment manager and a link governor. This focuses on the provision, progress and attainment of all children eligible for pupil premium: the 'FSM6'.⁷ It aims to identify underachievement in FSM6 children rapidly and ensure that this is brought to the attention of pupil provision groups, teachers, the senior leadership team and early intervention teams. The increased provision wholly or partly funded by pupil premium money in the current year is wide in scope and includes:

- Reading Recovery
- Reading and maths intervention programmes
- Phonics tutoring
- Additional speech and language support
- Bursaries for year 6 residential visits
- Transition support for year 6 pupils
- One-to-one tuition
- Early intervention teacher
- Vulnerable child support worker
- Additional learning support in the early years foundation stage

Looking forward

This school can, Livvy states, never rest on its laurels. It is expanding, is increasingly popular among prospective parents and has identified further improvements in performance including those related to:

⁶ Not to be confused with local authority-based virtual schools.

⁷ 'FSM6 children' is the total of all children in years 1 to 6 who are, or have been, eligible for free school meals during the last six years.

- increasing the proportion of children (currently 35%) attaining level 5 or above in reading (other level 5+ outcomes are 54% in mathematics and 41% in reading and writing)
- ensuring that a higher proportion of teaching is outstanding, as identified by inspectors, and that all higher ability pupils are stretched in their classes
- further raising attainment in writing.

It would be wrong from these priorities, however, to think that the package for children at St Peter's is an unremitting diet of assessment, testing and target-setting in the drive to ensure they all score as highly as possible by the time they transfer to secondary school. The school is focused on the quality of teaching and learning as, Livvy identifies, "the only way to keep the standards up". She identifies that much of the progress children make in reading, writing and expressing themselves is due to a carefully planned, imaginative and exciting curriculum. Tricia, the curriculum coordinator, described the process to develop this:

"With the help of colleagues, I coordinate the different areas of the curriculum and try and create an overall curriculum model for us to work within. I think our biggest challenge to begin with was to marry up the targets that we needed to meet for the children – the progress that we wanted to make for literacy and for maths – with the broader curriculum. We have arrived at a way of ensuring that the context for the literacy and maths is set within the topic structure in the curriculum overall. That is what we continue to work to improve.

Marrying up the two areas makes it more inspirational for the children. I think that is the biggest thing. The children buy into it. Their enthusiasm for the different areas and the fact that we can bring in lots of different ways of learning really encourages them."

The class teachers introduce new topics by decorating the doorways to their rooms in a way which gives children a clue as to what the topic is going to be about. They enter the room and encounter a whole new world, with parcels or books that relate both to the topic and to the promotion of literacy, with core texts at the heart of each topic. Unwrapping the books really inspires the children and gets them engrossed in the topic from the start.

Like other outstanding schools serving relatively disadvantaged communities, the school invests substantially in stimulating children's talk, the expansion of their vocabulary and expression of their ideas. The topics, together with a range of out-of-school visits, enthuse the children to discover and use language that many have not developed at home. The school also uses immersion (known as 'Wow') days to launch national curriculum themes, for example in science or ICT. Unlike the topics, children know what is coming up for a Wow Day. As a result of these curricular stimuli, the pupils all expect learning to be exciting. They are inspired and work very hard, taking the opportunity to apply and extend their skills in the core subjects.

“I think that it has inspired some of the parents as well. We have lots of Wow Days, we call them, or Experience Days and every time I am absolutely amazed at how many children come in really prepared for it. The parents themselves have helped them. I think that it is one of the ways that the parents have really become engaged with the learning in school.”

The school considers that its curriculum is much broader than the topics alongside literacy and numeracy. As Livvy says:

“It’s the whole experience. We have really targeted this world of opportunity and experience. We are offering every kind of opportunity and more all of the time ... and we are going to support every child to access that at every level possible. The success of our topic-based approach to the curriculum is apparent, for example, when you see a child writing in their literacy book and they are using vocabulary that they have learned through a song they’ve performed as part of their immersion day. You really see how the immersion has given the children the experience that they needed in order to succeed in their writing. It is reflected in all of the subject matter ... And so we are offering as best we can those experiences to the children.”

Another teacher illustrates the point:

“The children in my class didn’t know what a lighthouse was and we were about to read ‘The Lighthouse Keeper’s Lunch’ and so we built a big lighthouse out of cardboard and stuck it in the middle of their cloakroom so they went past it every day. Those children have got ‘lighthouse’ now!”

The commitment to teaching and learning, shared sense of purpose and cohesive teamwork are central to the ongoing success of the school. Above all is the unequivocal responsibility that each member of staff takes for children’s progress. They accept that there should be no excuses for any child not to be making progress. Livvy states: “We all practice that phrase ‘what are you going to do about it?’”

Ever-concerned with the needs of children in the locality, Livvy has the dream of creating some sort of respite provision attached to the school for pupils who would otherwise go into emergency care.

“You know the Friday night care scenario? With the child going into emergency care – they get thrown into a family they know nothing about at the most turbulent time of their lives, and I would like to have a small school house that has some facilities for parents who really struggle but want to be good parents. I don’t know what kind of funding is out there for that. We were thinking of somewhere off the school site, 10 minutes away. But we’d quite like it to double up as a respite place but also as a camp with activities attached. So if a mum can’t get back for 4.30 one night, when our school clubs end, we’ve got that option.”

St Peter's Church of England Primary School has seized every opportunity to make a difference to the children who attend it and now works in a challenging and supportive partnership with its neighbouring schools. Although not an academy, St Peter's assumes a higher degree of autonomy than many schools that are, resulting in exceptionally high outcomes for its pupils.

The school has three ongoing concerns. The first is uncertainty about whether the new national curriculum for primary schools will constrain the school's current eclectic and highly stimulating approach to a topic-based curriculum through which the current national curriculum requirements are covered. The school makes the legitimate point that outstanding schools are more deserving and more likely to make good use of the curriculum freedoms to which only academies, many of them much less effective schools, are eligible. It recommends that the curriculum freedoms available to academies are extended to outstanding schools.

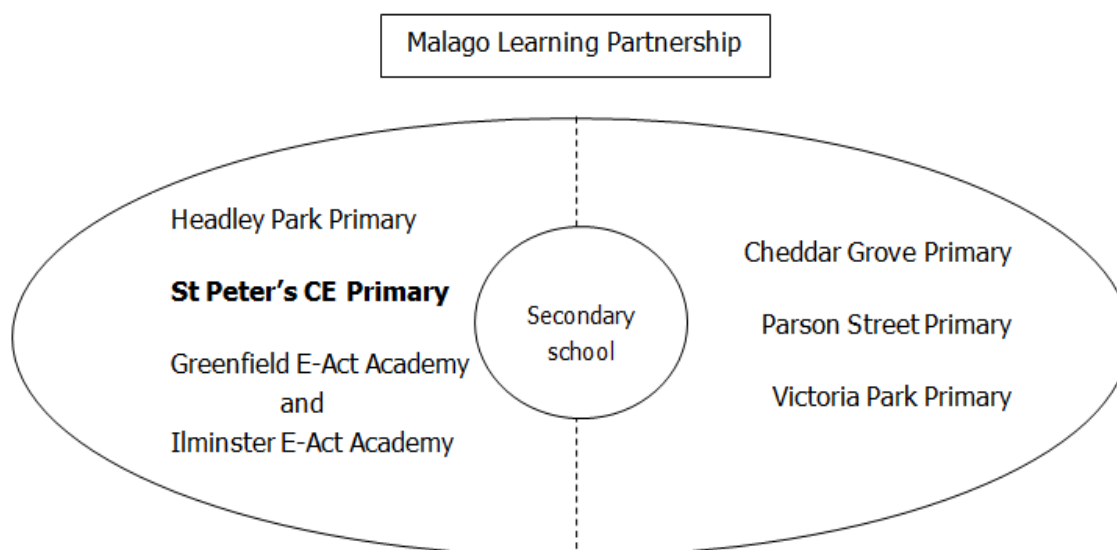
A second issue is to ensure that pupils leaving high-achieving primary schools continue their progress from the first day in secondary school. The partnership is building a year 5 to 8 curriculum slowly with the secondary schools. One difficulty is that all of the primaries are very proud of the curriculum that they have worked so hard on. So to achieve a consensus across schools from years 5 to 8 is a challenge. The individual primary schools do not want to lose their curriculum independence. Positive steps include some cross-moderation with the local secondary school and comparison of what is expected of level 5 standards. As a result, the local secondary school is keen to raise staff expectations and ensure that incoming year 7 children get off to a flying start.

The school has a third concern: the early identification of exceptional needs. If a child in nursery has been identified by a health visitor as having exceptional needs, it shouldn't take until the end of reception to have a statement. Livvy argues that every child ought to have a health visitor. "I am a great believer in early intervention; if every three year old had a health and learning assessment and instant interventions were put in place and family support, we might avoid the worst child abuse cases. It just frightens me to think that there are some three year olds out there living in a state of turmoil and having special needs who are not helped until they are much older."

Looking outward

St Peter's is highly committed to sharing its practice and learning from others. The school is part of the Malago Learning Partnership, a school improvement co-operative of seven primary schools, organised in two sub-groups, with a local secondary school that is part of both sub-groups (Figure 11-3).

Figure 11-12: School partnership



The partnership schools serve the local area and have similar demographic characteristics. In addition to sharing expertise and professional development events, teachers visit each other's schools and pool ideas and best practice. The partnership schools also share performance data, coordinated by St Peter's, and undertake regular peer reviews – currently within the two sub-groups but with the secondary school participating in all.

The peer reviews are authentic, having a high degree of objectivity despite being undertaken by a team that includes members – at present the head and deputy – of the school under review. A partnership school effectiveness review report on St Peter's about a month before it was inspected came up with a number of 'areas to consider', most of which had been dealt with by the time the school was inspected.

The benefits of the partnership are considerable, not only in improving teaching and learning through the dissemination of best practice, but also in demonstrating to the secondary school the very high levels at which many year 6 children achieve. There is other work to be done in the partnership, for example Ilminster is being supported out of special measures under the executive headship of the headteacher of Greenfield (a

school judged to be 'good' by Ofsted), which can draw on expertise from other schools in the partnership.

Case study 12 - Sir Robin Boshier (Ex-Fairlawn School and Harris Federation)

Primary leadership case study: picture of a primary system leader

If Sir Robin Boshier has a driving mission it is that every child in London should go to a good primary school. He has been committed to this cause in his different roles as a very experienced primary headteacher, most recently leading the outstanding Fairlawn School in Lewisham. He has also been a national leader of education, chief executive of a federation and a teaching school alliance, and Primary Director of the Leadership Strategy of London Challenge whilst also serving as a headteacher. In 2012, Sir Robin became Director of Primary Education in the Harris Federation of academies. In April 2014, he took up post as Ofsted's Regional Director for the South East and National Director for Inspection Quality and Training. This case study is about his professional leadership journey and what he has learned about leading school improvement.

Portrait of Sir Robin Boshier

Sir Robin came from a working class background in rural Oxfordshire. He was inspired by two great teachers, one who taught him for four years in his primary school and another at his secondary, Gosford Hill Comprehensive School in Kidlington, who encouraged him to think of going on to higher education. He went to a college sufficiently close to home to enable him to continue to lead the village youth club, which he had done since he was 17.

After qualifying as a teacher, Robin went on to take a degree at Greenwich. There was a glut of primary teachers and he made 83 applications for teaching posts without success. Ultimately he managed to get a temporary post, replacing a teacher on maternity leave at Oaklands Junior School in Biggin Hill, which became substantive when she did not return to the school. Leadership responsibilities came quickly through a combination of Robin seeing things that needed to be done in what he describes as a mediocre school at that time, and being given responsibility for physical education. He astutely used parents with football skills as coaches while he looked after behaviour.

Being curious and committed, Robin sought contact with the feeder infant school and learned about what children were doing before they came to the juniors. His 'big break' came when the headteacher of that same infant school was appointed to lead a 700-place first school near Dartford and asked Robin to join her there on a senior teacher post. This four-form entry first school was organised as three parallel mini schools of seven classes and Robin took charge of one of these, effectively becoming head of school as well as being English coordinator. He worked for a strong leader who set high standards. The headteacher, for example, would collect the English books in on Friday evening and scrutinise them over the weekend, making her views known on the Monday. Robin became an interim deputy headteacher for two years at that school and learned a lot about management systems.

He did not feel ready for headship so applied for and was appointed to another deputy headship in Wickham Common, Bromley. After two years he took up his first headship, aged 30, at Clare House in Beckenham.

Headship

Clare House presented its own challenges, mainly, he considered, to do with grossly under-achieving children from mostly middle class families. Robin found that year 5 children were doing year 3 work. Some staff were against phonics and believed that reading would happen by osmosis, so the new headteacher was immediately faced with a massive battle with staff on teaching children to read. In such situations, Robin considers persuasion or direction are not enough so he sought the evidence. He gave every child a standardised reading test and showed the staff that 90% of children were reading below where they should be. All staff were convinced by the evidence except for the literacy coordinator, who left. Robin quickly realised that in an average-sized primary

school of seven classes you have to take people with you. He decided not to have a senior leadership team and all issues were discussed and decisions made with the whole staff.

Robin introduced systematic phonics sessions, banded books, a focus on all children reading fluently by year 3 and high reading standards by year 6. Parents noticed the difference and liked what he was doing. The school was inspected by Ofsted and judged 'good' six months after he had arrived and 'outstanding' when inspected again two and a half years later.

Second headship

After six years Robin moved to the headship of Perry Hall Primary School in Orpington, finding to his shock that a significant number of dominant teachers demonstrated negative attitudes towards pupils in the way they spoke to, and treated them. Robin knew he had to do something radical but rejected a head-on approach for something more subtle and persuasive.

Instilling and enforcing values

He held a staff meeting at which he got all staff to think about their own children or those of other family members and list the values that should apply and how they would want them treated. At the next meeting, he took some of these values, such as 'respect' and asked staff to define what that meant and what it would look like. This led in the next staff meeting to a three-page policy: a values document. Staff had derived it and could hardly refuse to adopt it.

Robin then required all classroom doors to be left open and spent two terms largely patrolling the school. Whenever children were sent out of class he returned them. Whenever he heard harsh words or someone being spiteful, he went in and asked if there was a problem and if he could help. Within two terms, four staff who could not align themselves to the values had left. This was a breakthrough.

That was not the only battle. Initially, he did not see eye to eye with the chair of governors, who decided to stand down. Robin spent seven years at Perry Hall because, once he had changed the culture, he enjoyed working there. Values, he believes, come before vision and are certainly a requirement for effective teaching. The school became outstanding and a Beacon School. It was not without challenges as there were a number of disadvantaged children and children from traveller families.

Unfortunately when Robin left – and his deputy at about the same time – the governors made an appointment that didn't work out. The school slumped to satisfactory and the next (and current) headteacher has returned the school to outstanding. The moral here is

one for governors: if in doubt, it is far better not to appoint. The unsuccessful appointee had limited primary experience.

Two wilderness years

After successful headship experience, Robin wanted to influence provision for young people more widely. He thought the means of doing this could be through a local authority and became Head of Access in a London borough, where his portfolio included early years, children with special educational needs, looked after children and admissions. Although, he states, he learned a bit about strategic management, he found it difficult to make progress and change things. It was, he says, “a miserable experience”. The final straw came when Robin was pushed to the ground after a school closure meeting on a Thursday evening. He decided to resign, opened the paper on the Friday, saw the headship of Fairlawn Primary School in Lewisham advertised, applied and was appointed.

School improvement: good to outstanding

Third headship – Fairlawn Primary School, Lewisham

Fairlawn had been judged a good school when Robin arrived in 2003. His predecessor had been there for 22 years and the deputy had been expected to get the headship. The governors, chaired by a director of a major retailer, decided otherwise. The deputy left and the school, Robin states, was besieged with parental complaints. Robin started on the same day as a new deputy and realised that a different approach to leadership was needed.

The job was not one of transformation but of winning hearts and minds to get the best from what was already a flourishing school. This meant, as he describes it: “communicating what you thought was great, caring for people and showing that the school was for children not adults”. All decisions were taken on the basis of what was best for the children and it took a term to win over staff. Results were good for their time, 78% level 4 and 18% level 5, but he could see fantastic potential in the school’s varied and cosmopolitan intake, with some prosperous families, many different cultures and home languages and a huge range of social circumstances.

The school’s last inspection was in 2007, four years after Robin had arrived. The school was judged outstanding on all counts.

“Fairlawn is extremely well run. The headteacher, senior leaders, staff and governors work in close partnership to constantly check and evaluate the effectiveness of all the school does and to drive forward improvements. Teaching and learning are rigorously monitored and teachers are given support where needed. This has helped to ensure the consistently high standards of teaching throughout the school. Work in lessons is very well matched to pupils’ different capabilities, providing good challenge for the most able while giving very well targeted support to those who have learning difficulties or who need extra help because they are learning English as an additional language. Teaching assistants are deployed and used very effectively, so that, for example, they keep careful track of which pupils are contributing when the teacher is teaching the whole class. Tracking of pupils’ progress is thorough, so that staff know exactly how well each pupil is doing. That enables the school to provide pupils with extra help if they seem likely to fall behind. Because they all have individual targets and benefit from high quality marking, pupils also know how well they are doing and what they need to do to do better.”

Ofsted, 2007

Teaching at Fairlawn was more about getting the ingredients right than the icing on the cake, Robin considers. He is most concerned that every lesson is a good and interesting lesson so that children go home keen to find out a bit more: teaching should generate interest. He tackled assumptions that some children could not learn much by commissioning expert assessments of dyslexic children and those with special needs so that well-informed programmes could be designed for individuals. These worked and even children with quite significant special needs made good progress. Robin does not warm to intervention and withdrawal of children, preferring where possible to provide any necessary support in the classroom. Really he feels that teaching should get it right for every child first time, with teachers adjusting their approach and trying a different angle if the first approach does not work. There was little setting in Fairlawn, except for maths in year 6, where a large upper set of 38 children enabled the school to have a small set of those needing more expert help. Children's learning objectives were not discussed with them as levels until they reached year 5, thus avoiding early labelling and lowering expectations.

Fairlawn featured as an exemplary school in the Ofsted publication, *Reading by Six*.⁸

⁸ Ofsted (2010) *Reading by Six*.

Looking outward

As an early national support school, Robin and key staff became significantly involved in supporting and partnering other schools to help them improve. It was natural that when London Challenge turned to the improvement of inadequate primary schools, Robin was asked to lead this work on a part-time basis. He became Primary Director of the London Leadership Strategy in 2007.

Robin's powers of strategic leadership came to the fore at this point. Working with only a small central team, including four other headteachers, he devised a strategy in which outstanding primary schools each partnered two underperforming primary schools in school improvement trios. At the peak of this work, 284 headteachers had subscribed to the vision for primary education in London and committed their schools to working with others.

Because of the scale of this work, Robin and his team could not supervise every trio personally and had to trust the outstanding headteachers who were involved. This was largely successful. The team members managed however to ensure that the London Challenge lead headteachers were inducted into school partnership work, having a two-hour one-to-one session with each of them in their own school. He or one of his colleagues was always present for the first audit of the supported school by its outstanding partner and a Department for Education challenge advisor "to see whether they got it right". The team and several contributory schools produced 'toolkits' designed to help in different school improvement scenarios. Many of these worked very well. Ofsted was positive about the success of London Challenge in primary schools:

"Primary schools that have become partners with London Challenge are also improving rapidly, despite the relatively recent start to their programmes. The contextual value-added measures of the participating schools, taken all together, have risen significantly from below average in 2008 to above average in 2010. This represents real gains in achievement for the pupils in these schools; they have not just narrowed this gap but, on average, their achievement on this measure now exceeds the average achievement nationally."

"Networks of experienced school leaders from the London Challenge Leadership Strategy, coordinated by London Challenge, provide much of the expertise to tackle the development needs within supported schools and drive improvements in progress. A key strength of these leaders is their skill in matching people and schools, creating a sense of mutual trust. The leaders of the schools that contributed to the survey stated positively that the support is implemented with them and not imposed on them."

Ofsted (2010), *London Challenge*

The highly ambitious and lightly managed network of school improvement partnerships transformed a large number of primary schools in London and left many with enduring partnerships or federations. Fairlawn itself entered a soft federation with two other schools judged to be satisfactory. Subsequently Haseltine Primary School was judged outstanding when inspected in 2013 and Kilmorie Primary School was judged to be good in 2012.

Many of the supporting headteachers were national or local leaders of education and local authorities supported the cross-borough partnerships that were involved.⁹ Robin considers that the two most important personal characteristics for headteachers who are successful in school support work are resilience (to stick with the task and overcome setbacks) and bravery (to say the most important things). The networks and partnerships thrived and many have continued. School improvement leaders were made to feel part of an important team. “London schools and children are important” says Robin “and improving them is the moral thing to do. All children in London should go to a good school.”

He has a simple recipe for good teaching, which can be found on YouTube.¹⁰ In speaking about how heads can turn around challenged schools, he makes five points:

“The first thing is that you need to establish good behaviour. This is not just about compliance, the silent class, but children having behaviour for learning, knowing how to work independently and support the learning of others.

Second, he stresses the importance of lessons being participative, with children being active in questioning, doing, thinking, reflecting and discussing.

Third, learners should also be self-sufficient, able to access what they need and know what they need to do to make progress on their own.

Fourth, lessons should be engaging and interesting, so that children remember what they are about and want to carry on learning.

Fifth, effective lessons enable children to make rapid and identifiable progress.”

Lessons will not show such characteristics, he stresses, unless teachers bring a range of knowledge and expertise to bear on them and know where their pupils have reached in

⁹ Poet, H. and Kettlewell, K. (2011), *Evaluation of City Challenge Leadership Strategies: London Area Report*, National Foundation for Educational Research.

¹⁰ Boshier, R. (2012), BETT show, *Turning around challenged schools*, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EBwYG_R1RhM

their learning, where they are finding difficulty, how to help them overcome their difficulties and how to tailor new challenges to their learning needs.

A new challenge

Knighted for service to education in 2013, Sir Robin had led Fairlawn Primary School for nine years and did not want to stay there until he retired. He was approached by several chains to work with them but the Harris Federation, which had just taken on two primary schools in Haringey, had the advantages of being local and centred on London. Sir Dan Moynihan presented the allure of setting up something from scratch that involved Sir Robin's forte: school improvement.

Sir Robin has designed and set up his own school improvement model for transforming under-performing schools. The model focuses entirely on teaching and learning.

- First he gives the headteacher (or principal) and any deputy or assistant headteachers four weeks to show what change they can make to the school. He is clear about the changes he expects to see in classes and in children's books, for example. No principal or vice principal achieved the required changes set in 2012-13, leading to resignations.
- It is not difficult to recruit a principal to a Harris primary academy. Posts are advertised and people are approached. Typically Sir Robin will reduce the field to six and visit each applicant in their own school before interviewing two or three along with the chief executive of the federation.
- Prospective heads are concerned about two issues: will he want to run the school instead of them and what support will they have? Sir Robin dispels the myth that Harris want to run the school. The model is focused on outcomes. Principals have the resources and the power to run their own schools.
- Once appointed, the principal receives a set-up grant for the school straight away and has an allocation of support on IT together with finance and HR support, an allocation of advisory teacher days and access to support for middle leadership. They will also get a business manager for two days a week. He states: "The budgets of inadequate schools are usually in a mess."

- The focus on teaching is relentless. Teachers with several years' experience that are still teaching unsatisfactory lessons have to improve rapidly. The Federation has its own bespoke 'requiring improvement' to 'good' ('3 to 2') programme which gives them weekly support in the classroom over six weeks. There is also an 'ambassador programme' for very good and consistently good teachers who can become leaders of learning. This programme amounts to six hour-and-a-half twilight sessions working in peer pairs with videoed teaching, supported by sessions and resources on leadership and what makes a great leader of learning.
- The programmes are very popular and often draw out capable but reserved staff from these weak schools.
- Monitoring of and by the schools is rigorous. Schools are expected to assess pupils every six weeks and report to parents every six weeks. Sir Robin and the advisory team meet weekly, but undertake a six-weekly scrutiny of each school's pupil-level data. They write a commentary for the principal on the basis of this data and Sir Robin discusses the commentary with the principal. In this way, no child in any of the schools can slip through the net and make insufficient progress undetected. Performance management is focused on the progress of key named children. Where intervention is used, it must be a tried and tested approach.

Organisation

The advisory teacher team meet weekly on Friday afternoons. Team members spend the remaining four and a half days working individually in schools. The meetings are concerned with:

- team building
- reviewing the programme in schools for that week
- agreeing priorities for the following week
- analysing data
- identifying and building a toolkit around a common theme, such as middle leadership.

The teachers they are working with have six weeks to make the grade: demonstrate that they can teach good lessons. Otherwise, the principal gives them notice of formal capability procedures.

Are some teachers being written off early? The pace is fierce, Sir Robin states, because children only get one chance and the likelihood is of Ofsted coming in about 16 weeks after they start. If teachers have moved from requires improvement to approaching good,

they are given some leeway and some extra support, particularly if they have taught for less than four years and do not necessarily know what good teaching looks like. But Sir Robin does not readily compromise.

Some schools outside the Harris Federation are used as models of excellence. Sir Robin might take a governing body along to see them, prompting the governors about questions to ask and things to look for. These schools have got to have not only consistently good teaching but an interesting curriculum.

Looking forward

Harris is opening a number of free schools next year, including secondary provision that will allow all-through 3-18 education in Tottenham Hale. Sir Robin and his team are working with year 7 staff in some of the academies and bringing secondary teachers into primary schools. He finds these teachers need training in their approaches and expectations, which should be at level 6, not level 4C as many primary schools are, he states, “getting 20% level 6” doing work that secondary schools would not give to year 7. Secondary teachers also need to adapt to changes of pedagogy.”

Limits to growth

Five more primary schools joined the federation in September 2013, adding to the six that joined the previous year. There are new principals for the five academies and they are already in post so were able to make a prompt start. Sir Robin has a cadre of expert advisory teachers at his disposal to work with these academies. They are expert not only in teaching but also in curriculum design which, Sir Robin believes, contributes very significantly to accelerated improvement. The key is to make sure curriculum design facilitates the best teaching and learning. “Learning has to be fun. Children must want to come to school because it was interesting yesterday.”

In terms of the Harris Federation, there is ambition and capacity to incorporate many more primary schools, although the support structure would need to change to suit a large number. The motivation? That all London children ought to go to good school. Sir Robin sees local authorities as the barriers, with some exceptions. There is little that he is doing now to recover failing schools under the aegis of the Harris Federation that local authorities could not have done. They could have brought all their best heads together and created a solution together. But there are always some who do not want to work with others.

Time has passed and it is too late to wind the clock back. Leading headteachers have demonstrated that they have far superior expertise and capacity to help other schools improve than local authorities. Like some others in these case studies, Sir Robin has worked on both sides of the fence.

Reflections

Sir Robin, whose schools have had six inspection events this year, supports the current framework and its emphasis on teaching and progress, tough though it is. In his experience the interpretation by inspectors is quite wide-ranging, and there is a considerable difference between well-informed primary specialists and others, who offer few insights and can be “wobbly”.

One of the biggest risks in primary education is the lottery that often surrounds headship appointments, compounded by the unwillingness and apparent inability of governing

bodies and local authorities to do anything about inadequate appointments. There appears little reason why a local authority could not take the sort of measures for its maintained schools as the Harris Academies Board takes for the academies in its federation, if minded to do so.

From Easter 2014, Sir Robin Boshier was appointed to be Regional Director, South East, in Ofsted.

Case study 13 - South Farnham School, Surrey

Primary leadership case study: getting the best in a school in favourable circumstances

Ambitious parents are among the 'challenges' for South Farnham School, a primary academy in Surrey. The intake is prosperous with low eligibility for pupil premium. Almost all pupils are White British. The very long-serving headteacher is a system leader, having been a national leader of education for some time, and the school is a teaching school as well as being a national support school.

Headteacher: Sir Andrew Carter OBE

Chair of governors: Linda Ross

“Inspectors found the school remarkable. Everyone is expected to succeed and each individual, whether child or adult, does his or her utmost to rise to the high expectations. Pupils do exceptionally well, year after year, in the tests taken at the end of Year 6. All groups make outstanding progress. The school is one of the very top in the country for adding value, ensuring that pupils make the best possible progress from their starting points. Most of the teaching is outstanding, and none is less than good. Pupils are given a rich and exciting programme of activities and tasks, matched accurately to their needs. Those at risk of falling behind have their needs identified from an early age and are taught English and mathematics by skilled teachers. This ensures that all groups achieve exceptionally well.

The headteacher is inspirational. Through long and dedicated service, he has made the school one of the top schools in the country. His management of the performance, not just of the teachers but also of support staff, is second to none, and has resulted in a like-minded team who share his determination to continue to secure improvements.”

Ofsted, 2012

Portrait of the school

South Farnham was described as ‘a superb school’ when inspected 10 years ago and its latest Ofsted inspection confirms its continued outstanding nature. Andrew Carter has been headteacher there for over 20 years and expects to continue for many more. Nothing stands still.

South Farnham School is on two sites: the South Farnham (former junior school) site which houses key stage 2 children, and the Bourne (former infant school) site which provides for foundation stage and key stage 1 children. South Farnham Junior is based in a school building which retains many traditional features while being thoroughly modernised and extended to provide high-quality facilities for 21st century learning.

South Farnham Infant, on the Bourne site, is based in a Victorian building which has been extensively extended and modified since amalgamating with the junior school. Both schools were judged by Ofsted to be outstanding before the amalgamation and the combined school was outstanding when inspected in 2012 (see above).

South Farnham School is a teaching school: the lead school of an alliance of 50 schools. It is also a national support school and the headteacher is a national leader of education.

From junior to all-through primary: a story of amalgamation and risk

South Farnham Junior School had one feeder infant school, Bourne Infant School, a very good school about a mile away. The head of Bourne left and the headship was advertised but no appointment was made. After six months the local authority asked Andrew to be the interim headteacher. The governors advertised again but only got one applicant and the decision was taken to merge the schools – against the wishes of the Bourne governors but favoured by parents and in line with the local authority’s preference for all-through primary schools. South Farnham amalgamated with Bourne in May 2011 and became an academy in July the same year. In September 2011, South Farnham became a national teaching school. Bourne School became South Farnham Infants. The buildings were developed including: new classrooms, new playgrounds, and the beginning of a new hall, with expansion of the site.

One of the biggest challenges was to change the culture from that of a separate, long-established village school to being part of a unified school on two sites. As Andrew recalls: “everybody talked about the school as if we [the junior school] hadn’t arrived”. He resolved this by exchanging the staff of the infant and junior schools so they swapped location. As Andrew says: “I needed, from day one, no one to say, ‘what we used to do ...’ There was no ‘used to’, because none of them had been there.”

When Andrew asked the junior staff: “Who would like to work in an infant school?” he states hands shot up all round the room. This reflected the culture of opportunity created: “Some of them thought, we’re going to be a bigger school, I’ve never taught reception, I

could do that.” It was very successful. They appointed an infant specialist from outside to be head of school and – a year after the amalgamation – began the development of the building: “It was quite difficult. It’s an awkward little site, and there were building blocks, and bricks and beams and fences. And Ofsted came, in the June, when we were halfway through the build.”

Inspection

The inspection team saw beyond the limitations caused by the building work – for example, no outdoor play areas and restrictions on children’s movement – to the vision for infant provision, using what they saw in the junior school as a benchmark. Andrew commented: “They could see what we’d got and what we’d developed, and they could see what was going to happen there.”

Attitude to risk

In terms of exchanging the infant and junior staff, Andrew is adamant that:

“**The risk was to not do it.** That’s where the risk lay, and you could say we’re risk-averse. We moved away from the risky to what was actually more positive. You aren’t just cavalier and randomly pick people (who may not understand phonics, for example); you choose people and train them. We know how to train people, and we know what they needed to do. We find the people that are most likely, and then throw our support behind them.”

He draws from his farming background to advocate strengthening a school by ‘cross-breeding’, i.e. by doing something different to strengthen the gene pool! The school is stronger, because there are now 34 teachers, any of whom, he considers, can teach reception year, or year 6. They know what it takes to work in year 6 or to teach phonics in reception. So if any staff leave, their work and expertise is covered, others can step in. That has “strengthened the business”, in Andrew’s terms.

Managing for consistency

Much of the success of South Farnham is due to the refined systems, organisation and processes, strictly followed by all staff. Examples include:

- *Firm guidance for new staff* – the school tells them to arrive at half past seven and go home at six. Don’t work at home. Do a good day’s work. At the end of every school day, all staff meet the parents outside before going in and having a cup of tea together as a team.
- *Calendar of meetings* – every meeting in the school is arranged a year in advance. There is never a case of: “I can’t come to the maths meeting, I’m doing a netball match.” They are both important and can easily be organised. Thursday night is games night, so there are no other meetings that night. Maths and other meetings

are fitted into the cycle at the beginning of the year. Then everyone sticks to it. Nobody ever ends up with two meetings to go to. No one ever ends up making significant decisions if there have not been the proper meetings leading up to them. That also applies to governors.

- *Staff meetings* – no meeting goes on beyond an hour. School finishes at three thirty. Staff spend quarter of an hour with the parents outside. The staff meeting starts at 15:50 and finishes no later than 16:50.
- *Priorities* – every meeting has a set agenda, and the first item is always pastoral issues, to remind everyone that the school is about people. The second item is always, “How can we improve?” Andrew recalls: “Someone said to me, you can’t improve at every meeting. Maybe you can’t, but you can certainly think about it. Also, it sets the culture.”
- *Agreeing change* – nothing can change in the school’s policies until all staff are agreed. A subject team, for example, can make minor changes. But if it is a major alteration, it has to be discussed; in the interim nothing changes, because it has not been decided. Governors become involved in bigger decisions. In a large school, Andrew states, “you cannot have someone going off and doing their own thing.”
- *Communicating with parents* – teachers are taught strategies for handling parents. For example, if a parent calls you up worried about something, they always have to be contacted that day. “But it’s quite useful to ring them up later in the day. A parent comes home, they’ve had the gas bill and their child’s lost their jumper. It’s the last straw and the school’s there, possibly the least of their worries!” Andrew has no fear of being accessible. He explains: “I give every parent here my home phone number. I did it last week. I said, I love your children just as much as you do. Just a slightly different love. If we have done something as a school and it’s worrying you, and it’s before eight o’clock at night, ring me up. I always say, I’d be a bit disappointed if you rang me up because your child has lost their jumper. Because that’s not very important. But something important, give me a ring.” They seldom abuse this.
- *Monitoring* – The headteacher visits classrooms as often as possible: “I can go into 10 or 15 classrooms in the morning. I don’t need to sit and look at it all. It might be in response to something, or I’m just going to have a look, talk to the children and observe the vital signs. There are vital signs in the classroom, and you write them down.”

“When you’re asking other leaders to do it, you don’t say, go and look at the teaching. We have time together and say, what are we looking for? Is there something planned, and is it happening? If that’s not happening, what are they doing instead and why? You can look at the marking scheme, how often are the children heard to read. Look at the reading records. What you do with those vital signs is, you put them together. If every teacher hasn’t got time to hear reading,

that's a structural issue for the school. We clearly don't have enough time for this. But if it's one teacher, we can deal with them in a positive way."

Andrew's mantra is: 'structure, structure, structure; creativity, creativity, creativity'. He believes that having a structure allows creativity to flourish. As South Farnham leads a growing academy group, its insistence on structure will be all the more important, adapting core elements to different environments. One example of a structural solution developed in South Farnham is shown in Figure 13-1.

Figure 13-13: Support and intervention: children who need more help with their learning

Such children are put into focus groups for English and mathematics from the beginning of year 3 and taught in smaller groups in well-equipped group rooms. They have exactly the same curriculum and learning objectives as their peers who remain in the classroom but teaching is focused on their specific needs. There is a teacher and a classroom assistant with each group, which might number up to 12 children, so that support is high and response time to need quick aiding pace of learning. They have to get to the end of the lesson, even if the teacher has to support them a lot to begin with. When they go back to the classroom, the same learning objectives are on the board there.

This extra provision is funded by pupil premium money and by having classes of maximum size elsewhere. The provision of a 'focus group teacher' in each year in key stage 2 eases the demands on the other staff in the year group. The approach is predicated on no child being allowed to fail. Children's progress is reviewed every six weeks and the support system ensures that even children who are very difficult to move can make very good progress. The value added is considerable. Teachers leading focus groups tend to be very experienced and they are expected to pass their skills on to the younger teachers. It is very effective training.

There is no stigma to being in a focus group, Andrew states, because the children are doing the same work. He tells parents: "Put yourself in the mind of the child in a class of 34 who doesn't know what's going on. Every minute they're scared of being asked a question. Every day, someone says do this, and all they needed was a question. The teacher can't get to them for four or five minutes. And therefore they're already behind." Last year, 52% of focus group children achieved level 5. Andrew considers that without such support they would probably have been just below level 4. Discipline problems are also reduced he believes as children are being valued and their needs met. The average time spent in a focus group is about 18 months.

Leadership and governance

Andrew started teaching in Basingstoke over 40 years ago. Trained as a secondary mathematics teacher, the only job which came up was in a primary school. So he went

there and loved it. His advice for anyone at the start of their career is seize your opportunities.

“Lots of opportunities came my way, and I learnt very early on to grasp them. So if someone says, ‘Would you run the school play?’ the answer is yes. ‘Do you want to take the football team?’ yes, ‘Do you want to go on the school trip?’ yes. I often say to my teachers now, always says yes. That gives you three days’ grace to say no. But if you say no at the beginning, and you use the three days to change yourself to a yes, when you come back, the person will have found someone else to do it.”

After five years, Andrew became a deputy head in an urban school in Farnborough. It was a Greater London Council overspill area and challenging. After another deputy headship, where opportunities abounded, he became head at a 200-pupil primary school in Hampshire for four years before being appointed as headteacher of what was South Farnham Junior School 25 years ago.

Andrew has had every opportunity to get involved in the bigger picture, working with the local authority – to which the academy is still committed – and working with government. Through such work he has brought the school a national perspective. This influenced his becoming a national leader of education and the school becoming a national support school. Now it is also a teaching school. He reflects on the headship and working wider within the system:

“When I first became a headteacher I was very clear that I wanted to do more than simply manage the place. I wanted to make a difference and soon developed strategies for achieving that. At the beginning of my career, someone said, always do something different. What we do every year is to try something different. Try a new plan. We look at other schools, look what other people are doing, and that’s the great joy of working nationally with other schools, you pick up ideas from all over the place.”

It became clear to Andrew early on in headship that successful schools become masters of their own destiny and that continual improvement and aspiration are important driving forces. He states:

“I’ve worked in some very difficult areas, and I’ve yet to find a parent who hadn’t got aspirations for their child. What they haven’t got always is the knowledge of how to put it into action. Some of our parents want the school to be entirely organised around their child. Part of my job is to defend the line sometimes, and to be strong with parents. We’ve also tried to take them to the frontiers of what’s possible. That’s not easy to do, in the climate we’re in now, of competition and exam results. We’ve always tried to make it the best, and I couldn’t bear to be anywhere that was thought badly of. That’s a driver.”

Providing opportunities for staff

Andrew wants opportunities to be rife for everyone but does not set out to create them. His more subtle approach is to encourage his colleagues to come up with the ideas; to see what needs to be done. To do this the school has an element in its budget, £10,000 a year, which is called the innovations fund. It is there to support staff with good ideas in implementing these. Andrew explains:

“You set your budget in schools in April, but your new teachers start in September. So if a new teacher comes in with a burning idea, and you don’t have any money, you can’t put it into action for six months. What we want to say is, if you have a good idea, then we’ve got to have it. You create a climate in which good ideas are the currency. Teachers will knock on your door and say, ‘how about this?’”

The school gives leadership roles early on if teachers evidence talent and believe that their recruiting arrangements always identify talented people.

Succession planning and knowledge management

Andrew has exported 23 headteachers and 19 deputy heads into the system in his time at South Farnham. He is proud that: “The DNA is in many other schools, carrying the ideas and ambition, not direct replication”. He has a young staff team and is not afraid of losing good people because he is confident he can replace them with good people, not least because the school is a SCITT provider (school-centred initial teacher training), providing for many trainees each year.

“Someone said to me one day, ‘How do you say goodbye to all these good teachers?’ and here’s the clue. You look them straight in the eye, shake them by the hand, and say goodbye and thank you. And then you go to the door of the new person you’ve appointed, look them straight in the eye, shake them by the hand, and say, ‘My god, I’ve been waiting for you’.”

He believes that schools must rejuvenate to sustain their high quality as well as share learning across the school. It is no good, he states, having a teacher who, perhaps, has taught year 6 very successfully for many years and achieved great results if no-one knows what she does. The teacher retires and the school flounders because that knowledge has gone; there is no institutional memory. Staff spend time in South Farnham trying to capture good ideas, writing them down and sharing them, therefore the ideas remain part of the intellectual property of the school. When recruiting, the school is looking for people who will work well in that situation, people who are creative, who think and who work hard: “You’ve got to be a busy person.”

“Our quickest person to gain a deputy headship elsewhere was after three years. She said, ‘If I’m 26, and someone joins at 21, by the time they’re 30 I’ve got to be ahead of them’. She decided to be strategic and apply to a [challenging] school.

She went there and went on to another deputy post and is now acting head in a national support school. We encourage that. Those sorts of messages are very good for young people coming in: to know that when you come here, you can move on.

But also, we're very conscious of trying to support and encourage the person who wants to be a master teacher. It isn't all about becoming a head. So we have some people who've been with me here for 20 years, and are very happy doing that. We have teachers, and I'm very proud of them, in their sixties. Still functioning, still enjoying life."

The school has the advantage of size but even when Andrew worked in smaller schools, he encouraged people to go. Andrew stresses that getting a new teacher is an opportunity. Andrew's philosophy is centred on change and is accepting and encouraging of staff mobility.

Governance

The governors of South Farnham are very involved with the school; indeed, new governors are asked whether they will be able to see the school at work regularly during the school day. One or more governors are in the school most days. It is clear that they subscribe to Andrew's vision as an education expert and are immensely supportive of the school. In terms of challenge, they do question the detail of his plans and proposals, checking that different interests have been taken into account. There is a strong spirit of openness between the headteacher and governors, particularly the chair, and ongoing dialogue about issues and developments. While the governors are party to the school's strategies and support the idea of action, even if it involves some risk rather than doing nothing, it is clear that they can and do moderate some of Andrew's ideas. As he admits, in the chair's presence, "sometimes I will come up with an idea which is sort of thrown out into the ether and it gets thrashed around and I also know when to withdraw it because I get the quizzical look that suggests I am entering the realms of fantasy! We have never had any rows!"

The governors have taken the amalgamation with the infant school in their stride, visiting both sites regularly and coping with the fact that events such as fêtes and shows have doubled. They have always been keen to help other schools although the school was sometimes discouraged from this in the past. As the chair says: "you always have to watch the ship you are running to make sure that it doesn't run aground. It's quite a balancing act but we've always got a very strong team so that there are always sufficient people here to run the show before we start to look out and help other people".

In terms of succession planning, the governors have faith in the strength of the school management team and the rigour of their appointment process. "We are always looking for people who will be able to manage well and work well with other people." The

governors can watch the teachers and the school receives their reports. This process is courteous but the governors follow through tenaciously.

Looking forward and outward

About 10 years ago the governors said the school must have a national presence, for two reasons. Firstly, it was the right thing to do: sharing success with other local schools and, on a wider stage, contributing to national strategy. Secondly, by being involved in policy, people value what the school is doing and, in turn, the school learns from others.

Becoming one of the early national leaders of education, and the school a national support school, South Farnham has supported four or more underperforming schools in the area, the most recent of which went from special measures to good in 10 months. As above, the school invests in such support because of a belief that: i) that you should share, and ii) you always learn from the experience.

“We have experience of looking at why schools are failing. It’s rarely because people are incompetent or unwilling, but they’re not sure what to do. Or they’re spending huge amounts of energy in one area rather than another. So we spend time talking to them. It’s always about leadership. But when you sit down with them, you need to make sure you understand. What we have to very quickly show them is we’re just like you. I do put my hand down a lavatory and get the ball out. I do have to put the tables away after the PTA event. That’s what I do. But I don’t spend my time talking about it. So we worked with schools and we got reasonably successful at it. Being a national support school is great, and being a national leader is good, and naturally out of that comes becoming a teaching school. It’s a development.”

The school is now sponsoring a local school that has a lot of difficulties. Sir Andrew and the governors have taken the view that if they take on one school, they should aim to work with several more. He says: “It’s as easy to run five schools as it is to run two.”

The governors are persuaded that this might be part of a long-term strategy for the school. They have discussed academies working best in a structured way as multiple school trusts. Economies of scale begin to take effect at about five schools in the trust.

As a teaching school South Farnham benefits from having been a recommending body for ITT at the very beginning, before becoming an employment-based initial teacher training provider (EBITT) and then a SCITT in its own right. From September 2013 it was allocated 62 School Direct places, with ambitions to increase the number to 90. Seven teachers are specialist leaders in education, going out and working in other schools and using that expertise back in house. The teaching school alliance has about 50 members, of which 10 or 15 are “really active powerful members. The challenge for us is to create an alliance that has such value in people’s minds that people will join it.”

Case study 14 - Taylor Road Primary School, Leicester

Primary leadership case study: long-term commitment to a city school and its diverse community

Taylor Road Primary School is in the St Matthew's area near the centre of Leicester. It serves a very disadvantaged multi-ethnic community and almost all children speak English as an additional language. The school moved from its old Victorian block into new buildings a year ago and has 625 pupils on roll. It was judged outstanding at its latest Ofsted inspection and its outcomes for pupils are well above the national average. Chris Hassall is the long-standing headteacher at Taylor Road.

Headteacher: Christopher Hassall

Chair: Mehrunnissa Issa

“The school is at the heart of its local community and this contributes strongly to its success. Its work is regarded highly by its families. Pupils show great respect for staff and make a special contribution to their learning through their exemplary attitudes. Teaching is consistently good or better throughout the school, and its outstanding elements have a much wider impact beyond the classroom. Leadership, management and governance are of high quality. This ensures excellent teamwork and consistent approaches to teaching. The school sets out to provide the best possible education for its pupils. The way it focuses on pupils' learning and personal development results in their excellent achievement and rapid progress.”

Ofsted, 2012

Portrait of the school

This large primary school, recently rehoused in a fine new building, is in many senses a pillar of the local community. It unites people from across faiths and races. It educates parents as well as children. It endeavours to ensure that every child will leave primary school equipped to make the best of the opportunities of secondary education. The basic skills such as writing and mathematics are taught with rigour within a rich curriculum. The school serves a central, highly important role in a deeply disadvantaged and changing locality where overcrowding, poverty, lack of employment and social tensions impinge on the lives of many children. The proportion of children whose home language is not English is more than 90%, and over half are eligible for pupil premium. Two thirds of pupils are of Black African heritage and a third are from Asian backgrounds, with a growing influx from Eastern Europe and the Baltic states.

Current headteacher, Chris Hassall, describes how before he was appointed over 16 years ago, the school was judged inadequate by Ofsted; the number on roll was less than half of what it is today, and dwindling. The old Victorian accommodation was half empty and the school faced significant recruitment and retention issues.

Today, the school is in a very different place. The school came out of its Ofsted category within a year and step by step became good, then good with a number of outstanding features and excellent leadership, and – in Autumn 2012 – outstanding on all counts, with the upward trend in performance topping 90% of children reaching or surpassing level 4 in English and mathematics at key stage 2.

The quality of the school is not only recognised by Ofsted. It is a national support school and has also earned a very wide range of awards. It currently holds National Healthy Schools status; the Basic Skills Quality Mark; Artsmark Gold; a Sports England Activemark; an International Schools Award; an Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Quality Mark; the Inclusion Quality Mark; a Leading Parent Partnership Quality Mark; a Circle Time Quality Mark; the Football Association's Charter Standard; a School Achievement Award; and the Geography Association's Quality Mark. It also holds Community Anti-Bullying status.

Leadership and governance

Ofsted (2012) reported that:

“The school’s success is the result of many years of hard work and dedication. The headteacher sets a very fine example in the way he works alongside both staff and pupils. He uses his experience as a National Leader of Education, alongside other senior leaders, to ensure a consistently high quality of teaching. Consequently, staff understand very well what makes high quality learning for pupils.”

Path to headship

From before he started teaching, Chris Hassall’s career appears to have propelled him towards the work he is doing in the heart of Leicester. After leaving school at 16 and tasting life as first a police cadet and then a junior reporter, Chris gained his A levels and degree through part-time study and completed a post-graduate certificate in education (PGCE) specialising in early years. It is clear that he was always interested in young people and the community; at weekends he helped with youth clubs. His first headteacher took an interest in his potential, in effect as a personal mentor, gave him early responsibilities and then pushed him on after two years when a contrasting opportunity came up in a different school. He was in his second school in his third year and his third school in his fourth year, gaining different experiences and working for different headteachers with their own styles: “I think that helped me enormously. One school was in a White working-class estate, one in a leafy suburb, one was a multi-ethnic inner-city school. So to have that experience, to work for three heads in four years really was a great introduction to teaching.”

After four years, Chris had worked in three schools teaching from foundation 1 to year 6. In his fourth year his head pointed him towards a deputy headship in another school. Chris did not feel he was qualified but put in an application for a big multi-ethnic inner-city school, and was appointed. Chris insisted on teaching, contrary to the wishes of his new head, because he felt he needed to demonstrate his credibility to the staff. So again he taught in foundation, key stage 1 and key stage 2. This experience still bears fruit.

“I think that has held me in such good stead, when you run a primary school, because you are able to draw on the experiences that you’ve had. For instance ... I’ve been working with [one of our newly qualified teachers] on PE. She’s got a year 1 class. I’ve taught year 1; I know how to do year 1. So we’ve done coaching, I’ve done some teaching, she’s observed, I’ve observed her teaching. ”

Chris was an acting head for two years, before being appointed to the headship of a multi-ethnic primary school in Loughborough – mainly Gujarati-speaking Hindus with a small community of Sylheti-speaking Bengali children. “I had my own school; it had had 12 mobile classrooms and two Victorian main buildings. I absolutely loved it.” He was there for four years during which time they got a new school. He had a firm hand in the

design, fighting against the open-plan culture of the time. After Loughborough, he worked as headteacher in two other schools, one of which was junior school. That experience convinced him that he wanted a primary school. So he applied for his current school, known at that time as St Matthew's and Taylor Road. It was housed in what had previously been an old three-storey shoe factory. The school had been in serious weaknesses, and people in Leicester viewed it quite negatively.

The initial challenges were formidable, not least in enlisting the engagement of the community and attracting and retaining staff. Little by little the school tackled the priorities and moved forward to where it is today. Staff pay testament to Chris's strong vision. Seen through their eyes, he knows exactly where he wants the school to go and takes staff with him. They perceive his strengths to be a good manager who resolves issues quickly; that he has a depth of knowledge and takes bold decisions; and that he is very supportive and approachable and believes that the things that matter most are children's learning and well-being.

Senior leadership

The school is led by a strong team which includes a deputy and two assistant headteachers (all with the National Professional Qualification for Headship), which would, as Chris puts it, "prevent the whole edifice collapsing if I went". There are five middle leaders. They are responsible for monitoring teaching and pupils' progress, monitoring progress against targets and guiding assessment for learning. The assistant headteachers lead years 3 and 4, and 5 and 6 and there are also leaders for key stage 1 and the foundation stage. This is a strong team, which subscribes to the principles, values and practice that Chris has established with them.

Most of the other teachers in the school have only been teaching for one, two or three years which, Chris considers, "is typical for a school like this". They tend to move for promotion unless they get senior leadership positions, when they tend to stay. The school grows its leaders from within as, although it gets inundated with applications for main scale posts, Chris states that there is less interest, possibly because of perceptions of the school's environment.

Governance

Ofsted (2012) found that:

"The governing body contributes significantly to the school's everyday life and work. It is well-informed, not only through the headteacher's reports but also through regular monitoring visits. The governing body checks systematically on the impact of teachers' performance management targets and, together with the senior leadership team, ensures such targets are linked directly to the quality of teaching, accountability and salary structure. This approach is focused very well

on maintaining and developing further the quality of learning and ensuring pupils' progress ... Systems and processes for safeguarding children are exemplary.”

With and through the governors, the school has built very good links with its multi-ethnic community, which holds the school and its headteacher in very high esteem. Indeed, there is a high level of dependency. Nevertheless, since becoming a good school, Chris and his colleagues have increasingly shared their knowledge and expertise with other schools. With the governors' approval, Chris became a national leader of education in 2008, and the school a national support school. He and his staff have supported a number of schools since and have plenty of capacity to do so.

The governors welcome the resource that this outreach work brings into the school. Chris considers it prudent to remain visible to his school's community and is always there at the beginning and end of the school day whenever possible.

School improvement: from serious weaknesses to outstanding

When Chris came to the school in 1997 it was a very different place. He knew the area and was looking for a challenge. He certainly found one. The roll was falling; there were only 200 children on roll in a building for 500 and the school was losing three or four pupils a week. Annual mobility, Chris states, was about 70% and eligibility for free school meals was over 65%: "I used to come down and look at weekends and you would see people moving with a shopping trolley with all their belongings in it." He states that teachers walked out and class sizes were 15 because people said that it was impossible to teach classes of more than that at the school. The profile of the school was different then; it had 60% White British heritage pupils and standards, behaviour and the quality of teaching were all very poor. The school had four or five supply teachers and was spending 95% of the budget on staffing. "It was so under-resourced it made you cry", Chris says. However, being in a category did not bother him at all at the time though he found the first year extremely hard: "It was behaviour management that was causing the school the biggest problems and the behaviour management came from the fact that the teachers weren't skilled or strong enough."

There was a parting of the ways for a number of underperforming staff and Chris knew he had to lead from the front, and for him this meant setting an example. So he taught, full-time for four years (not having been a full-time teacher for at least 10 years). He admits it was a new learning curve but it meant he knew the details of the curriculum, national strategies and new teaching approaches. This gave staff something to live up to. It also began to impress other heads. "It was wonderful for me because when I used to go to meetings and all the headteachers were asking about the national curriculum, I could say have you taught group reading? Do you think it really works? Things like that. So it was a really great way of informing myself at a practical level at the time when the strategies were coming in." The contrast struck him between this and headship as he had seen it when, as a deputy, he had the opportunity to be acting headteacher. Chris recalls:

"I was absolutely amazed at the time because on the first morning I took assembly, and ... then I thought, right what do I do now? So I had a walk-round and saw that everybody was quite happy and then I went back and thought: why not go back to the office and see what's what. Went back to the office and the secretary made me a cup of coffee. And I said what does he do now? And she said, he usually has his coffee, and then he'll have another walk about. And ... then it's dinner time and then he might have another walk about after dinner and have a cup of tea. Then it's home time. And I thought is this it? Is this what heads do?"

Gradually Chris improved the quality of staff and, with his deputy, established a culture of the highest expectations for pupils and staff, focusing on close monitoring and evaluation, target-setting and regular reviews of the progress of each child. Areas needing

improvement were diagnosed and incisive actions taken which included a new strategy to develop English skills. Success followed and the school now has nearly 700 on roll and is heavily oversubscribed.

Sustaining outstanding

Much of the credit for the school's past improvement and future success lies in the rigour of its quality assurance, its structured approach to developing pupils' learning skills and its rich curriculum. These approaches largely derive from the tried and tested practice of the headteacher.

Quality assurance

Assessment forms a crucial part of quality assurance and is embedded within the school. Again, the headteacher sets an example by assessing all year 2 or year 6 writing each weekend. His assessments, strengthened by having been a SATs assessor for Edexcel, are then compared with the teachers' assessments and any differences followed up.

The school also promotes self-assessment and peer assessment strongly, empowering pupils to recognise the standards they have reached and what they and their peers need to do to improve.

Pupils' feedback to staff

The school has a regular approach to feedback at the end of the lesson, in which children hold up red, amber or green cards to indicate their understanding. Chris is concerned when a teacher, faced with a preponderance of red and amber cards, does not allow in their planning time to address the issue in a subsequent lesson. The school also finds peer assessment helpful in involving children in their learning as part of 'Assessment for Learning'.

Academic coaching

Children have academic coaching in the school. The teachers also talk to the children on a half-termly basis about their targets, where they are and their level. As a result, children are asking what they need to do to get to the next level – 3B to 3A for example – and staff help them understand what they have to do to improve. Chris gives an example.

“Writing in year 6 gets assessed every week and you can see the progression. What is really interesting is a girl came to me the other day and said to me, have you marked my writing this week? I said: ‘Don’t worry I spent hours on it’. She said: ‘What did I get?’ And I said: ‘You’re a bit stuck on 5B.’ And she said ... well I mean when an 11 year old sits there and says ‘talk me through the **sentence constructions** for a 5B and what I need to do to get a 5A’. And you think am I talking to an 11 year old child? And you think yes you are and this child knows.”

Structured learning

Basic skills like writing are taught in a very structured way, which the school finds to be successful. This applies not only to the formation of letters in handwriting, but also to the structure of sentences and writing content. There is a regular review of each child's progress. Structured approaches are complemented by cooperative learning strategies, team approaches and a range of other means of making learning active and participative.

Challenge

Chris has thought through and tested his very clear approaches to all aspects of primary education but is still ready to re-examine his conceptions. He is keen on children being taught one method for developing a skill, whether multiplication or letter formation, but expects teachers to use their professional knowledge to help those children who don't get it and may need a different approach. So the structure provides a baseline and ultimately the school wants children to grow out of that baseline.

“Even when I say our children can learn to write by prescription, we will teach them simple sentences then we'll teach them compound sentences ... and then we'll teach them subordination in sentence structure. It doesn't stop those children who can use modal verbs and embedded clauses from using them.”

“I like it when people challenge our approaches. For example, year 6 teachers said our approach to literacy was not working. I said what do you mean it's not working, we got 95% in reading – that means three children didn't get it. And they said yes but they should have got it. And I said what do you think the reason is? And they said it's because of the way we set the literacy up. They explained that because all our children within a key stage are put in ability sets, when they come into year 6 their attainment level in reading might be a 3C. So if they're put into a 3C set and they're reading books and doing work at 3C they're never going to be level 4 are they? It really made me think about it. And it's true. And it took me back to when I first started teaching here. If you want children to play catch up you know you have to set the expectations higher, you've got to pull them up. I remember pulling children up from assessed level 2 writing to level 4 within a year.”

Consistency

The school pays great attention to ensuring that agreed approaches and practices are followed in every classroom, every lesson. Staff are reminded of these at the beginning of each school year, when they go through the staff handbook. For example, each classroom will have: a display about the current topic; a working wall for literacy; a working wall for numeracy; and displays about the school symbol, the school motto, the school song, the school story – an inspirational story. There's always an anti-bullying display in the classroom: the definition of what is bullying and what you can do about it.

Working with parents

The school puts a lot of effort into helping parents to understand and support their children's learning. The Taylor Road website, for example, contains videos of teaching basic skills in writing and mathematics: www.taylor.leicester.sch.uk/Learning. The school holds well-attended learning sessions for parents on Fridays. Whatever they do for parents in the school, parents are always invited to stay afterwards for a coffee and a chat. Chris regards these things as very important.

"I had to tell off my senior team one day because we had a parents' meeting and they started to put the chairs away and the parents were still sitting there and I said what message are you sending to those parents? You're sending the message that everybody wants to go home so they've got to leave now. I said they stay as long as they want to and we talk to them as long as they want to. And those little things make so much difference."

The school runs extended school every day and opens for 'complementary school' on Saturdays from 9.30 to 14.30.

Continuous improvement

Continuous improvement through reflective teaching is built into the school's culture. Teachers are expected to identify, reflect on and respond to the learning that has (or has not) occurred. When leaders monitor lessons, for example, they are considering whether the teacher planned into the lesson a way that they can judge how effective both their teaching or, more to their point, the children's learning has been to inform next steps in planning. Chris believes plenaries should really be assessment activities. Indeed, he encourages teachers to think of their lessons as a progression, building step by step.

"Years ago, there was a subject inspection in one of the schools where I was. The inspector leaned across to me and said: 'What were the children like in the past five minutes?' And it suddenly made me ask myself: 'What have they learned in the past five minutes? What have they learned in the past 10 minutes? How has that learning built and developed in the lesson?' And that's the approach that I want teachers to adopt.

"What I'm trying to do is trying to get the most important people in the school which, I have to say this, are teachers ... and ... improve the quality of their work. And part of that quality is to be able to assess the quality of the children's learning. Because if they can't do that how can they build on the lesson the next day?"

Looking outward

Since becoming a national support school, Taylor Road has been very active in school-to-school support. Chris (a national leader of education) first gave consultancy support to two headteachers and then was asked by the local authority to be executive headteacher of a failing school. Chris and his staff worked with this school, and the local authority then wanted the school to be federated with Taylor Road. Chris and his governors favoured the proposal. Indeed, governors, on visiting the other school, were visibly upset at the quality of education the children there were receiving and the poor learning environment. The Taylor Road community were completely against Chris becoming executive head, even though there would have been a head of school at Taylor Road, and the proposal had to be dropped. The community simply did not want to share their head; nor did they want the perceived stigma of being associated with a school in special measures.

Chris is also chair of two interim executive boards (IEBs) for schools in Ofsted categories. HMI have recognised the potential of the IEB of one of these schools, in another local authority, and Chris is applying his expertise to the situation:

“The IEB is skilful and knows the challenges that the school faces. The Chair is frustrated by the lack of progress in key areas of weakness and all members are working hard to hold leaders to account. They have taken on specific areas of responsibility and they are increasingly monitoring the school’s actions.”

Ofsted, 2013

HMI’s reference to the other IEB also mentions the support for teaching and learning provided by staff from Taylor Road.

“Since the inspection, the IEB has continued to provide strong challenge and guidance, which school leaders value in helping to keep the school moving forward. School leaders support the process by providing the IEB with clear information about pupils’ progress and the quality of teaching. Appropriate plans are in place to establish a governing body with the skills to continue the work started by the IEB. The transfer of governance is expected to take place early in the summer term. The support that the local authority has brokered from other schools has been particularly useful in improving the quality of teaching.”

Postscript

Chris Hassall walked the interviewer towards the station, exchanging warm greetings with women wearing hijabs and niqabs and being hugged by young men who had long since left the school – demonstrations of the affection and respect in which he and the school are held. The school has never received a complaint of any sort.

Case study 15 - Vauxhall and Wyvil Primary Schools, Lambeth

Primary leadership case study: executive leadership taking an inner-city school from special measures to outstanding in three years

Vauxhall Primary School is in the London Borough of Lambeth. It is a growing inner-city primary school of 223 pupils, and shares many of the challenges and opportunities of primary schools in the heart of London. It serves a very disadvantaged and multi-ethnic community. It was judged 'outstanding' at its most recent inspection in 2012 under the new Ofsted framework. Attainment has soared from only 61% of pupils achieving level 4+ in English and maths in 2009, to 100% in 2011 and 2012. In 2012, Vauxhall topped a Department for Education list of 125 of the highest-performing primary schools in the country on the basis of prior attainment. The school was in special measures in 2009 when executive headteacher Chris Toye took over the school.

Executive headteacher: Chris Toye

Chair of governors: Anil Fernandez

"All pupils, whatever their different needs and abilities, make excellent progress and have well-developed reading, writing and mathematics skills by the end of Year 6. Teaching is highly effective. Lessons are skilfully matched to what pupils need to learn next. Excellent work with numerous other organisations, such as local theatres, builds pupils' confidence. Behaviour is exemplary. Pupils are very respectful and supportive of each other. The school is exceptionally well led by the executive headteacher and his leadership team. Staff, pupils and parents are proud to be part of the school. Pupils and staff rise to the high expectations leaders have of them. In turn, they are given the support and help they need to do the very best they can."

Ofsted, 2012

Portrait of the school

Vauxhall Primary School is a short walk from the major London transport hub with the same name and the River Thames, and a little way from the Kennington Road on the way to the Oval Cricket Ground and Stockwell. Unusually for an inner-city school it has large playgrounds and a large geographical footprint. More usually, the main building is Victorian and on three storeys. Extensive efforts have been put into making the learning environments as open and welcoming as possible: corridors are bright and lively, and everywhere there is the celebration of pupil successes.

Most pupils at the school come from a range of minority ethnic groups, with the majority from Black African or Black Caribbean heritages; two thirds of pupils do not have English as a first language. A quarter of the pupils have special educational needs (SEN) statements or are supported on school action plus. Over half the pupils are eligible for free school meals. The school also incorporates the Vauxhall Children Centre that offers a range of services that support families through child care, adult learning, parenting programmes and helps bring a range of other services (health, social care, employment) into the community.

Vauxhall Primary School had from the early 1990s onwards often been seen as “the poor relation of the area”. It always catered for some of the neediest families in a high-needs borough. The school had struggled with its roll and there was talk about amalgamations with other primaries in the late 1990s. The school was then placed in special measures twice between 2002 and 2009, and on both occasions led out by Chris Toye (the first through temporary support, the second as the permanent executive head). In 2009/10 the school improved from special measures to good in 10 months, and then was judged to be outstanding only three years later.

Leadership

In 2002, Chris Toye had been a Lambeth head for two years at a local school when Vauxhall was deemed to require special measures by Ofsted. Chris was approached about supporting Vauxhall (“I was not the first choice back then!”) and was asked to “go and fix the school, then pass it on to the next headteacher”; it was agreed as an 18-month support role. Chris said that the quality of teaching was inconsistent, systems were not embedded, and there was a lack of accountability: “Teachers were well intentioned, and were trying to give pupils good experiences – but these weren’t related to learning”. There was, he states, a lack of focus on core subjects and generally low expectations.

With Chris’s support, systems were introduced, new teachers brought in, and behaviour and expectations improved. Vauxhall came out of special measures in 2004 and a new headteacher was appointed. Chris’s support role was noted by Ofsted back in 2004:

“... during a period of considerable change the previous headteacher and the federation headteacher [Chris] maintained a vigorous and determined focus on raising standards and improving the quality of teaching and learning; they tackled weaknesses rigorously and successfully established a strong foundation for further improvement.”

In September 2005, Chris moved to Wyvil Primary, just over half a mile from Vauxhall, to take up the headship there. In 2006, Vauxhall was inspected by Ofsted and found to be satisfactory. Meanwhile, Chris’s development at Wyvil as a school leader would prepare him for the challenges of returning to support Vauxhall later on.

Journey of Wyvil School

Wyvil now has two thirds of pupils with English not as their first language, 95% of pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds, and 21% of pupils with an SEN statement or supported on school action plus. There is also a special educational needs centre for children with speech and language difficulties. It was a different place before Chris arrived in 2005: Wyvil, he states, “had a low profile with something of a self-imposed exile”. Results were good enough, and there was an established staff with the largest proportion of post-threshold teachers in the authority. The school roll was below 430 and there were 100+ vacancies; the school was apparently unaware of this, although they had classes of 25. The school was not well regarded locally, and there was an acceptance of children leaving to more favoured local schools.

The budget enforced changes: some staff retired and younger aspiring teachers were recruited. Rapid progress was made, including identifying the staff who would be able to bring both early successes and sustained improvement. There was a need for “other validations” that progress was being made, through external awards such as Healthy School status, the Activemark for physical education, Investors in People and various environmental awards. Chris began developing the roles of subject leaders through

planning and establishing portfolios of subject-based work that would lead them eventually to write the school development plan.

By 2009, Chris had appointed a deputy – Rachel da Silva, who would go on to become the head of school at Wyvil – and two assistant heads. Support from parents and the community was growing for the mission to become more outward-focused. At the same time, partnerships were being established with a range of prestigious London organisations to provide out-of-class opportunities for the pupils: “our associations are important and so we select the right ones”. These included the South Bank to provide arts and choral opportunities; the Royal Opera and Royal Ballet to provide music, dance and weekly ballet lessons; and the Young Vic for drama. Many of these links were then extended to Vauxhall after 2010.

Chris knew that the next logical step was for Wyvil to have the experience of supporting another school. He now regards this period of support for a primary school in Tulse Hill during 2009 as crucial to Wyvil’s and his own leadership development. He wanted to make a statement to the school community about becoming more outward-looking. Three members of staff from Wyvil were deployed to support the school, working directly with staff and pupils; and Chris carried out lesson observations. A year later when the authority came to Wyvil to ask them to support Vauxhall, it meant the school already had a track record.

Ofsted visited Wyvil in 2013 and judged the school to be outstanding in all areas, saying:

“Throughout the school, all groups of pupils make rapid progress in English and mathematics. Teachers have excellent subject knowledge and regularly check on pupils’ understanding in lessons. The executive headteacher and head of school have worked well together to monitor pupils’ progress. Leadership and management are outstanding because leaders have accurately analysed pupils’ assessment information and put effective strategies in place to ensure that pupils’ progress is accelerated at every key stage. Leaders have ensured that there are rigorous systems in place to monitor the quality of teaching and provide good support and training for teachers. Subject leaders are very thorough in their analysis of areas identified for improvement and effective strategies have been implemented to ensure all pupils make accelerated progress.”

In terms of Chris’s own development, he has found that “having credible people asking me the right questions at the right times such as ‘have you thought about this opportunity?’” has been one of his key influences. After five years at Wyvil he might have been looking for other opportunities, but then the authority asked him to support Vauxhall again.

Chris has now applied and been successfully appointed as a national leader of education in 2013.

Chris provokes similar reactions about his leadership style from the two heads of school at Vauxhall and Wyvil (Edison David and Rachel da Silva). They identify that he:

- exhibits strong moral purpose – “pupils are at the heart of what he does ... he follows his principles” and is “a man of conviction”
- brings clarity of purpose and provides a steady hand – “he is navigating the current climate well ... he does not see change as a threat, he sees it as an opportunity”
- empowers staff – “he allows me to lead the school and have the vision.”

School improvement: from special measures to good

Meanwhile, Vauxhall remained a troubled school and was consequently vulnerable. There were staff changes, and there had been five deputies in five years. The school's income was lower than it should have been due to low pupil numbers (one quarter below the potential maximum) and so there was a lack of resources for interventions and support. In 2009, a number of key staff left including the deputy head. Coupled with low results and a new Ofsted framework the school was placed in special measures. Ofsted said in 2009 that:

“the turbulence of the last year and the huge change in staffing have weakened some of these improvements and undermined the school's provision ... the quality of the teaching is inadequate ... and the school's leaders fail to provide a clear sense of direction or plan effectively for school improvement”.

Supporting Vauxhall during 2009/10

The local authority gave Chris the first call this time. Initially the task was to work in partnership with the existing head, however the head departed and the arrangement became a 'soft federation' with Wyvil for three years. From the start, the work between the two schools was not seen as a strong school supporting a weak one: “Vauxhall have an awful lot to offer to both schools and we share lots of positive practice” (Rachel da Silva). From day one it also helped Chris that he was a “known quantity at the school: by the community, families and staff”. He had now also spent 10 years as a Lambeth head and so it was all “very familiar” and he could get on with the work straight away. Chris embarked on a series of important changes to the school with the support of key staff members such as Edison David at Vauxhall and Rachel at Wyvil.

Reviewing special educational needs

Chris said there were numerous examples of undiagnosed special educational needs across the school. This had resulted in pupils failing to receive the support they needed and the school not receiving the necessary funding. He supported two early applications for SEN statements, and another seven in his first term. There were 14 children with statements of SEN out of 200 on roll by the end of 2009/10 from a position of two at the start of the year.

Restoring order

He made some quick early fixes: “parents and pupils needed to feel safe on the school site so I banned dogs from being brought into the playground. I wanted it to be clear that these were our rules now”. Chris also had to deal with some abusive behaviour towards office staff from a small number of parents: they were also banned from the site. This had the desired effect and sent a very clear message to the community.

Chris spent a lot of time walking the school – “it meant there were fewer places for poor practice to hide”. Chris knew that as he was reviewing the school he was presenting himself as a role model. It also had a positive impact on behaviour. The senior team established a new system for managing and reporting behavioural incidents, addressing in-class behaviour and using it in a positive way to build rewards and sanctions, and at the same time increasing accountability. As he broadened the leadership team, the greater number of senior staff gave greater capacity to deal with incidents and ensured people stepped in and took action.

Identifying the capacity to improve

Chris recognised that he needed to quickly identify the foundations on which to build improvements by learning what capacity and skills the school already had. When he arrived, he found “a lot of people wearing a lot of hats without the necessary expertise”. One immediate injection of support was to bring his acting special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) from Wyvil to help and provide instant access to systems that worked. Edison David, then on the senior leadership team at Vauxhall and now head of school, agreed: “one of the most important steps that Chris took was to understand the staff and their capacity, and restore order. He respected the culture when he arrived and the ethos of the school”.

Clarity of vision and expectations

Edison also commented that a critical early step was to improve communication across the school and for Chris to set out his expectations. Edison said: “we had our systems in place, but we were not able to follow through and take action in response to gaps that we identified”. Chris made it abundantly clear to all that his number one priority was to improve rates of pupil progress and overall achievement. There was a rigorous focus on the quality of teaching across the school triangulated with pupil-level data and work scrutinies.

Managing pupil achievement

During 2009/10, with Chris and Wyvil’s support, Vauxhall moved quickly to target more support for specific pupils. There were some good systems to review pupil progress, but there were few actions in response. The pupil data was not related to where each child was and the expectations about their progress and interventions. “All our efforts are now related to individual pupil achievement and personalisation of the support to them” (Edison). In 2009/10, this meant monthly lesson observations to acknowledge the small steps of progress and ensure things did not fall back. With termly HMI monitoring visits, the new senior team needed to be able to demonstrate how they were analysing their progress, and were very conscious of their accountabilities and the serious implications of these.

Establishing a bigger management team

In 2009, the team was Chris, a consultant head provided by the local authority, and an acting deputy for the first six months. Chris then quickly moved to establish a wider team encompassing himself as executive head, a head of school (Edison), three assistant heads (non-class based), and a part-time early years co-ordinator. Two of the assistant headteachers came from Wyvil and this provided a positive career step for them. The leadership team was now a strong and high profile group. The head of school role in particular was focused on ensuring effective teaching and learning at the school, as well as carrying out the performance appraisals of staff and overseeing the budget.

Ofsted's first monitoring visit was in March 2010. Progress overall was judged to be satisfactory, although progress was deemed to be slower in the Foundation Stage. Teaching and learning were judged to be satisfactory "with some pockets of outstanding practice ... some teachers are now displaying a clear focus on the need to accelerate pupils' progress". About Chris's leadership, the team had this to say, four months after he had arrived:

"The leadership provided by the executive headteacher is very strong and provides clear direction and purpose. He has quickly established his vision and leads the school with enthusiasm, dedication and a clear commitment to improvement, especially in relation to the progress pupils make. This is beginning to raise staff and pupil morale and increase parent confidence. For example, the rigorous monitoring of teaching has led to weak practice being challenged. Support provided to remedy weaknesses and the sharing of good practice has successfully raised the overall quality of teaching. The development of a new system for monitoring pupils' progress, together with well-focused support to meet the needs of all pupils, is having a positive impact on pupils' progress."

Ofsted visited again in July 2010. The result was that the school came out of special measures, and was judged good with outstanding capacity for sustained improvement: an exceptional rate of progress after only nine months. Ofsted said:

"Underpinning improvements is the good leadership and management of the executive headteacher and his senior team. The resources, expertise and experience available from the partner school have been wisely utilised. The headteacher provides a very clear direction. He has set high expectations and, along with the senior leaders, has worked tirelessly and to good effect to improve the school. The determined drive to raise achievement has yielded impressive improvements in a very short space of time. The school's outstanding capacity is underpinned by a shared and challenging culture of accountability which has, during the past few months, delivered rapid progress."

School improvement: from good to outstanding

By the end of 2009/10, Chris knew that “we had created a sea-change: achievement was soaring and we were hoping to reach outstanding at our next inspection”. The following year would be about focusing on several key aspects that would help them get there, and also deepening the relationships and work between Vauxhall and Wyvil.

Quality of teaching

Chris had begun by assessing both individual and collective needs across the staff. He introduced robust performance management for individual teachers and support staff. Individual targets set were for pupil progress and achievement to the level of average point scores for individual pupils. Teachers’ mid-year reviews considered pupil progress data.

Across the school, Chris was establishing both the capacity and expectations about staff joining in and undertaking whole-school projects to improve teaching, some as joint projects between Wyvil and Vauxhall. Chris set up weekly “professional development meetings” (not staff meetings) to consider aspects of teaching and give momentum to the whole-school projects. Read, Write, Inc was introduced at both Wyvil and Vauxhall at the same time with joint training. This was linked to a greater focus on literacy teaching and learning: 45 minutes a day, with an extra 20 minutes of focused phonics support through Read, Write, Inc. At the same time, Edison was also developing a maths curriculum programme for the whole Oval cluster.

Joint work between the two schools looked at the criteria for lesson observations and what outstanding teaching looked like. This helped to create expectations that peer observations would be a natural part of practice, enabling the sole Vauxhall teacher in a year group to have access to a ‘learning trio’ through working with the two colleagues in the same year at Wyvil. Leaders spent time on joint book scrutinies, assessment meetings, moderating samples of writing and undertaking fixed point assessments. The leadership teams wanted to look at “the rigour of the daily practice and routines” not the one-off lesson for an observation.

Work to improve the quality of marking was another example of joint work between the two schools. Staff looked at examples from Wyvil, visited each other’s schools and saw practice in the classroom – “it was a good example of us learning from colleagues: this is what outstanding provision looks like”.

Embedding systems and processes

From 2010/11 there was joint subject leaders’ work to strengthen the curriculum, drawing on good practice at Vauxhall. Staff were working on systems together, for example approaches to parents’ evenings, reporting to parents, data collection, reviewing pupil progress, and the rigour and regularity of monitoring and observations.

New systems set up in 2009/10 needed to be embedded, refinements needed to be made, and Vauxhall needed to monitor the impact of what was being done to support improvements. One example was the comprehensive data review sheet developed by Edison and used to review attainment and progress at pupil review meetings every term. A single A3 sheet now brings together all the actions arising from the pupil review meetings across the school, the follow-up actions that have been agreed and what monitoring then needs to take place.

Opportunities for children

Chris recognises that “we have such a receptive group of children here who will take up all the opportunities that are offered”. However he knew that his priority was to ensure that all out-of-class learning supported and could be linked back to core subjects and key aspects of learning and was supporting pupils’ development: “there is no time for vanity projects, or a deficit model where additional opportunities are provided to help support ‘these poor children’; we do want exciting experiences, but we don’t want them sitting in isolation”.

All these opportunities have been made easier by the two schools working together to create the capacity. Children are encouraged to get involved in the peer mediation programme and after-school clubs, and are expected to be involved in one of the extended personal experiences. Staff review the data on participation and target pupils who do not get involved. There are over 50 after-school clubs available, some joint between the two schools, for example a cluster project called Debate Mate to encourage public speaking, a ‘Shakespeare in schools’ project, and organising a children’s festival at the Royal Festival Hall.

The federation’s considerable efforts in this area have been recognised by the Arts Mark Gold award, the Basic Skills Award, ICT mark, and the Inclusion Quality Mark, as well as being named the first ‘Inclusion Centre of Excellence’ among primary schools in London.

Using the accountability regime

Chris believes that the Ofsted framework sets out what you need to do – “it may not be a fashionable view and it certainly isn’t rocket science, but the guidance and framework really do tell you what you need to do to become outstanding”. So the senior leadership team used the 26 pages of Ofsted’s inspection handbook as a guide and kept coming back to it. Staff bought into this approach, and it also helped Chris in setting appropriately high expectations for both new and existing senior staff.

Planning

The school development plan is now detailed, including three-year projections for pupil numbers, and resources that will be available. For example, the current plan is looking at how an existing coach house on the site can be converted into an additional learning space. Chris identifies the overarching themes – some of these are the same for both schools, for example working towards the Inclusion Quality Mark – then subject leaders work to develop their specific plans for each school.

Staff professional development

Work between the two schools has enabled staff to engage in a greater range of professional development. Six middle leaders from the two schools have undertaken action research projects as part of the National College's Middle Leadership Development Programme, for example on mental maths strategies and assessment in the foundation stage. There are now shared in-service training (INSET) days and a high-quality INSET programme, for example providing professional development on numeracy for seven local primary schools led by Vauxhall. There is also a newly qualified teacher (NQT) support programme operating between the two schools.

Governance

Chris's experience of governing bodies was a positive one. The Wyvil governors "were incredibly receptive to supporting other schools" and there were no issues in offering support to either the school in Tulse Hill or Vauxhall. Parents at Wyvil saw it as a compliment that they were being asked to support another school. The Vauxhall governing body when Chris arrived in 2009/10 was a different story: "it was challenging, but in the wrong way, and there was a lack of any sense of responsibility".

Chris said that the Vauxhall governing body had been one of the reasons why the school had got into difficulties and in 2006 Ofsted noted that "governors also are mindful of the need to be more involved in gaining a greater understanding of the quality of provision in the school."

In response, Chris increased the numbers of staff and parents on the governing body. He ensured that pupils and subject leaders attended regularly to anchor the discussions in what was really happening at the school. The sub-committees were re-established. Many governors said they enjoyed it a lot more. In the end, the move to a hard federation between Wyvil and Vauxhall by the end of 2012 was the way in which the governing body was fully reconstituted. From two governing bodies of 15 people, a federation governing body of 20 was formed and subsequently slimmed down to 15.

The move to a hard federation was described by Chris as "an attempt to solve the problems at Vauxhall once and for all, so it would never slip back", and also to stop it being vulnerable as a one-form entry school. It would, Chris stated, completely change the way the school viewed itself. The soft federation had provided a positive first step. The benefits in terms of career opportunities for staff, shared events and residential visits, and improving the buildings had meant it had been viewed very positively. Wyvil governors had set up a committee to monitor the impact of the federation: the chair of governors described how "we needed to make sure our own ship doesn't sink; but the more we investigated it, the more benefits we found".

Chris now feels that the current federation governing body is working much more effectively by being less embroiled in the detail because there are two schools to worry about. It has also meant that parent governors could step back from their concerns about their pupils, and be more strategic. The former chair of the Wyvil governing body is the chair of the federation governing body, there are two parent and three staff governors, and five co-opted experts all with some specific knowledge. There are sub-committees on curriculum, resources and welfare.

When Ofsted returned to the school in September 2012, the outcome was that Vauxhall was judged outstanding, three years after it had been in special measures, and the authority had contacted Chris and Wyvil to offer their support. About Vauxhall's leadership and management, Ofsted made the following comments in 2012:

“The skilful and highly effective executive headteacher has used the expertise in the federation and built a strong senior leadership team to sustain improvement. They have extremely high expectations. These are communicated clearly to all staff and pupils, who share their aspirations. Securing equality of opportunity for all pupils and tackling discrimination of any kind permeate all aspects of the school’s work. The desire for success for every pupil is the driver for improvement. Detailed, measurable plans for development are firmly grounded in an accurate understanding of each pupil’s needs and the progress that everyone needs to make to achieve highly. The monitoring and evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning are systematic and robust. Information is used extremely well to hold staff to account for the quality of their teaching and the difference it is making to pupils’ achievement.”

Looking outward

Chris's leadership style is to engage and work with others: he established and empowers broad leadership teams at both federation schools and he sees the importance of and wants to work with local schools. He has been working closely with the local Oval cluster of schools, and he now chairs their main meetings. The cluster currently includes 12 schools: one secondary, two special and nine primaries. Seven of the primaries are one-form entry: "we have a responsibility to each other". The cluster has set itself the aim of making a reality of a self-improving system by helping the schools help each other and address problems before they become significant. The cluster has established a charitable trust to resource joint work and has appointed an extended services manager, Amy Oxley, to co-ordinate the range of networks and opportunities and also act as a fundraiser. The work of the cluster includes out-of-school activities, a gifted and talented group, an early years network and parenting support. The cluster also jointly commissions educational psychology and speech and language therapy services, and organises professional development for staff across the 12 schools.

Chris has been working closely with the local authority throughout his 13 years as a headteacher in Lambeth. There have been particular benefits in being able to learn from Lambeth's approach to encouraging primary school federations. Chris has been able to see the developments and successes of the Loughborough Federation and the Gipsy Hill Federation. Lambeth local authority co-ordinates regular meetings of all the executive heads in the borough, which Chris says has been a useful forum to share experiences and consider future directions. Chris said that since Lambeth have been keen to broker partnerships between schools, there was less anxiety locally about what it might mean for Vauxhall and Wyvil, and the communities could feel more confident that the schools would retain their own identities. The benefits of the federation for Wyvil and Vauxhall have been seen, for example, in shared efficiencies through a single business manager, a shared ICT co-ordinator across the schools, and shared IT contracts and legal providers. The ICT co-ordinator said he would have been very unlikely to have been able to provide the support to Vauxhall as a one-form entry school, and there were numerous benefits in more economic purchasing. He has also been able to develop new schemes of work for both schools.

Looking forward

Chris and the leadership teams are considering a range of future directions for the federation. Now that Vauxhall has been designated a national support school he wants Vauxhall and Wyvil to firm up their offer to be able to support other schools outside of the borough as “this will be important for our strongest teachers”. He is attracted to the potential in the teaching school model.

He is interested in working with the local authority to open a centre for children with autism. Wyvil has a centre for speech and language impairment, and a new 45-place autism centre is opening in September 2014 working with the National Autistic Society. The regeneration of the Vauxhall area will bring 16,000 new houses and the need for more school places that would provide the potential for existing local schools to expand.

In terms of national education reforms, there are potential sponsors and organisers of new free schools interested in setting up locally: Chris’s view is that this would take pupils away from the current outstanding provision in existing schools: “the response needs to be that all schools around here are performing well”. Chris and the governors have no plans to explore academy status in the immediate future. The advantages of remaining a community school and working closely with the local authority on future expansions outweigh any benefits that might come from converting. They are likely to look at it again in a couple of years, and Chris “has no fundamental problem with it”. Chris’s general approach with government policies is to see “what is the best way through this for our school”. National curriculum changes have received general approval from his colleagues and “slimming down and increasing expectations are good things; so yes, we can do this and it’s not significant re-working required for our school”. Overall, Chris felt “there are more opportunities and flexibilities now than ever before; but with it comes high stakes in terms of maintaining your outstanding status”.

Chris said he would enjoy the challenge of taking on more of a chief executive role in the future if the federation chose to expand further. He recognises that he would need to grapple with a different set of challenges: more distant management and “you would not be the person with the immediate levers to pull”. He knows that “the old model in which the headteacher is the hub of the wheel is disappearing”, but points out that most heads still enjoy teaching and have come up through structures where they are making all the decisions. Some heads are ready for the challenges of executive leadership; some will still want to remain in control of single organisations.

Case study 16 - West Thornton Primary Academy, Croydon

Primary leadership case study: building an outstanding learning community based on empowering leadership

West Thornton Primary Academy, Croydon, is a large academy of 630 pupils serving a socially and culturally diverse community, with two thirds of pupils who do not speak English as their first language. The proportion of pupils entitled to free school meals is slightly below the national average, although this does not fully represent the scale of deprivation that families at the school face.

Executive headteacher: Stuart Roberts

“The headteacher’s passion, commitment and energy have been central to the school’s successful drive to secure and maintain high quality teaching and pupils’ outstanding achievement. He is fully supported by a highly capable team of senior and middle leaders ...”

Ofsted, 2012

Portrait of the school

Stuart Roberts was appointed as head to West Thornton Primary School in 2004. A year earlier the school had been judged by Ofsted as “very good”. However, the school faced significant challenges as the deputy had left around the same time as the previous headteacher, and the school had been very dependent on their combined leadership. As its new headteacher, Stuart identified that improvements could be made both to pupil behaviour and assessment systems.

Stuart’s immediate priority was to improve pupil behaviour by establishing clear rules and procedures and requiring teachers to take greater responsibility for resolving issues, so that all behaviour problems did not land at his door. He began to identify potential leaders and subsequently give them responsibility by introducing year group leader posts. He also promoted a key member of staff to deputy headship and made some external appointments.

In his second year Stuart started to focus on ensuring that systematic pupil assessment was practised throughout the school and addressing the quality of teaching and learning. He realised that many pupils came from homes where reading and cultural experiences were often lacking and so a curriculum that was rich in developing the love of reading was needed. At first the template for organising both classrooms and a curriculum that achieved this aim was quite prescriptive, but the curriculum model has evolved – and continues to evolve – drawing on research and teachers’ experience. The curriculum is also centred on developing independent learners using the Building Learning Power (BLP)¹¹ and Philosophy for Children (P4C)¹² models. There are some clear ‘non-negotiables’ that have to be achieved but teachers are encouraged and empowered to organise learning in the way that will best meet the needs of their class and individual pupils.

Throughout the period of curriculum development the school has achieved high levels of pupil attainment in national curriculum tests. In November 2007 the school was judged by Ofsted to be ‘good with a number of outstanding features’. The head had also been designated as a local leader of education (LLE) and supported a number of other schools on their improvement journey as part of the London Challenge programme. The head is now a national leader of education (NLE) and West Thornton is a national support school.

¹¹ Building Learning Power provides a framework that supports children to develop the habits, attitudes and skills that will enable them become confident, creative and independent learners – see: http://www.buildinglearningpower.co.uk/what_it_is.html

¹² P4C is designed to develop children’s thinking and reasoning skills and to enhance their self-esteem – see: <http://www.philosophyforchildren.co.uk/index.php/225>

In 2011 the school converted to being an academy. Around the same time, and following discussion with the local authority, Stuart became executive head of Spring Park Primary School in Shirley – a struggling school that was around a 20-minute drive from West Thornton. Spring Park at its own request has now joined West Thornton as Forest Academy in a multi-academy trust named the ‘Synaptic Trust’ – reflecting West Thornton’s focus on inquiry and learning through making connections. Ofsted revisited West Thornton in September 2012 and judged the school ‘outstanding’ in every category. This has led subsequently to the school being designated a teaching school.

Leadership and governance

Ofsted found that governors provided a “high level of challenge to school leaders”, had “a very well-informed and accurate insight into pupils’ performance” and made a “substantial contribution to school improvement”. This is partly achieved through assigning particular governors to year groups with the lead governor meeting with the year group leader to discuss progress and performance.

Stuart’s leadership has been hugely instrumental in the development and success of the school. Five particular aspects of leadership are evident in his approach.

A clear vision

Stuart’s passion and approach towards education is evident throughout the school and shared by staff, appreciated by parents and very visible in how children are learning. The vision statement for the Synaptic Trust describes how:

“We are a learning community which creates chances for dreamers, idea makers and innovators to connect, thrive and outperform. We empower our children to use their skills as divergent thinkers, responsible role models and leaders to carve out their own futures, and become extraordinary citizens.”

A phased approach to development

The vision is authentic in terms of how West Thornton is operating but the school has moved there in stages. Stuart has been clear both in his leadership of West Thornton and Spring Park that basic systems and standards have to be put in place in relation to behaviour, assessment and teaching before a school is ready to move on to developing bolder and more innovative approaches to teaching and learning. For example, at West Thornton he was initially “quite controlling” on the format of classroom and other wall displays because they had been neglected. Similarly, he insisted on a system of target-setting that included action plans for those pupils who were one or more sub-levels of attainment below where they should be in relation to national curriculum levels. To aid their progress, he also overhauled the role of teaching assistants (TAs) so that they were equipped to focus on supporting learners (see Figure 16-1 below) and used a commercial scheme – Read, Write, Inc. – to underpin the school’s work on literacy. However, as the basics became embedded that created the capacity and confidence to develop new approaches to the curriculum and teaching and learning.

Figure 16-14: Process for employing teaching assistants

TAs are assessed rigorously before being offered a job at West Thornton Primary School. They have to undertake a grammar and maths test and plan and teach a lesson prior to being interviewed. This process ensures that TAs are sufficiently equipped to provide cover for teachers' planning, preparation and assessment (PPA) time and other occasional absences.

An understanding of context

Stuart quickly grasped that many pupils were not reading at home, nor did they have access to cultural experiences such as going to museums and theatres. Children were coming into school with limited language. The school's job, therefore, was not just to teach children the basic skills of reading but to have a curriculum that was 'heavy' on speaking and listening (see description of curriculum below), fostered a love of reading and provided a rich menu of cultural experiences. The school encourages all sorts of different types of reading (via comics, magazines, tablets as well as books), has re-designed its library, promotes reading with parents, runs a radio station at lunchtimes and participates in the Premier League's Reading Stars programme (including creating a dedicated space in the school to make being part of the programme feel special). In 2006/07 West Thornton was the National Literacy Trust's reading school of the year. The school has also created an exhibition space that is designed and curated by the pupils based on a topic they are studying. Exhibitions are set out in a style and to a standard matching that of an art gallery or museum.

The understanding of context is also evident in Stuart's approach to leadership at Spring Park. While some of the interventions mirror steps he has taken at West Thornton, he has also recognised that the context of the school is different. His approach to tackling the problem of passive disinterested learners has been to take advantage of Spring Park's location to create a focus on outdoor learning – an attribute that is reflected in the school's new name 'Forest Academy'. The diversity of context is also recognised in the Synaptic Trust's mission statement:

"We are passionate that all schools in our family are free to follow their own destinies based on the needs and aspirations of their investors. Our uniqueness and different strengths ensures that our communities grow and prosper and that we have opportunities to support and learn from each other as we create futures for all."

Combining creativity and freedom with structure and rigour

A project-based and inquiry-centred approach to learning might be interpreted by some as a throwback to 1970s-style laissez-faire learning. But this is far from the case. Teachers are trusted and have freedom to organise the school day and to develop the

curriculum but this freedom operates within clearly established frameworks. The curriculum, as described below, is clearly structured and separate subject disciplines are linked. There are also clear outcomes for pupils that teachers are expected to deliver. The approaches for setting targets and tracking pupil progress are thorough and follow standard processes linked to key questions (see Figure 16-2). The performance management process is rigorous; and the development of the school's improvement plan is detailed but clearly prioritised. The school works to a Monitoring, Assessment and Deadlines (MAD) map that integrates what needs to be done when across the school year.

Figure 16-15: Target-setting and progress-checking at West Thornton Primary Academy

Year group target-setting is based on autumn baseline tracking data and requires teachers to address the following questions:

- What does the data tell you about the year group?
- What will be in place to achieve these targets?
- What are the potential factors affecting progress towards the targets?
- Which are the children causing particular concern?
- What are the priorities for the year?

Progress towards targets is reviewed by senior leaders at the beginning of the spring and summer terms, in particular looking at:

- Who/what are the barriers and what can be done?
- Which groups are on track for good or outstanding progress?
- The progress of those individuals causing concern: what are the barriers and what actions are being taken?
- What is the progress of special educational needs (SEN) children?
- Anything else the senior leadership team needs to know?

Empowering the whole school community

At the centre of Stuart's approach to leadership has been the empowerment of leadership at all levels within the school community.

Empowerment of leaders

Leadership is broadly distributed at West Thornton. In addition to Stuart, who as executive headteacher has overall responsibility for standards and school effectiveness, the senior leadership group comprises an associate head, who acts as head of school

and leads on teaching and learning and the curriculum, and three deputy and three assistant heads. The responsibilities of the three deputies cover, respectively:

- behaviour, safety, inclusion and SEN
- achievement and learning, and English as an additional language (EAL)/ethnicity aspects of inclusion
- social, moral, spiritual and cultural issues, Early Years Foundation Stage and transition leader. This deputy is also supporting Stuart at Spring Park.

The three assistant heads each have responsibilities for particular aspects of the curriculum along with a focus on developing teaching. Eight other teachers have teaching and learning responsibilities (TLRs) for leading year groups and for leading on issues such as extended schools, pupil voice and action research.

Leadership potential is identified early and a teacher could be assigned a leadership responsibility as early as their second year. Middle leaders have the opportunity to participate on development programmes. The senior leadership group members have all come from within the school. The work that the executive head has undertaken in supporting other schools has helped to create space at West Thornton for the other senior leaders to develop into their roles. It has also had the benefit of providing staff from the school with the experience of work with other schools as they support the executive head's improvement interventions. Figure 16-3 describes how the management operates.

Figure 16-16: West Thornton's senior leadership group

The senior leadership group meets every Monday morning when its agenda might include looking at implementation of the school's improvement plan, reviewing staff structures, sharing information on learning walks and data analysis and identifying which staff need courses or further development opportunities. From time to time the senior leadership group will have a session off-site to consider more strategic issues such as roles and responsibilities, a review of the school improvement plan, the application to become a teaching school or the implications of being involved in opening a new school. On Tuesday afternoons after school the wider management group (i.e. including staff with teaching and learning responsibility allowances) meets, when the emphasis is on year group leaders around the table feeding back what they are doing with their teams to improve teaching and learning.

Empowerment of staff

This is achieved through a number of routes. The school has a significant training budget of around £40,000 per year. It uses a mix of in-service days, external conferences and courses and sessions run in schools by leading experts. Staff are encouraged to continue

their own learning, for example, with newly qualified teachers being given books that they are expected to read and small groups of staff participating in action research.

Staff are also encouraged to develop their interests – “There is freedom to explore” and “You can go off and develop something” were two of the comments made by members of staff. As a two-day Inclusion Quality Mark accreditation visit to the school in June 2013 reported:

“Staff work closely together within a culture of high expectations, mutual respect and trust. They really appreciate the career development opportunities they are given through training and feel they can go to any member of staff for advice and support, irrespective of role or seniority.”

Inclusion Quality Mark report, 12 June 2013

The school encourages teachers to develop what it terms ‘professional flexibility’ and to use their judgement as to the balance of lesson content over a day or a week. They can also use their judgement to adapt the curriculum to use and reflect on significant news and events.

The development of staff is all brought together in the approach to performance management. Each member of staff is given three individual targets for the year: one relating to pupil progress; one to their personal progress; and one to wider school development. Development opportunities are provided to support staff in meeting their targets. Staff record their progress through teaching and learning logs and this, plus pupil tracking data, the feedback from learning walks and lesson observations, feeds into their overall assessment for the year.

A particular device the school has used to involve staff in curriculum-based leadership has been to apply for kitemarks – such as the Rights and Responsibilities Mark, the Arts Mark, the Primary Quality Mark and the quality marks for Inclusion, Primary Science, Geography and ICT.

“It has been a good way of bringing people together and developing middle leaders.”

Member of the senior leadership group

Empowerment of pupils

The empowerment of pupils at West Thornton is striking. They are confident in class in discussion, debate and responding to questions. They are used to reviewing both their own progress and that of their peers. The school embeds pupil leadership of learning by using:

- a group of 21 digital leaders who help other pupils and support teachers in using technology in the classroom. This role is particularly significant as the school does not use information and communication technology suites but embeds technology

into everyday learning in the classroom through iPads, tablets and other smart devices. The pupils have their own digital leaders' club

- writing mentors who once a week will review pupil progress and the quality of teacher feedback from reception to year 6
- a learning council that develops and oversees the implementation of rights and responsibilities of all the pupils, in accordance with the United Nations Charter for the Rights of the Child
- an eco-council that has been monitoring air pollution
- reading champions and buddy readers.

Empowerment and involvement of parents

This is achieved through running workshops on aspects such as phonics, mathematics and digital learning, including advising on how to deal with internet threats. Parents say they feel “included and informed” and that “the teachers work with you”. This sense of inclusion is helped by classes inviting parents back for tea and reading after every class assembly. Each class also has an open lesson twice a year so that parents can come and join in and become familiar with the school’s methods. The academy also has a very effective learning mentor.

Parents also say that special needs of pupils are understood and that the school is “responsive” in meeting those needs.¹³ They particularly value the way that ethos of the school encourages pupils to respect and support other pupils with special needs. Parents receive details of their children’s targets at parents’ evenings and if parents do not attend this is followed up by phone. A partnership with a specialist charity, Place2Be, provides access to counselling and therapy sessions for children and families with specific problems. The academy also supports families by signposting them to outreach and other services.

School improvement: good to outstanding

The school’s performance has been high in terms of attainment for a number of years. But the key process that helped move the school from good to outstanding was the development of its curriculum.

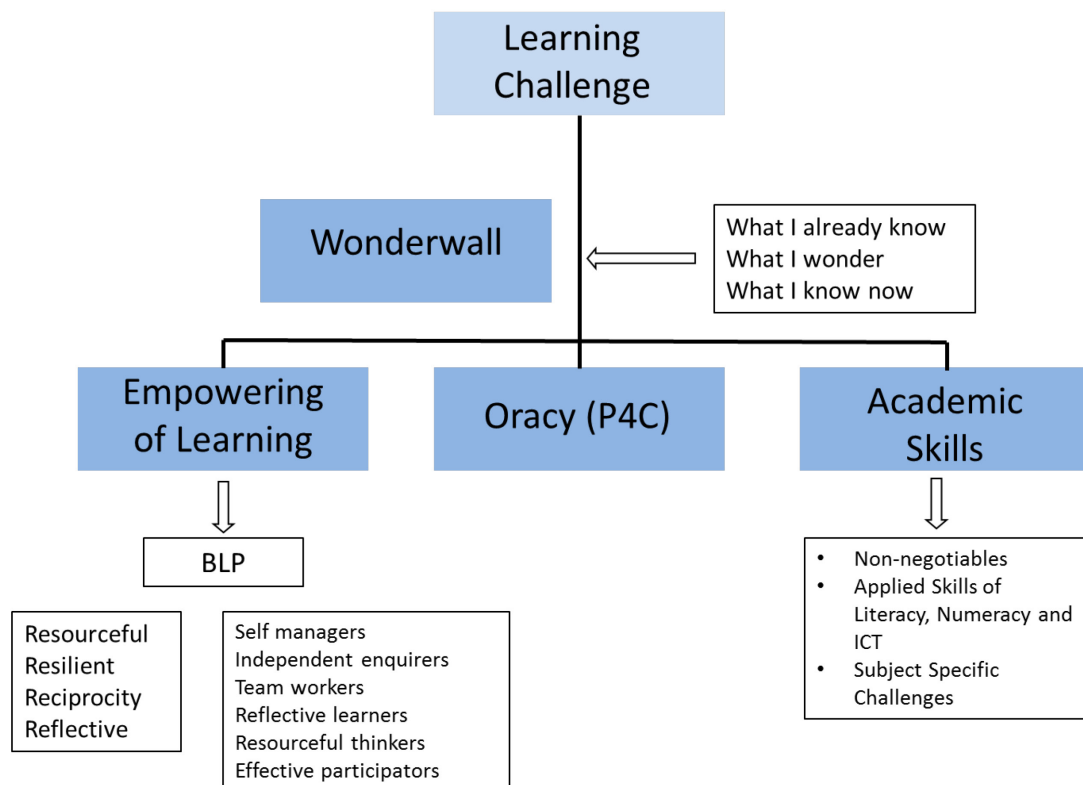
The process started as a result of senior leaders undertaking a whole-school improvement project as part of their National Professional Qualification for Headship

¹³ Ofsted (2012) confirms this view, noting that “Arrangements to support pupils with disabilities and special educational needs are highly effective so that these pupils make excellent progress.”

(NPQH) accreditation. The school initially introduced a project-based cross-curricular approach to teaching and learning. The school then decided it needed to do more to develop its pupils as independent learners and rely less on ‘drilling’ children for national curriculum tests and more on embedding skills and knowledge. It was at this point that, based on reading, research and attendance at conferences, the school decided to adapt approaches such as ‘Building Learning Power’ (BLP) and ‘Philosophy for Children’ (P4C) to West Thornton’s context. The so-called ‘Learning Challenge’ curriculum structure which the school is now using is constantly evolving in the light of research and practice. It currently follows the model set out in Figure 16-4 below. The word ‘challenge’ to describe the curriculum is deliberate – the school’s curriculum framework documents say that:

“We believe, and we encourage the children to understand, that learning cannot happen without a challenge or a struggle.”

Figure 16-17: West Thornton Primary Academy’s Learning Challenge curriculum structure



Each challenge is framed as a question: “Would it be good if dinosaurs had not died out?”, “Was it better to be a child in 1940 than 2010?”, “What inspired Georgia O’Keefe?” or “What’s on the menu at a scientific tea party?” Each year every year group will undertake 10 to 14 learning challenges. The learning challenges will vary in length from three weeks to half a term. The entry point into a challenge is an initial experience that induces a ‘wow’ factor for the pupils, for example a visitor bringing birds of prey to the school or the installation of a mystery tent to explore in the playground. A series of questions provide the framework for the challenge with the children’s thoughts and further questions displayed on a ‘Wonderwall’. The tasks and assignments undertaken as part of the challenge will be designed in such a way as to draw and develop the four BLP attributes. Discussion and debate on questions build on the school’s P4C practice (see Figure 16-5 below) and help to develop pupils’ oracy and self-confidence.

Figure 16-18: Philosophy for children: a closer view

Philosophy for Children is designed to develop thinking and reasoning skills and to enhance self-esteem. P4C aims to develop four key types of thinking:

- Collaborative – thinking with others
- Caring – thinking of others
- Critical – making reasoned judgements
- Creative – creating new ideas.

Staff at West Thornton have been trained to facilitate P4C and the school uses it in five ways:

- at the start of the day teachers use a daily morning ‘wake up and think’ session
- in class, as part of a Learning Challenge, pupils may be placed in two or three groups and tasked with assembling facts, developing arguments and framing questions to put to another group. The groups will then debate the issue based on structured rules for discussion. So, for example, pupils assigned to be either Romans or Celts might debate the pros and cons of the value of the Roman occupation of Britain
- in a weekly lunchtime philosophy café that pupil philosophy mentors help to plan and run – a typical question that might be discussed at the café could be: “If you read a newspaper in a shop without buying it, is it stealing?”
- in philosophy assemblies where children, facilitated by a teacher, are able to articulate their thinking and respond to other points of view in a larger forum on a topic selected by the teacher
- a home/school travelling “philosophy spider” follows up questions asked at school and encourages children to discuss these further at home.

At the inspection in 2012 Ofsted inspectors noted that:

“Pupils across the school are consistently challenged to consider a wide of personal, moral and social issues so that, by the time they leave year 6, pupils have developed a mature and responsible view of a range of issues.”

Ofsted, 2012

The school is passionate about maintaining high standards within the context of its skill-based curriculum. It achieves a balance between creativity and structured learning. Challenges, for example, will include many assignments that develop literacy and numeracy skills. But the school does not try and force everything into the straightjacket of Learning Challenges and will run free-standing phonics and numeracy sessions alongside these. It is left to each teacher to decide how best to achieve the appropriate balance and mix.

Every child has an individual learning log that they use at home for research or creative work and that contributes to the Learning Challenge.

The operation of the curriculum is monitored through learning walks, lesson observations, looking at books and wall displays and through the termly pupil-tracking sessions. The lesson observations take place in the context of the school having defined its approach to ‘outstanding’ learning and teaching (see Appendix A).

Looking outward

Although the Synaptic Trust has been formed and looks set to grow to incorporate a third school, Stuart's ambition is not to start building up an academy chain. Rather than become a chief executive officer he wants to retain direct engagement with teaching and learning. "I like to do school improvement myself" is his view.

West Thornton already hosts the Outstanding Teacher Programme (OTP) and the executive headteacher's vision is to build on this and the School Direct programme and to work with other schools through a teaching school alliance to recruit, employ and grow teachers in a way that reflects the West Thornton vision. His vision is to "build a community of schools run by people with the same philosophy".

Stuart has "always had a positive relationship with the local authority" and it was through his links with them that he became involved in Spring Park – now Forest Academy. This link is also providing the route to other school improvement assignments. In the autumn term of 2013, Stuart was working both as a school improvement partner supporting a school that was in an Ofsted category and also as an LLE providing 10 days-worth of support to another school.

Engagement with the local school community also embraces working with other academy headteachers in the area, attending breakfast briefing sessions with other heads, contributing to the local authority's Schools Forum, working with the local authority on place planning and being part of a cluster of local primary schools. The cluster schools hold joint in-service training sessions and staff from the schools visit each other to observe practice and subject leaders work together on common challenges.

On most days West Thornton is a bustling hive of activity with staff and leaders from schools in the UK and abroad coming to visit and finding out about the academy's learning model. Pupils as much as staff are able to explain how it is that the school works.

Looking forward

The school's development plan for 2012/13 was based on five 'foundation' priorities:

- the achievement of pupils
- the quality of teaching
- the behaviour and safety
- the quality of leadership and management
- spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.

Each priority was broken down into a series of sub-priorities with an action and resources template setting out the roadmap for delivering the priority. The template included not only a list of actions but also information under four other headings:

- What will success look like?
- What will we do to monitor the implementation of our actions?
- What will be the impact on pupils' learning?
- What will we do to evaluate the success of our actions?

A significant development for 2012/13 was the introduction of a Learning Zone for year 4. During the summer holiday three classrooms were knocked into one to create a high-quality flexible learning area that carried the academy's commitment to independent learning into new territory (see Figure 16-6). The intention was to develop similar learning areas for years 5 and 6 over the following two years.

Figure 16-19: The Learning Zone: a closer view

90 pupils from the three classes that form year 4 share a carpeted area that includes tables and chairs, sofas and cushions, wall displays and a table-top PC – the size of a large coffee table. Three teachers, a higher level TA and two TAs provide the staffing. The children spend some of their time in focused sessions led by teachers where key skills and content – such as multiplication or grammatical structure – are taught. But for the rest of the time children work independently and with their peers on self-directed tasks. They are presented with a series of challenges that are listed on the ‘Wonderwall’ – with some of the challenges being obligatory and some being optional.

The children use iPads and hand-held devices as well as conventional resources to research and work on the challenges. Children present their work to each other through blogs, peer review and making their own videos. Assignments also include written work which is carefully assessed and feedback provided. Staff will discreetly monitor during the course of the day how pupils are spending their time and making progress and, where necessary, guide them in their learning.

In one corner of the Learning Zone is the Learning Pit. This is the place that the children go to if they are struggling with a challenge. Here they will be helped through resources and advice to develop strategies to tackle the issue that they are finding a challenge. The philosophy of the Learning Zone is open about how struggle and practice is part of learning.

The leadership team carefully selected the teachers that would form the team to staff the Learning Zone. As well as planning projects together the teams find that the key to making a success of the initiative is the debriefing at the end of each day. They jointly review the day’s learning and look at the children’s work to see what progress they are making. If they identify areas or issues where the children are struggling to master a concept or skill they will build that into how they use the focused teaching sessions.

The aim is to create the ethos of a school within a school, with the teachers having control of their own budget and able, within the boundaries of the school’s ‘non-negotiables’, to plan and deliver their own curriculum and develop their own approach to discipline. For example, the children decided to make a rule that they would not wear their shoes while they were in the Learning Zone as they wanted to avoid the area becoming damaged by scuff marks.

The Learning Zone was in part a response to issues with some of the boys, when they were in year 3, having some behaviour problems. Now, however, the pupils are empowered, enthused and articulate about their learning – and the behaviour issues are a thing of the past.

On 1 September 2013 Spring Park formally became Forest Academy, and along with West Thornton forms the Synaptic Trust, a multi-academy trust. The 2013 national curriculum test results for the academy represented a significant improvement and the school is now achieving levels of attainment that are above the national average. The school's self-evaluation now assesses the school as being 'good' and it is expected that the next Ofsted inspection will confirm this judgment.

As well as continuing to lead school improvement at Forest Academy the executive headteacher has responsibility for supporting the effective implementation of a new governance structure. West Thornton's business manager is splitting her working week across the two schools, focusing on integrating back office systems and achieving efficiencies through shared procurement.

Teaching school status, as discussed below, now forms an important part of West Thornton's future agenda. The school previously hosted PGCE and GTP placements and from September 2013 took on its first School Direct trainees.

Summarising curriculum thinking

A key factor in West Thornton's decision to become an academy was its desire to follow and implement a curriculum that it considered right for its pupils. Putting pupils' interests first has helped to create the perspective and confidence to adopt policies and approaches – even if they do not fit in with current mainstream thinking. The school sees that children will need to grow up with multiple skills. Stuart sees both the current and reformed national curriculum as being “too linear” in the way it thinks about educating children – he considers they fail to provide children with “adaptive and resilient mindsets”. Tomorrow's employees, he believes, need to be equipped to manage the constant changes in roles and careers they will face.

Stuart emphasises that empowering children as thinkers and leaders is not a reversion to a project-based approach to learning reminiscent of the 1970s. The move to develop independent thinkers is combined with a rigorous emphasis on mastering the non-negotiable skills that all children need to progress effectively.

As national curriculum levels are due to be abolished, the executive headteacher considers there is a case for moving to a system where children are assessed at the end of each year against clear descriptors of what they can do. But until a new system emerges the academies in the trust will continue to use assessing pupil progress (APP) sheets.

Appendix A: West Thornton Primary Academy's definition of outstanding learning and teaching

We believe learning can be judged to be outstanding when:

- All pupils are engaged and enthusiastic about the challenge.
- Pupils ask questions that move themselves and the learning of their peers on.
- The children have taken charge; for large sections the teacher has stood back.
- There has been struggle – where the children have persevered and pushed through a challenge in the lesson.
- All children can articulate new knowledge, skills or growth in understanding or confidence.
- Pupils reach an outcome they are proud of.
- The standard of thinking or written work is higher than expected.
- Pupils can make links with previous learning and identify next steps for themselves.
- Pupils leave the room buzzing – still talking about the learning.

We believe teaching can be judged outstanding when:

- The teacher has high expectations for all from the start.
- The teacher uses a range of strategies to engage, enthuse and motivate all children.
- The lesson enables all pupils to make progress that can be identified.
- The task is challenging and matched to pupils' learning needs.
- There is an appropriate balance of teacher and pupil talk.
- The teacher allows appropriate time for independent and collaborative work, making timely interventions that move learning on.
- Appropriate use of questioning and discussion allows teacher to ascertain understanding at different stages of the lesson, adjusting the pace where necessary.

Case study 17 - White Horse Federation, Swindon

Primary leadership case study: taking advantage of every new opportunity

The White Horse Federation, a multi-academy trust, is a partnership of two existing primary school federations based respectively on Moredon and the Drove primary schools in Swindon. The trust has two executive headteachers and a trust board.

Executive headteachers at the White Horse Federation: Nick Capstick (formerly headteacher of the Drove Primary School) and Lauren Connor (formerly headteacher of Moredon Primary School)

Interim chair of executive board of directors of the White Horse Federation: Joss Jarvis

Portrait of the White Horse Federation

Set among the deprived wards of Swindon are examples of two exceptional primary system leaders who have now come together to provide a local and regional powerhouse of school improvement. Executive headteacher Lauren Connor formed one of the country's first primary federations between Moredon and Rodbourne Cheney primary schools, later federating with Nyland Special School and in doing so taking two schools out of Ofsted categories and two schools to outstanding. Nick Capstick led the Drove Primary School out of serious weaknesses to outstanding and into a federation with Mountford Manor Primary School.

With the agreement of their governing bodies, the two leaders subsequently joined forces to form a seven-school multi-academy trust – the White Horse Federation – that has two teaching schools and is providing school improvement support to all Swindon secondary schools and 38 schools across Gloucestershire. At every turn, these are leadership stories about taking advantage of the right opportunities to support their pupils better and improve teaching and learning. This case study begins with Lauren's federation at Moredon and Rodbourne Cheney, then passes to the Drove before ending up with the White Horse Federation. It is an inspiring journey.

The leadership of Moredon Primary School and its federation with Rodbourne Cheney

Lauren Connor, described by her fellow executive headteacher Nick Capstick as “the most effective school improvement practitioner I have ever met”, led the amalgamation of infant and junior schools to create Moredon Primary School in 2006. Shortly afterwards, Moredon formed a federation with nearby Rodbourne Cheney Primary School after the latter had endured a lengthy period without a substantive headteacher and was placed in a category of concern by the local authority. Lauren became the executive headteacher, and it was one of the first primary school federations in the country. Moredon is a two-form entry primary school, Rodbourne Cheney is one form; otherwise they share similar characteristics in terms of their intakes, with the majority from White British families and an above-average number of pupils eligible for free school meals. Since 2009, both schools have consistently had results at level 4+ English and maths at 90+%.

By 2008, Moredon was judged outstanding:

“This is an outstanding school, where pupils make exceptional progress. Pupils’ personal development and well-being are outstanding. They enjoy school and their behaviour and attitudes to work are exemplary. Their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding. The school’s care, guidance and support for its pupils are also of the highest order.”

“The headteacher, the deputy headteacher and other senior members of staff are a dedicated and passionate team, providing outstanding leadership and management, and are totally committed to doing the best they can for their pupils. The headteacher leads with enthusiasm, expertise and a very strong commitment to improvement, and in this she is ably supported by the deputy headteacher, who has charge when she is working at the federated school. They have contributed very significantly to the outstanding provision that is now made for pupils.”

Ofsted, 2008

At Rodbourne Cheney, an Ofsted inspection early in 2007 had given the school a ‘notice to improve’, although noting Lauren’s “very clear and determined leadership that had achieved a lot in a relatively short time” and that the federation was already “bringing expertise at other leadership levels to the school. Many staff spoke about how pleased they were to have a clear sense of direction, particularly after the uncertainties of the previous year”.

When Ofsted visited Rodbourne Cheney again at the start of 2007/08, they noted that good progress was being made as a result of “the drive, vision and determination of the headteacher [which] have been vital in empowering teachers to take on board their leadership and management responsibilities.” By the next inspection in the spring term 2008, Ofsted commented positively on the breadth of the curriculum, the dynamic

teaching in the foundation stage, lesson planning matched to abilities, and careful tracking. The changes had been brought about by:

“... good teamwork and inspirational leadership by the headteacher that have enabled the school to make significant strides towards raising standards. The remarkable transformation of the school is a testament to the robust procedures and initiatives that have been introduced since the federation with its partner school. The leadership of the headteacher is exemplary. Incisive evaluation and robust action to address weaknesses have resulted in significant improvements in a relatively short time. The headteacher has forged a leadership team who shares her vision and strongly supports the initiatives that have been introduced.”

By the 2010 Ofsted inspection, Rodbourne Cheney was judged outstanding and the glowing Ofsted report had this analysis about the reasons behind its transformation:

“As the Rodbourne Cheney badge accurately depicts, it has been put safely in the hands of a more global federation which has nurtured, supported and developed it.

Four years on from being a school requiring significant improvement with standards that were significantly below national averages, [Rodbourne Cheney] has achieved a very rapid rate of development, and current standards are well above average. This has been achieved through the following features:

- An executive headteacher who puts quality teaching and learning at the top of her agenda and ensures that all pupils receive very well-targeted support
- Teaching staff that plan memorable experiences for developing academic skills and also encourage pupils’ personal development, thus enabling them to become thoughtful and reflective young people
- An Early Years Foundation Stage that provides the best start to school life
- Top quality relationships with parents and carers which promote engagement in their children’s learning
- Close working partnerships with other schools in the federation, specialist support from agencies and sponsorship from local companies
- A highly cohesive school community that reaches out locally, nationally and globally
- Highly efficient and effective use of resources across the federation.”

A National College publication¹⁴ in 2011 explained the impact of Lauren and her team's leadership on both schools:

“The head can be both strategic and operational, as needed, but has an intuitive approach to leadership development. She is seen by her staff as providing an excellent role model and a very strong lead. Her vision and ideas are highly motivating. Risk-taking is encouraged; people are listened to and staff have taken on responsibilities beyond anything they imagined or sought. Leadership development is shown for example in the deputy who would never have gone into a school causing concern but who did, and the temporary teacher who now leads the federation's behaviour support work across the local authority.”

Prepared to Lead: How schools, federations and chains grow education leaders,
page 72

Six years after the federation was established, two senior leaders at Moredon identified what was important for them in maintaining their outstanding provision. The list is an illuminating mix of systems and capacity building:

- talent spotting – to identify and nurture talent and create the right opportunities for career development
- relentless continuing professional development (CPD) – returning to key themes and ensuring there is a cycle of reinforcement and refreshing of practice
- training for teaching assistants – ensuring all staff are supported and developed
- six-weekly pupil progress meetings – maintaining an unwavering focus on pupil-level data and identifying support that might be needed
- effective use of additional resources (e.g. pupil premium) and using out-of-class experiences (such as residential trips) to support the development of the whole child
- clear expectations to staff – about the vision of the school, the culture and the key non-negotiables
- peer observations – to share practice and enable staff to work, for example, as ITP facilitators to develop their own practice
- a culture of consistent change, good team working, being solution-focused and saying “yes”.

¹⁴ Matthews P., Higham R., Stoll L., Brennan J. and Riley K. (2011) *Prepared to Lead: How schools, federations and chains grow education leaders*, NCSL.

Leadership of the Drove Primary School

“The headteacher, staff and governors are totally committed to driving school improvement to ensure every opportunity is given for all pupils to achieve and enjoy learning. All pupils, including those who are disabled or who have special educational needs, make rapid progress. Teachers set consistently high expectations and build strong, effective relationships with their pupils. Lessons have pace and rigour and incorporate a wide variety of strategies to engage all pupils. Pupils’ behaviour is outstanding and they display extremely good manners towards each other and adults.”

Ofsted report on the Drove Primary School, March 2012

The Drove is a three-form entry primary school in the centre of Swindon. The school site is large: the buildings were a former girls’ grammar school that have made for large individual and separate classrooms, although open learning spaces are consequently limited. A children’s centre provides full day-care provision, parental outreach, family support services and a base for a childminder network. Around the central playground can be seen the buildings that build the transitions from pre- and post-natal care, nursery and then school. The children’s centre provides the opportunity to engage hard to reach parents and offers 63 adult education courses to parents through a community engagement programme. The two family outreach workers work with families with children under five. As a centre of vocational excellence for early years, additional resources and expertise are brought to the school. The remodelled buildings on the outer edge of the playground now house a new two-storey block that acts as the training centre and administrative hub of the White Horse Federation and teaching school alliance.

The Drove’s catchment area includes relatively few privately owned houses and many multi-occupancy flats. Many families, especially new arrivals, live in over-crowded housing close to the red-light district of Swindon. About half the pupils live in the Central Swindon ward that ranks among the fifth most deprived wards in England. There is very high pupil mobility between key stage 1 and key stage 2: 45% of pupils are new entrants to the school during key stage 2, compared with the national average of 16%. About a quarter of pupils are currently eligible for free school meals, almost three quarters of pupils have English as an additional language, and four fifths of pupils are from black or minority ethnic heritages. 41 languages are spoken by pupils at the school. Absenteeism remains a challenge, with children taken back to their former home countries in term time. A significant proportion of the children suffer from low self-esteem and lack confidence due to being economic or trauma refugees. In 2012, over 90% of children entering the Drove’s nursery provision had below average profiles of attainment, 90% had English as an additional language, and most had little or no experience of play-based learning.

In 1999, Ofsted had placed the Drove into ‘serious weaknesses’. In 2000, Nick Capstick took on the challenges as the new headteacher. The school now provides a shining example of strong and vibrant multi-cultural education, offering the best possible start to

children from challenging home backgrounds. Throughout the school are tangible demonstrations of the understanding and welcoming of different cultures. The Drove rightly prides itself on very strong relationships with parents and the local community. Children make considerable progress from their low starting points: in 2013, 98% of pupils made expected rates of progress in writing, 92% in reading and 92% in maths; the school's key stage 1/key stage 2 value added score of 101.3 was even more impressive given the very high rates of pupil mobility.

“The school is outstandingly successful in creating well-balanced, confident pupils, who welcome challenge and work with concentration and enthusiasm. All pupils talk enthusiastically about their school.”

Ofsted report on the Drove Primary School, 2009

The Drove says that its ambition is to give pupils “the roots to grow and the wings to fly”; “... at Drove we are rightly proud of the rich tapestry of culture, religion, colour and faith that has become the hallmark of our school” (Drove prospectus). The school is justifiably pleased with the range of awards that it has received over time, which act both as external validations of its exceptional journey and affirmation for pupils: the General Teaching Council (GTC) National Award for Excellence in Professional Development, Equal Opportunities and Diversity; Times Educational Supplement (TES) 2009 award for Outstanding Community Involvement; Investors in People Outstanding Practitioners award and Gold Award; 2011 shortlisted for the TES Primary School of the Year; Basic Skills Agency Quality Mark; Artsmark Gold Award; Dyslexia Friendly Schools Award; International School Award; and Activemark/Sportsmark.

Leading the Drove Primary School

Nick Capstick had a somewhat unusual route to headship (and now executive headship). He had taught for three years then joined the National Council for Educational Technology (NCET) and subsequently the **British Educational Communications and Technology Agency** (BECTA), before working as a local authority adviser. He thought he should be “doing it rather than telling others how to do it”, and consequently applied for the job of headteacher of the Drove Primary School in 2000 when it was advertised. It was his first headship.

The views on Nick’s leadership style were consistent. Many interviewees talked about the “strong ethos; we know what the school stands for”, with a clear philosophy of primary education that was uncompromising in its drive for pupil progress linked to support for the whole child and their families. He was described as a “visionary leader” who was “always looking at the needs of the children”: “he is good because he shares the passion – you get fired up about working here” and “it’s about the vision and values – and everybody has bought into the vision”. At the same time he is “extremely supportive – he knows the needs of every child”; “compassionate and understanding”. Another key component of his leadership style was the desire to continually be adapting the offer and taking advantage of changes. Senior staff said “he has an eye on the future: he is someone who wants to be amongst the future in terms of change”; “Nick is always moving forward, and people get caught up in that: you definitely can’t be afraid of change here.”

From the time of his appointment, Nick’s leadership qualities have been praised in Ofsted inspections of the school:

“The headteacher is totally committed to raising standards. Since his appointment, significant progress has been made in the school. The headteacher has a clear vision ... and leads very much from the front. He is building a high performing team, and together they are inspiring, motivating and influencing staff ... [he has] made remarkable inroads, in a very short time, into many of the difficulties the school faced ...”

Ofsted report on the Drove Primary School, 2001

“The headteacher is inspirational and innovative and provides very effective and purposeful leadership. He has an enterprising approach to tackling new situations.”

Ofsted report on the Drove Primary School, 2006

“School leaders at all levels have a shared sense of purpose. The leadership of the headteacher is very strong in managing the school’s performance. The highly effective leadership of teaching is supported by a robust programme of monitoring and professional development.”

Ofsted report on the Drove Primary School, 2012

Nick was headteacher of the Drove between 2000 and 2012. In September 2012 he stepped up to become one of the two executive headteachers of the White Horse Federation. A new principal, Helen Swanson, was appointed to lead the Drove within the federation. Helen had previously been the head at Tregoze Primary, which is now itself another of the White Horse Federation schools. The current senior leadership team at the Drove is broad and demonstrates the desire for leadership distributed across a range of staff. Helen leads a deputy principal, two assistant principals, two deputy assistant principals (with phase leader and special educational needs (SEN) responsibilities), a literacy co-ordinator, the school business manager for the federation and the human resources (HR) director for the federation.

Senior staff talked about always having autonomy to take decisions, for example deploying additional staff where they might be required to address a school improvement need. Senior staff agreed that the focus was always on the children and their progress, and that when staff had ideas there was lots of support to implement them, for example introducing play leaders in the playground to improve behaviour. “There is definitely an open door and all views are welcomed and encouraged: people feel listened to.”

Ofsted in 2012 agreed:

“Leaders and managers at all levels, including governors, are passionately committed to their school. They are knowledgeable about its strengths and clear about priorities for improvement, never hesitating to share their vision for the future. Succession planning is supported through leadership opportunities across the federation. Leaders have become very effective in sharing their expertise, consistently raising the quality of teaching and learning, in turn improving levels of achievement for all groups of pupils. As a result, senior leaders have demonstrated relentless determination and secure ability in the capacity to improve.”

School improvement at Drove Primary School: from serious weaknesses to outstanding

With the school in serious weaknesses when Nick arrived in 2000, he described how in some ways the early stages were the most straightforward part of the improvement journey as “anything was better than what had been done before”. In 2000, before Nick’s arrival, Ofsted had judged that there were “serious weaknesses in past curriculum planning and teaching which have led to significant gaps in pupils’ learning. The teaching of pupils in mixed age classes was not successful. [There had been] significant turnover of teaching staff and headteachers”. Nick took a series of steps to guide improvements.

Stabilising the school

Nick focused on stabilising leadership and management, improving the quality of teaching and learning and putting basic systems and procedures in place. He was modest about the idea that there was always a plan to get to where he is now – “certainly not” – but staff said that Nick did have an explicit ambition to be outstanding, “it was just a matter of when not if”.

Staff recruitment and development

Recruitment of high-quality staff became a key focus. Effective appointments were made for literacy and numeracy co-ordinators, who were able to provide focused and high-quality continuous professional development (CPD), and modelling up-to-date practice using, for example, models and images in maths. The school has placed a high premium on growing its own staff, with a number of examples of senior leaders who joined as teaching assistants, Graduate Teacher Programme (GTP) students or newly qualified teachers (NQTs). There is now serious investment in staff training, through supporting staff to undertake master’s qualifications, time for staff to undertake TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) courses, and enabling staff to deliver the Improving and Outstanding Teacher Programmes (ITP and OTP). The high standards of teaching across the school have been achieved by appointing 80% of the Drove’s staff from the outstanding GTP students they have trained. Year 6 teachers said: “the opportunities here are second to none ... Nick is a great believer in everyone having an opportunity.”

“Expertise is developed from within, through the high quality training on offer. Excellent appointments have created a team that is very skilled and focused to drive the pace of improvement. Rigorous performance management effectively targets need and the priorities for individual professional development of all staff, including support assistants.”

Ofsted, 2012

Support for the whole child

Nick described how the school's changing pupil population and high rates of mobility meant it had been fundamental to promote a philosophy of "support for the whole child through identification of needs, support for and engagement with parents, and then focus on the details of pedagogy". This is manifested most clearly in the approaches for English as an additional language (EAL) learners. Part of developing the whole child at the Drove is to recognise that no assumptions can be made about the experiences of the children and their backgrounds – even to the extent of assuming they have all played with a bucket and spade when writing about a beach visit in a year 4 literacy lesson. Many of the children have "very limited life experiences", and the school has recognised that it needs to do a lot to support children in shared experiences through drama and role play on which to base their writing.

"Developing the 'whole child' is a principal focus of the school's work and leaders work very hard to successfully promote the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of the pupils."

Ofsted, 2012

Supporting learners with English as an additional language

41 languages are spoken at the school (the top five are Konkani, English, Bengali, Urdu and Portuguese). This has been a rapidly changing picture: in 2004 there were no pupils from the Goan community, now they represent 32% of the school population. There are no dual language resources for Konkani speaking children. The school has therefore developed a multi-layered approach for all EAL learners with a number of key features:

- The school undertakes mother tongue initial assessments two weeks after the arrival of new pupils so that they can see whether there are any barriers to learning other than language acquisition.
- There are six bilingual teaching assistants at the school, and Nick spent £6,000 training two of them as TEFL teachers. Staff said that the bilingual teaching assistants had made a significant difference, especially around their ability to help diagnose whether there were any additional barriers to learning.
- There is a strong focus on speaking and listening, letters and sounds, phase 2 and 3 support and "lots of phonic sessions". Specific intervention groups were timetabled for the afternoon.
- Parents' workshops had been operating for six or seven years to develop parents' knowledge of maths and literacy, or "how to read with your children".
- A Saturday morning language school supports 70 children from Drove and across Swindon. The approach is "immersion in fun language-based activities" to help children pick up technical and colloquial language.

- Offering bilingual and translation services for parents to develop loyalty and trust, alongside adult education services to help integrate families and help improve their chances of gaining employment.
- The children's centre has support work on diet and nutrition at parent classes as part of the school's work to try and reduce levels of absence.

Nick is strongly of the view that EAL is only “a barrier to learning, and not a special educational need or reflection of cognitive development. So we need to make the curriculum compelling, the contexts relevant and age appropriate, and ensure a visual curriculum is in place surrounded by aural and oral immersion in English at the same time”.

The interviewer spoke with a group of EAL learners whose home countries included Poland, Romania, Goa, Afghanistan, Brazil and Portugal. All arrived at the school with no English, some as recently as a few months before. All were able to articulate with real passion (in English) the support they had received on language acquisition and how the school helped them to learn. They mentioned that having someone who was fluent in their home language had been very helpful, as had the additional reading support, being assigned a friend who helped them settle into the school, and the “fun Saturday club”. Pupils said “I can't pick out one thing that is great about this school, because so many of the things make it very good”; “the school has helped me to progress so much”. Sandra Gonzalez, a Konkani speaker, had been instrumental in supporting many of the pupils. Sandra started as a learning ambassador for Swindon Council and was employed at the Drove as a teaching assistant, undertook TEFL training, and is now a higher level teaching assistant at the school.

“The excellent relationships that exist between adults and pupils create a secure, nurturing atmosphere. The mentoring support for pupils with emotional needs is excellent. Pupils were keen to express their enjoyment of school and learning. As one child said, ‘I enjoy school very much; I'm a Christian and my friend is a Muslim; we share each other's holy books and like learning from each other.’”

Ofsted, 2012

Pupil assessment and individual support

Senior staff explained the use of data that enabled them to review the performance of specific groups and identify the need for additional interventions. They undertake pupil progress meetings every six weeks (they have a six-term year), and involve teaching assistants and other support staff in these discussions to discuss the impact of interventions. They are also constantly thinking about the needs of individual pupils: senior staff mentioned “emails at all hours of the day and night to plan different support for pupils!”

“Pupils consolidate learning very well in ‘timed reflection’ sessions where they respond to teachers’ marking or carry out open-ended tasks, applying previously learned skills in a variety of new situations. Booster classes for all in mathematics and English ensure that even the highest attaining pupils are challenged daily.”

Ofsted, 2012

One-to-one support is provided by a team of 29 teaching assistants. In supporting children with dyslexia, for example, they are making a difference through close links with class teachers, building on progress for individual children and tailoring support to each child’s needs, and increasingly working with younger children in reception to pick up tendencies for dyslexia.

Many of the approaches to teaching and learning have come from Nick and his reading: “I am a self-confessed ‘geek’ on education research”. Nick talks about “really understanding pedagogy and how children learn and being excited about the challenge of finding innovative and bespoke curricular for small groups, individuals or whole classes”. This constant need to re-invent and refine the support is a hallmark of the school’s flexibility in adapting to its changing intake, for example the 26 children who had joined the school into year 6 in 2012/13. This flexibility of support was identified as a key part of the story on moving from ‘good’ in 2009 to ‘outstanding’ by 2012.

Assessment for learning

Equally important has been the work on assessment for learning, both continual and summative, linked to “forensically understanding if a child has the knowledge and skills to move forward”. There is an “uncompromising understanding of the progression of literacy and numeracy skills based on a child’s ability, not their chronological age: teaching what the child needs to know rather than what might be seen as age appropriate”. A lesson study project in maths in 2011 broadened out into looking at pedagogy across the school, and created opportunities for staff to observe each other and develop more informal and closer relationships to develop this further. Working parties have been another positive way to generate change, innovate, and for staff to work together; these will become federation-wide over time.

Focus on literacy

Throughout the school there is a strong focus on reading, literacy, and speaking and listening. ‘Project X’ has been developed by the school with Oxford University Press and is a whole-school reading scheme designed to engage boys and girls through strong role models (there are life-sized characters around the school) and promoting genuine enthusiasm for reading. A strong focus on reading recovery is supported through afternoon sessions on development of language and the use of reading partners and talking groups. Parent workshops and learning mentors are an important feature of support.

“In ‘non-negotiable time’, created by extending the school day each morning, teachers effectively revisit learning issues arising from the previous day.”

Ofsted, 2012

Pupil absence

Attendance remains a significant challenge for the school. Pupils are taken out of school in term time for extended visits to families overseas. The school had just received a request for 49 days of absence, with the father saying the family might not return. In the main reception area there is a ‘wall of attendance’: each leaf or undersea animal on a large display has the name of a pupil with good attendance for each term; each leaf provides one ticket for entry into a raffle, with a bicycle as that term’s prize.

Throughout this period, Nick has remained very clear that his role and leadership is facilitative. “There are three roles at this school: teachers, learners and everyone else who supports the other two roles to be effective”.

By March 2012, the successes and hard work at the Drove had resulted in Ofsted judging the school to be outstanding. In the summer of 2012, the school converted to become an academy as part of a multi-academy trust to establish the White Horse Federation. In doing so, it formalised the close working with both Mountford Manor Primary School and with Lauren Connor and her federation of schools.

Working with Mountford Manor

Mountford Manor Primary School is about ten minutes’ walk from the Drove along one of the dual carriageways running through Swindon. The school is a one-form entry primary school with about one third of the pupils eligible for free school meals, and over half eligible at some point in the last six years. Its catchment area draws from an area of local authority housing and some of Swindon’s most deprived wards.

In 2010, it was one of the 200 lowest-performing primary schools in the country, with level 4+ English and maths at 41%. The local authority brokered a relationship between the Drove and Mountford Manor that quickly resulted in a federation between the two schools by February 2011, establishing a joint governing body.

Work between the two schools focused on putting key systems in place, for example pupil profiles, strengthening assessment processes, and investing in middle management development. Significant time was spent on the quality of teaching through joint lesson observations providing commentaries on practice, and enabling staff to observe practice at other federation schools. Staff at the Drove and Mountford Manor worked on planning and differentiation and unpicking the attributes of effective teaching. Promoting a sense of shared accountability for pupil progress and standards was also crucial. Pupil and parent visits to several of Swindon’s large employers and local higher education

institutions have been attempts to raise family aspirations in a community of significant generational worklessness.

By 2013, key stage 2 results at Mountford Manor had risen above national and local averages with 76% of year 6 pupils achieving level 4 or above in reading, writing and maths. In 2013, 82% of year 6 pupils achieved level 4 or above in reading, and 85% in writing and the same proportion in maths.

Ofsted visited in July 2011 and again in October 2012, and although the school is still judged to 'require improvement', the inspection team noted the improvements that had been made and the further capacity that was being utilised from the Drove:

“The use of expertise from the partner school has been a major factor in the school’s successful drive for continuous improvement. Staff have embraced new ideas and sharing of expertise is now embedded. This can be seen, for example, in the good use of success criteria in lessons, common marking strategies and in lesson planning.”

Ofsted inspection report on Mountford Manor, July 2011

“Senior leaders have a clear vision and high expectations. They have tackled and eradicated inadequate teaching. The school benefits from good support through its links with other high performing schools in the federation.”

Ofsted inspection report on Mountford Manor, October 2012

Working in partnership: emergence of the White Horse Federation

At the same time as Nick and the Drove were beginning to work with Mountford Manor in 2010, Lauren and her federation were also approached by the local authority to work with the Nyland Campus. Nyland is a community special school with places for approximately 30 children of primary age across Swindon with emotional, social and behavioural difficulties. 20 boys currently attend full time, all with statements of special educational needs and two thirds eligible for free school meals. It also provides assessment places and nurture outreach. The school had been placed in special measures in 2009. Lauren’s response to the local authority was that the work should not be done as a national leader of education (NLE) deployment; it had to be a formal federation so that her three schools could work together: “we needed a collegiate approach”. Work focused on stabilising staffing, improving the quality of teaching, planning a more appropriate and broad primary curriculum and developing the learning environment. A new principal, Andrew

Denham, was appointed. Ofsted visited in 2010 and said: “The executive headteacher's drive and ambition have been fundamental to moving the school forward ... The school's greatest strength lies in the quality of its leaders and managers.” By the time of its latest inspection in March 2013 under the new framework, Nyland was judged to be good:

“There is a strong staff team and relationships with the pupils are good. Leaders have ensured that teaching has improved since the previous inspection and that they carefully check the progress that pupils are making. The partnership of the schools across the whole federation works together well to provide essential training for staff. There are opportunities for all the schools to join in activities together, for example a recent art festival.”

Ofsted report on Nyland Special School, 2013

By 2012, Lauren had been an executive headteacher for almost six years, was an NLE and a member of the primary heads reference group for the Department for Education. She has a unique perspective on the role of primary headteachers as system leaders and the differences with the role of a head in charge of a single school (which she cheerfully questions: “I genuinely don't know how a single head of a stand-alone school does the job any more”). Lauren acknowledges that it would have been impossible in 2006 to envisage how her career has developed – “how could I have written down what it would be like?” She regards the key ingredients as flexibility and taking the right opportunities as they arose: “nobody says no – so you can take risks and seek opportunities”. In terms of the key moments in her own development over this period, Lauren mentioned “meeting Nick ... taking on the failing EBD school – it was a humbling experience ... and Ken Robinson's work ‘Changing the Paradigm’, demonstrating that you can go out and challenge. The way I see it, you can either look at the landscape and watch it change, or you can be the gardener.” Leading several organisations through massive periods of change – successfully – Lauren had two further reflections about what is needed: “You keep staff on board by telling them from the beginning, being honest and talking straight, and then you get to keep the talent.” And perhaps most importantly of all, her key question to herself remains: “How can what I have done today have made a difference to the five year old in the classroom?”

Nick explained the rationale for joining together his two-school federation and Lauren's three-school federation to form the White Horse Federation in 2011.

“From an education point of view and philosophical point of view it seemed to make sense. As local authorities decline, some of the central resources and support mechanisms are no longer going to be there. So we had choices. We could either work collaboratively together and look at the synergy that comes from two very successful federations coming together or go our own ways. This would work at a number of levels:

- pedagogically
- strategically
- operationally, and
- administratively.”

The impetus behind the White Horse Federation also owed much to the personal chemistry between the two dynamic and inspiring executive headteachers. They share a similar ethos and philosophy about primary education. Ultimately, Lauren suggests that after she met Nick it “just made sense” in terms of working together, and “after all, we will take any route to get to our overall target of improving teaching and outcomes”.

Two years on and it is clear that those perceived benefits of the larger federation have been more than realised. Staff at Moredon and the Drove considered there were significant benefits in terms of working across a larger group of schools and having access to both more opportunities and more colleagues. Indeed moving to a seven-school federation was seen as less of a change than moving to a two- or three-school one. They cited a number of examples of the benefits:

Back office systems

- a business manager and HR director that both worked across all seven schools. There were common job adverts, pay arrangements and performance management across the federation. Staff now join the White Horse Federation and therefore movement around the schools is written into their contracts.

Opportunities for children

- cross-federation arts and music festivals organised by one of the schools for all pupils across the seven schools
- gifted and talented ‘challenge days’ organised across the federation.

Opportunities and development for all staff

- termly meetings of special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) across the federation to share good practice and interventions
- recruitment and retention opportunities for staff have increased hugely, with better career progression, more talent-spotting and greater diversification of the workforce
- whole-federation training, moderation and pooling of talent. More professional development opportunities.

Leadership development and talent management

- investigating ways they can incentivise and develop future leaders, e.g. by offering £1,500 for them to undertake a school improvement project that would benefit the school and second them onto a senior leadership team
- of the current seven principals in the federation's schools, five are home grown. There is considerable peer support available with this number of senior leaders. They meet termly to review progress, consider planning and provide professional challenge and devise possible solutions. Their discussions are then followed by a meeting between them and Lauren and Nick about how the executive heads can support the principals with any issues.

The federation does not seek to create a homogenous brand. Each school retains its distinct ethos and character, so there have been no changes in uniform and for pupils and parents it should be imperceptible that they have joined the White Horse Federation apart from the addition of the logo.

In 2012, as the five schools converted to a multi-academy trust, Tregoze Primary joined and the federation also opened a new-build sponsored academy, Croft Primary. Throughout, Nick and Lauren emphasise that this was opportunistic and organic growth by taking advantage of the freedoms that were available and the opportunities that came their way to support other schools and improve the offer for the children at their primary schools. "We're quite proud of growing gradually, and we haven't gone for everything that has been offered to us."

Governance of the White Horse Federation

The governance of the White Horse Federation has recently been overhauled and currently operates on two levels: an executive board of directors, and a local governing body (LGB) for each school. Chairs of the LGBs come together as a group and also elect a single representative who is co-opted onto the executive board of directors. The purpose is to maintain lines of communication between the LGBs and the overarching governance of the White Horse Federation, as well as having clear lines between the executive board and LGBs in terms of accountability and devolved responsibilities:

"The LGBs of academies who have demonstrated they are consistently and securely outstanding may be able to take on additional responsibilities in the context of increasing autonomy. The LGBs of schools which still need support in order to improve the quality of their overall performance within the Ofsted guidelines may be required to reduce the extent of their delegated responsibilities. In some circumstances, if a school is put into a category, the Executive Board will

suspend the delegated powers and duties of that governing body for a pre-determined period of time.”

White Horse Federation website section on governance

One innovation that has been used with the LGBs is to have pupil governors from year 5/year 6 to come to the first half hour of the meeting and report on challenges that they have been set, e.g. “what makes you enjoy learning?” When pupils asked for more dictionaries, they had to put together a business plan about how they would raise the money.

There are currently 11 directors of the federation, with spaces to allow capacity to bring on individuals for specific projects. For example, a member of a local solicitors’ firm that had been supporting the conversion to academy status had come onto the board for 12 months. The executive board is made up of the chair and vice-chair; Nick and Lauren; the federation business director; and the executive primary and secondary directors. The responsibilities of the board are:

- “the formulation and implementation of the White Horse Federation strategy and future growth and development
- the effective management of the academies, teaching schools and children’s centres and other associated settings within the multi-academy trust (MAT)
- the financial performance and monitoring of all settings within the MAT
- the educational and academic performance and monitoring of all settings within the MAT”

White Horse Federation website section on governance

The directors will have portfolios and link to an area of work or particular staff, and reports are brought to the board meeting. Moving to having increased specialist skills, the current directors have a range of HR, legal, finance and other business backgrounds, as well as including education professionals.

Looking outward: local and regional system leadership

The opportunity to develop an alliance of schools and other partners through designation as a teaching school was one that the federation was eager to take. Moredon and the Drove were designated as a job-share teaching school in the first cohort in 2012. In 2013, the Drove was designated as a separate teaching school, and Moredon now leads the original alliance with the White Horse Federation, renamed as the Swindon Teaching School and currently working with 33 Swindon primary schools. The Drove Alliance Teaching School is based at the new offices on the Drove site. The Drove Alliance will be working closely with 38 schools across Gloucestershire (the Gloucestershire Learning Alliance), primary schools in Gloucester city and Gloucester local authority, as well as supporting all secondary schools across Swindon.

The work of the teaching school alliances has already been extensive:

- together they are the leading provider of initial teacher training in the region, with the University of Gloucester, and will manage 120 School Direct placements
- CPD support is being provided to schools in Swindon commissioned by the local authority, to schools in Gloucestershire and Gloucester, including NQT training across 120 schools, running ITP/OTP courses, and the new suite of National College leadership courses
- the alliances are co-ordinating Research and Innovation Groups (RIGs) across Gloucester to bring together groups of teachers interested in working together on development and research work
- five NLEs, a host of local leaders of education (LLEs), and 27 specialist leaders of education (SLEs) across the two alliances provide support to schools in Swindon, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire. Lauren has been working with the primary phase of the Swindon Academy, co-ordinating mixed teams of SLEs and LLEs from across Swindon, with the express purpose of enabling them to learn from each other about working with other schools.

This has only been possible because they are aware of the need for additional capacity and have deliberately over-staffed so as to be able to respond to new challenges and opportunities without exceeding the HR elastic limit.

The White Horse Federation has established delegated leadership groups – six primary heads and three secondary – to lead on the ‘Big 6’ elements of the teaching school role. Schools in the alliance have also signed up to a data-sharing protocol. Nick said that the high mobility of pupils between schools means there is an added incentive for schools to engage and work with each other locally to increase the overall quality of provision rather than having good and poor schools. Nick and Lauren are both firm believers in the

potential that teaching schools have to offer. Lauren's view is that: "Yes, teaching schools are the answer and will work".

Case study 18 - Wroxham Primary School, Potters Bar

Primary leadership case study: hub teaching school committed to a well-researched 'learning without limits' approach

The Wroxham School, Potters Bar, is an average-sized primary school with 243 pupils on roll. Most pupils are from White British families and reflect below-average levels of social disadvantage or special educational needs. The school converted to an academy in June 2012 and has been judged outstanding for the third time consecutively. The headteacher is a national leader of education (NLE). The school is not only a national support school (NSS) but also became a teaching school in 2011 and leads an alliance of more than 50 primary, secondary and special schools. It is also a Challenge Partners hub school. Through its teaching school status it demonstrates its capacity to support education across a wide area.

Wroxham represents a particular approach to education that develops children as self-managing learners and seeks to raise their sights and fulfil their potential, whatever that might be.

Headteacher: Dame Alison Peacock

Chair of governors: Tony Borden

"The headteacher provides inspirational leadership. She, along with her highly efficient leaders and governors, is constantly looking for ways to improve the quality of teaching and pupils' achievement across the school. Teaching is outstanding in all year groups. Teachers have high expectations of their pupils; they set tasks that are sufficiently challenging and build consistently on pupils' prior learning. Pupils' achievement is outstanding; their attitudes to learning are exemplary and contribute considerably to the school's harmonious environment and their achievement. They are very proud of their school and readily help each other to learn."

Ofsted, 2013

Portrait of the school

This influential, one-form entry primary school is driving an educational experiment that many others are trying to replicate. The mission is to raise children's achievement while removing any of the expectations, such as ability labelling, which might limit their potential. This is done systematically and consistently through a rational and well-developed approach that gives children a high degree of control over their learning from an early age. The approach is carefully thought through, well structured and supported by research findings. The approach encourages children to take decisions about their learning, support each other and act responsibly. There is good evidence¹⁵ that children become mature and ambitious learners and thrive under the high degree of participation that is expected of them.

Figure 18-20: A closer view

'Learning without limits' explained

"The general way that we work to resist the idea of ability labelling is that we will present the learning in such a way, either so the learning is open ended and differentiated by outcome or by saying quite openly to the children these are the levels of challenge that you might wish to select from. The levels of challenge will range from the easiest right through to those that they really have to think about. The children know that if they choose a challenge and find that it's easier than they thought, then they are perfectly free to move to a more challenging task; similarly, if they start something and it's more difficult than they thought it was going to be, there's no stigma attached to reconsolidating your knowledge and moving on. And what we find across the board is that this approach enables our children to be far more ambitious for themselves than maybe we have decided for them.

We do track all the children; we do have assessment data for all the children. This is essential for tracking their progress and achieving high outcomes. But we're not giving those levels to the children. So if you ask the children: Are you level 4? They won't know but they will know what it is they're trying to learn at the moment and what the next steps are in their learning.

¹⁵ Swann M., Peacock A., Hart S. and Drummond M. (2012) *Creating Learning without Limits*, Open University Press: Maidenhead.

What works for us is this sense of agency about making a decision for yourself, whether you're seven or seventy, feels far more empowering than doing something because somebody else says so. Essentially we're seeking to engage our children in a way that empowers them, that fires them up and makes them want to challenge themselves. Because the opposite of that is what I found when I first came here – the cool thing was to look as if you weren't bothered. The cool thing was to show no interest in anything at all, because if you showed interest then it meant you had to try and if it meant you had to try then it meant that you weren't innately gifted. So you can see where that ends up – it ends up in a very stale, nobody's going to answer a question, nobody's going to look like they're putting any effort in whatsoever at all. And actually what we all know is that we achieve success when we work hard.”

In terms of the school's environment, there is below average social deprivation – as measured by eligibility for free school meals – but the economic slow-down has affected many families and caused stresses that have swollen the number of children on the 'at risk' register, which the school readily accepts.

The school has many of the characteristics of a 'laboratory school'. Alison was appointed in 2003 and led the school out of special measures since when the school has been at the forefront of both curriculum development (through the Cambridge Primary Review)¹⁶ and pedagogical research. Alison is passionate about dissolving barriers to learning by removing ability labels. 'Lab' schools in the USA and elsewhere are closely linked with universities, providing placements for trainee teachers and hosting education research projects. Wroxham's exceptional credentials in research and teacher education have been boosted further by its designation in 2011 as an NSS. The chair of governors subscribes completely to the school's vision and potential:

“I think if we can structure the Wroxham educational hub as a real hive for on-going learning, where the school is always the laboratory and where the teachers are teaching their peers and sharing with their peers, it provides a model of excellent practice based on intellectual rigour. This gives us the right to try and influence policy.”

Faced with the question of how the staff handle the situation where one child can see that someone else is further ahead, reinforcing a feeling of not being very good (at mathematics, for example), Alison explains the approach.

“We are trying to build a culture of 'I'm not very good at it yet. So I can get good at it. Today I don't feel very confident but I will tomorrow.' So the notion that this is

¹⁶ Alison was a founding director of the Cambridge Primary Review Trust.

about a journey and it's not about ranking one against the other. Your success doesn't diminish mine. That's the point."

The only time the children become aware of national curriculum levels is in year 6 because some children this year have sat their level 6 paper for maths and English. Essentially that comes from a culture of aspiration where children are trying to prove that they're going to be doing something even more.

Leadership and governance

The headteacher

Alison had wide teaching experience, originally in secondary education and then, after a period working in teachers' centres, in three primary schools before being appointed headteacher at Wroxham in 2003, when the school was in special measures. She has combined her teaching career with an ongoing involvement in school-based research, linked to significant national projects including the longitudinal 'ORACLE' study of children and young people, ESRC-funded research on 'Pupil Voice'¹⁷ and the Cambridge Primary Review. As part of the latter's Review Team she established a national network of schools to disseminate the outcomes of the report. She is involved with many other organisations concerned with education and is in demand as an educational speaker.

Both as a teacher and as a school leader, Alison has for many years been at the centre of action research into teaching without labelling by ability, which continues to be modelled by the Wroxham School. She is co-author of *Creating learning without limits* and much of the evidence for this case study comes from one of the regular in-service days on the subject, led by Alison, in which the school is opened to those who want to see how the approach works.

Vision

The chair of governors is in no doubt about Alison's vision, expressed as a belief in how education should be, and her passion for harnessing everything to that belief. Her commitment to what she is doing is seen by the chair as infectious and her evidence-based rationale persuasive. Her approach to removing restrictions on learning governs all educational decisions in the school and extends beyond the children to staff and families. One example of this is prompted by the fact that six support staff had just sat their GCSE mathematics, coached by the school's maths coordinator. The school's commitment to developing these and other staff is evident, with Alison stating:

"One of those staff, for example, was a kitchen assistant when I first came here. She now teaches as part of the teaching team in year 5 and is doing a fantastic job. Keeping the door open for people allows them to surprise us ... Sarah, another class teacher, was a teaching assistant when I first came, and trained here to be a teacher. Almost all the other teachers were trainees in the school. Learning is not just for children; it's about the adults as well."

Alison's philosophy owes something to her background and the example of her father, who left school early to go to work, gained his qualifications through evening study and

¹⁷ *Listening to Children*. Forum for promoting 3-19 Comprehensive Education. 2001.

eventually became a teacher. His influence helped forge her view that you should never give up on people. “Just because you have had one set of experiences, doesn’t mean that you are limited in what you can do.” She is very concerned about the deep divisions in society in this country and believes that there is a real imperative to do something about this. She is convinced that early labelling, with an over-abundance of testing, setting and putting children into boxes defeats this object.

“None of us starts out to set limits to children. None of us sets out to label children and say ‘that’s enough for you; that will be good enough.’ But unintended policy consequences, with all the levels and everything else, have led to a culture where we believe we have to measure children all the time so we can prove what we’re doing. By doing that, we are too often restricting children from doing what they should be able to do.”

Her approach is far more rigorous than, for example, the setting or grouping of children by attainment (or ‘ability’) that provides for crude differentiation, because it requires constantly monitoring every child and providing a sufficiently wide range of activities and challenges that each can work at their own level. In a year 4 mathematics lesson, for example, whole-class recapitulation of approaches to multiplication led to extension tasks at five different levels. The children were sufficiently trained and trusted to start at the level they felt was right for them and move to more challenging work if it was too easy and vice versa. The tendency, Alison states, is for children to extend their reach as they succeed at challenges they did not at first think possible. The atmosphere is consequently not competitive, but one of each child striving to do their best.

All children know what they are aiming for and what their next objectives are, but these are not coded as national curriculum levels before year 6. Phonics is a skill developed in class or smaller groups that are not set, whereas reading is differentiated so that children can read at the level most appropriate to their individual competence and their next challenge.

Governance

There is a close partnership between the governors and the school. The chair has much experience of running organisations and fundraising and is also a parent. Governors did not take the decision to apply for academy designation lightly. There was a good deal of concern about the effect on the local authority and other schools. The decision was taken when it became clear that there was gathering momentum for ‘converter academies’ in the primary sector. Governors felt it was better to convert sooner rather than later. The governors had had good dealings with the local authority but felt that its capacity was decreasing. Although some governors were nervous about how a relatively small school would manage when ‘going it alone’, the chair’s confidence and Alison’s entrepreneurship were influential in the decision-making.

The governing body has been strengthened since becoming an academy board and has a range of professional expertise. For example, the governors procured legal expertise and the experienced lawyer concerned joined the board of governors. The governors have developed a strong strategic plan for the school's future.

School improvement: from special measures to outstanding

When Alison became headteacher of Wroxham in January 2003, the school was in special measures. It was a grant maintained school, run quite assertively by the governing body at the time and relatively isolated by its status from the local authority. Alison describes its strong emphasis on accumulating money and initiating building projects at the expense of unfilled management posts resulting in lack of support for the previous headteacher. Allied to this, she states, poor behaviour was a major issue; the quality of teaching was poor and standards were too low: the focus of leadership had become too diffuse.

Alison brought clear vision, some fundamental beliefs and leadership by example to the school. In her previous school she had done a lot of work on how to enable pupils to participate more actively in the school. She was very committed to the benefits of 'pupil voice', citing the importance of the children having an opportunity to say what they thought and to listen to each other's views.

At The Wroxham School, she introduced mixed-age circle time from an early stage, eradicating behaviour issues by encouraging children of different ages to understand and empathise with their different perspectives. This dispelled the prevailing culture of "everyone for themselves". By October 2003, when inspectors brought the school out of special measures, circle time – which continues today – was well established.

"The pupils' social skills are carefully and effectively fostered. Appropriate emphasis is given to collaborative discussion and practical work in many lessons, which is complemented by the work of lunchtime play leaders. Members of staff pay particular attention to seeking the pupils' ideas and opinions and taking them into account when making decisions about the way the school operates. All of the pupils meet weekly in groups, comprising pupils from each year group, and they discuss matters that affect their personal lives, including their time in school. The older pupils are given chance to take on responsibilities and all of the pupils are strongly encouraged to care for each other through a wide variety of initiatives."

Ofsted, 2003

The inspection team identified some of the qualities that helped Alison turn the school around in her first 10 months. "The headteacher has done much in the short time she has been in the school. She is demanding, yet has been the catalyst for providing a happy and stimulating working environment. She knows what she wants, but is realistic enough to know that some changes take time to become totally effective." Her strategies to secure improvement included:

- leading by example, by teaching across the school
- improving teaching by bringing experts in to work with teachers and sharing what good practice there was within the school.

- strengthening leadership by appointing an effective deputy headteacher and expecting subject co-ordinators to monitor the quality of provision and assist teachers with their planning. Leadership team meetings were open to all teachers.
- involving pupils, parents and governors fully in sharing the vision and developing the curriculum
- introducing specific learning targets, training staff in formative assessment, involving pupils in the assessment process and instituting 'learning journals' in which pupils record their progress against the learning targets.
- reorganising financial systems and controls.

The school culture has developed and deepened substantially since those early days of transforming an underperforming school. Standards rose sharply and the school was judged outstanding when inspected again in 2006. This was sustained in 2009, when inspectors commented that:

“The headteacher provides outstanding leadership. Highly reflective, she promotes strong teamwork, high morale and a professional open culture where ideas are shared and people think carefully about what they are doing. She very effectively promotes the school as a community where all, pupils and staff, are engaged in learning. Although innovative and creative in approach, this is rooted in rigorous management systems.”

Ofsted, 2009

Examples of some of the strategies, now well-embedded, which reflect this culture include the following.

Listening, dialogue and questioning

Alison stresses that a key aspect of the school as a learning community is listening. The ideas picked up in the circle time meetings are a formalised mechanism for listening to children. There is also an emphasis on listening to staff, to the community and to other schools “because if you don’t listen first you can’t engage in a dialogue”. This, she believes, builds a sense of mutual respect, where people value and share each other’s expertise.

The school seeks to encourage children to express their ideas through staff deploying open-ended questioning, asking them to reflect on their learning and their experience in order to develop their understanding. Dialogue is about developing cognition and is structured effectively through high-quality teaching. Alison says: “If children are going to make decisions about their own learning and you’re going to ask them to self-evaluate and you’re going to ask them to develop that independence of thought they also need to

be able to speak about what they're doing. So putting research evidence into practice is a key part of what we're trying to do in the school."

Feedback

The school acts on the compelling research evidence of the importance of feedback in accelerating progress. Feedback is formative, meaningful and rigorous through a range of approaches including: oral feedback; self-evaluation; peer reviewing; marking; talking with the teacher or pupils talking with their group about what they have done.

Team work

Team working is a significant part of the way the school operates. This takes place at all levels, including among pupils, teachers and other members of the school staff. Team working is underpinned by a culture of trust, respect and openness.

Assessment

The school believes that, in terms of assessment opportunities, the richer the task the richer the opportunity to assess it. The head is uncertain about how the future policy for assessment will work:

"... we do know that many schools are so concerned about their sub-levels that if they are not careful they put all their energy into trying to measure them and have no time to create something that's worth measuring in the first place. So it's the rich context for learning that's the key. Because the richer the context, the greater the opportunity to understand what the children are understanding. Everything we do has to be about understanding what the children are doing today so that we can plan tomorrow."

Learning review meetings

The school holds 15-minute learning review (or family consultation) meetings with children and their parents every spring and autumn. The headteacher sits in on all those with year 5 and 6 pupils. The pupils are involved in preparing a 'PowerPoint' presentation about their learning and the meetings lead to agreement on how the school will subsequently support the child. The meetings are rigorous, but also supportive:

"It's about everybody working together for the child ... We get 100% attendance. This is because if parents can't come when we ask them to come, we just arrange a time they can come, even if it's 7 o'clock in the morning before they go to London. I think the reason we get 100% is because the children prepare their PowerPoint and so they're going to nag parents, aren't they? When are you going to come and see it?"

Risk-taking

The Wroxham culture of risk-taking is key for the adults and the children because:

“... if we’re going to ask the children to make a decision about the level of challenge they’re going to do, it is no use them being inhibited by a risk averse environment ... If they can’t trust their peers not to tease them or be unkind to them if they’re choosing a lower challenge than someone else then they won’t do it and the whole thing will start to unravel. So what we’re trying to do all the time is to make children make good decisions for themselves and for their teachers to make good decisions for themselves.”

Looking ahead and outward

The school has taken steps to address the one significant shortcoming in its last Ofsted inspection report (2013): the quality of writing and presentation. The school continues to absorb knowledge and research and refine its approaches to teaching and learning. The next step is to build more on 'dialogic' teaching: engaging children in purposeful talk and dialogue and combining that with philosophy for children sessions aimed at exploring what the school describes as "some quite tricky questions". Wroxham is also developing 'lesson study' approaches following a 'learning three' or triad model. The example Alison gives is:

"Two colleagues and I have been engaged in looking at the learning of several children in year 4. We've planned the lesson together, one of us leads the lesson, the others look at the learning of the children and then we meet together afterwards. And we're not talking about the teaching; we're talking about how did 'X' manage to engage with his learning, what can we do differently to enable him to do that better?"

Most of Alison's evidence about the quality of teaching in the school is based around such shared enquiry into the quality of learning. She has reservations about judging and grading lessons because of their labelling effect. She asserts that "as soon as you start giving people grades, they don't listen to the feedback. And we know the way forward is through feedback".

Now that the new academy has sustained the outstanding status of its precursor school, Alison and the governors are clear about their direction of travel in terms of the next stage of their vision. The school had already been designated a teaching school and the chair of governors was in no doubt about the reciprocal benefits to Wroxham:

"It's obvious that the teaching school creates a standard of excellence at an intellectual level for the teachers, which must then feed back to the teaching of the children. So to me it is obvious that that the teaching school bolted on to the school benefits the school. If you talk to one of the teachers they're thinking about the process of teaching while they're teaching. That's got to be good – it's always been about that. Another aspect is Alison's advocacy: getting out there to spread the mission. So what we've done is conceptualise all this into the idea of building Wroxham as an educational hub, as a sustainable hub for educational excellence, based on three pillars – based on the school, based on the teaching school and based on policy and advocacy. And that's our next vision, the next place where we want to go."

For Dame Alison, the school is also central to her credibility in having the ear of policy makers, both informally and through her membership of a range of national committees and advisory groups. She speaks with the authority of a practitioner and leader of learning in a very successful and innovative primary school. As the chair of governors

recalls, Alison's response to his curiosity about why she remained at this small school was: "If I left Wroxham, I would lose what makes me different and interesting as a policy advocate, because I'm a practising head. If I go to a think tank or academic environment then what am I? Another education wonk? ... Here I'm a head. Every day I have to deal with the sort of problems that every headteacher faces."



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