

Committee: **Children's Services Scrutiny Committee**
Date: **21 November 2011**
Title of Report: **Final Monitoring Report for the work of Ninestiles Plus with three Hastings Secondary Schools**
By: **Director of Children's Services**
Purpose of Report: **To report to the Scrutiny Committee the outcomes of the Hastings Federation School Improvement Strategy**

RECOMMENDATION: The Committee is recommended to welcome the successful outcomes of the Ninestiles project and to consider in particular how the outcomes can be sustained and used to benefit other East Sussex schools.

1. Financial Appraisal

1.1 There are no direct financial implications for East Sussex County Council arising from the recommendations of this report.

2. Supporting information

2.1 Attendance data

- Hillcrest – 91.7%
- The Grove – 92.5%
- Filsham Valley – 92.6%

2.2 Exclusions – from September 2010 to end of term 5:

- Hillcrest – 98 fixed term exclusions totalling 311 days, 3 permanent exclusions.
- The Grove – 22 fixed term exclusions totalling 120 days, 2 permanent exclusions.
- Filsham Valley – 44 fixed term exclusions totalling 112.5 days, 2 permanent exclusions

2.3 Factors contributing to Hillcrest's relatively high rate of fixed term exclusions include: severely reduced capacity at senior leadership level with an Acting Head and one Acting Deputy, significant reduction in Teaching Assistants (TA) for budgetary reasons, long term sickness absence of SENCO since September compounded by long term sickness absence of interim acting SENCO, high admission of students with behaviour problems transferring from other schools.

2.4 Factors contributing to The Groves high rate of fixed term exclusions were two year 11 exclusions of 47 days each. This avoided two permanent exclusions. The rationale for this was discussed and agreed with the East Sussex Behaviour Panel before they were implemented (26 days between the other 20 students).

2.5 The contract began in April 2008 and therefore had little or no influence in the 2008 results, which therefore act as the baseline for the impact of the programme [at the time of writing, 2011 results are provisional, but will not change significantly].

School A	%5ACEM	%5AC	%C+ Eng	%C+ Maths
2006	29	33	49	37
2007	25	32	42	43
2008	34	49	43	44
2009	34	66	47	39
2010	44	84	58	46
2011	51	82	65	56

School B	%5ACEM	%5AC	%C+ Eng	%C+ Maths
2006	17	30	28	25
2007	24	36	35	29
2008	12	41	40	13
2009	37	80	47	40
2010	43	98	58	47
2011	38	99	51	44

School C	%5ACEM	%5AC	%C+ Eng	%C+ Maths
2006	17	25	31	28
2007	20	29	32	29
2008	16	23	29	27
2009	34	76	48	36
2010	38	87	56	43
2011	45	86	58	49

2.6 An external evaluation has also been conducted on the work of Ninestiles Plus with the three schools and this is attached as Appendix 1.

3. Conclusion and Reason for Recommendations

3.1 The three Hastings federation schools have made excellent progress in raising standards and this is as a result of the significant investment of the County Council to secure a contract with Ninestiles Plus.

3.2 The three schools have now been replaced with two federated academies, and the County Council is a co-sponsor for each of the academies, along with BT and the Lead Sponsor, the University of Brighton.

3.3 It is anticipated that the academies will build successfully on the improvement secured in the predecessor schools.

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Background Documents Appendix A – External Evaluation Report

EVALUATION OF THE CONTRACT WITH NINESTILES PLUS TO SUPPORT SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT IN THE HASTINGS & ST LEONARDS FEDERATION: FINAL REPORT

1. The scope of the study

1.1. This study evaluates the three-year programme (2008 – 2011) to transform three under-performing secondary schools in Hastings/St Leonards¹ through partnership with each other in a federation lead by an executive head and his strong lead partner school.

1.2. Support for the improvement of under-performing schools is now routinely provided by other schools; indeed the current government sees school-to-school support as the norm and federation a routine process. Neither was commonplace in 2007 when the Hastings contract was drawn up, and the programme was, and to my best knowledge remains, unique in two ways:

- The 'one on three' model - one lead partner supporting three partner schools².
- Geography - the distance separating the lead partner (Birmingham) from its Hastings partners.

1.3 The project holds national importance because of its innovative design, including scale, geography and anticipated impact for students; because of its potential to develop in practice what has been termed 'system leadership' in theory – school leaders working for the success of students in other schools as well as their own, in conjunction with and strategically led by the local authority (LA); and because of its success: the schools have, without any question, been transformed.

1.4 Although the intended strategy to combine the three schools into a 'hard' federation had to be amended (see 4.13), the three schools remained in vigorous partnership throughout the three years of the contract, at the end of which (September 2011) they have become a pair of federated academies, with the intention to recruit an executive leader.

1.5 The consultant who conducted this study had also acted as consultant to the local authority (LA) in setting up the federation and selecting the partner school, and so had a perspective on the process from its inception. This was a linear, light-touch study taking some 20 days over three years.

1.6 In 2010, the lead partner was asked to provide short-term support to a neighbouring school, particularly in English. The study was extended to evaluate this support programme.

1.7 Following this introduction (section 1) and an executive summary (2), the report is in five sections: the first three (3-5) are chronological - before (the schools at the beginning of the contract; previous improvement attempts), during (key actions during the programme) and after (outcomes and the potential for sustainability); and then two sections which aim to make this study of value beyond the Hastings area - analyses of the actions critical to the success of the project (6), and of the characteristics of an effective lead partner and executive leader (7). The report on the small-scale support to the nearby school referred to in 1.5 forms an Annex.

1.8 The partners were:

- partner schools: Filsham Valley School, St Leonards; The Grove School, St Leonards; Hillcrest School, Hastings;
- lead partner school: Ninestiles School, Birmingham, through its 'trading arm', Ninestiles Plus;
- executive leader: Sir Dexter Hutt;
- short-term supported school: Bexhill High School; and
- local authority: East Sussex County Council, in particular its Children's Services department.

¹ For brevity, the report will use 'Hastings' as shorthand for 'Hastings & St Leonards'

² The report will use the terms 'support federation', 'lead school'/lead partner', and 'partner' for the supported school(s); the last term acknowledging that its role is not a passive one.

A brief note on methodology: the evidence has been drawn from:

- semi-structured interviews with key staff of lead partner and partner schools, including governors, some repeated at different points during the contract period;
- lengthy discussions with the executive leader and key members of his team, both in Hastings and at Ninestiles;
- semi-structured interviews with key LA personnel, including the county councillor with lead responsibility for scrutiny and especially senior staff of the Children's Services department;
- observation of teaching in one of the partner schools;
- scrutiny of OfSTED inspection and Raiseonline reports;
- the regular reports provided to the county council's education standards committee by the executive leader;
- visits to another school supported by Ninestiles Plus, to triangulate findings;
- attendance at one federation leadership team meeting;
- scrutiny of evaluation forms completed by partner school staff of various events; and
- in addition to my involvement as consultant to the process of establishing the tender and awarding the contract.

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2. Executive Summary

Numbers [in brackets] show the principal paragraph(s) which provide the detail underlying this summary.

2.1 This report evaluates a three-year (2008 – 2011) project to bring about significant improvement in a group of three under-performing schools in Hastings & St Leonards, by federating the three schools and partnering them with a highly-successful lead school, under a single executive leader. The total project funding was around £1.8m, £500k of which was provided by the DfE and the remainder by the County Council (ESCC).

2.2 Previous efforts by the local authority (LA) to improve the schools having not brought about significant improvement, ESCC, supported by DfE, decided on the approach outlined above [3.4, 3.5]. A group from the schools and the LA drew up the process to select a lead partner [3.6]. The contract focused on improvement in GCSE results, but also required that the schools be transformed, shown by improvements in the quality of teaching and leadership, in students' attendance and behaviour, and in admissions to the school. Especially in the light of the change to academy status, school budgets were required to be in balance at the end of the contract. Crucially, the schools (academies) were to be left capable of continuing their improvement independently. Ninestiles School, Birmingham, a highly-successful school in its own right and one that had successfully brought about improvement in other schools, won the contract through its trading arm 'Ninestiles Plus', and started work in the spring of 2008 with Sir Dexter Hutt as executive leader [4.1, 4.2].

2.3 In each and every respect, the contract was successful. Whether schools' performance has improved is a matter of data (exam performance, attendance, teaching quality and admissions), and these are to be found in [5.2 – 5.5] and in OfSTED inspection reports [referred to in 5.5]; whether the schools have been transformed and whether their improvement is sustainable are matters of judgement, and it is my judgement, as well as that of many in the LA and across the federation, that the contract has transformed the schools culturally and created sustainable successors, capable of going forward to become good and outstanding schools/academies [5.10 & 5.12]. That the schools (academies) have remained federated and are seeking an executive leader is further tribute to the success of collaboration as a model for driving improvement.

2.4 Whether the project represents value for money is for those who funded it - ESCC & DfE - to decide. The project fulfilled its contractual objectives of transforming the schools and their results, and it is worth mentioning that a previous project - the Leadership Incentive Grant - had provided the schools with sums of the same order of magnitude, with no discernible impact on results [5.11].

2.5 The success of the project can be attributed to five factors:

- ESCC is to be congratulated on a well-drafted contract, with clear targets, leading to the selection of an outstanding lead partner school [3.6, 6.2];
- the exceptional combination of qualities possessed by the executive leader [6.4, 6.5];
- the skills and hard work of the senior leaders of the three schools as those teams settled from the second full year of the project [6.6];
- the remarkable willingness of the staff of the schools, many of whom had been through multiple changes of headteacher and many 'false dawns', to enter whole-heartedly into a period of rapid and pervasive change [3.10]; and
- the backing provided by the LA, members and officers, to the executive head and the project, even when this meant radical changes to their traditional roles in relation to schools [6.3].

2.6 The key features of the lead partner and executive head are legion and are examined in great detail in [6 & 7]. For this summary, I will highlight only:

- speed and urgency - the pace at which change was driven;
- showing how the platforms for improvement - teaching, curriculum, management and so on - are linked together and, by tackling behaviour first, winning trust and confidence;
- decisively tackling staff who were barriers to change;
- meticulous planning, phasing and evaluation;
- managing carefully the shift from direction at the outset, to collaboration, to independence;
- providing sufficient quality personnel working substantially in the schools, compared with the diseconomy of consultants parachuted in for short periods;
- seeking consistency and reliability at all times; and
- because they have know-how, they show and model how to do it, not just advise.

2.7 The current government is wedded to school-to-school approaches to school improvement, such as support federations and chains of schools/academies. There is no questioning the ability of a small number of exceptional schools and leaders to support school transformation; the issue is whether this number can be taken up to the scale required to bring about improvement in all the schools that need it. There should be a role for Ninestiles Plus and the few others like them to train potential lead partner schools [7.6].

3. The schools at the start of the contract; previous improvement efforts

3.1 The schools had many similarities - together with two other secondary schools, they served one relatively small town, and areas of significant disadvantage within it, were of similar size and all had new headteachers within the previous year or two. All three fell into the ambit of the National Challenge¹ when it began in 2008, based on GCSE results in 2007 that were strikingly similar - the proportions of students achieving the principal benchmark (five or more GCSE grades C and above including English and maths - 5ACEM) ranged from 20 – 24%, against a then LA average of 43% and a national average of 45%. Between 29 and 36% of students achieved the previous national benchmark of any five grades C or above (5AC) (LA average 58%, national average 59%). All three schools fell around ten percentage points below their expected [see 5.4 for explanation] figure on both benchmarks. Results at 5ACEM had broadly flatlined from the previous year, while those at 5AC had declined over two years. The proportion of students achieving five graded GCSEs (5AG), at around 88%, was low in all three schools; this benchmark is a measure of students' attendance and motivation as much as one of teaching and attainment. Attendance levels were below the national average and fell from 2005 to 2007.

3.2 It would therefore be easy to treat the three schools as homogeneous and to lump them together as simply 'under-performing'; the learning points from this overwhelmingly successful project include individualisation of the schools and the language used during consultation [3.11]. They served subtly different communities with different demands and, crucially, aspects of their effectiveness differed markedly. GCSE results in both English and maths in one school were very

¹ A government programme to raise standards in schools whose GCSE results were below, or close to, the 30% 5ACEM floor target

low; they were much higher in the other two, but the 'overlap' between the two subjects was low. Whereas two schools rated themselves as 'inadequate' in most key aspects of performance in their self-evaluation discussions with their school improvement partner (SIP) in 2006/7, the third saw itself as satisfactory overall because of improvements working through the school: it achieved a sharp improvement in GCSE results in 2008.

3.3 OfSTED had inspected two of the schools in 2005 and the third early in 2007: extraordinarily, all three were deemed satisfactory and improving. These unhelpful reports were waved when discussions between the schools and the LA/DCSF about underperformance and the need for transformation became heated. The need for improvement was proved when one school was inspected again by OfSTED in October 2008, part of the latter's strategy to monitor the progress of a proportion of schools deemed satisfactory: results in 2008 having shown a further decline, this school was then placed in special measures - where, in the retrospective view of most of those in the school, the LA and the federation, it should have been previously.

3.4 Over time, the LA had deployed a wide range of improvement strategies within each of the schools individually, including supporting the appointment of new headteachers and adding capacity through the attachment of extra staff and the work of members of its advisory and school improvement service; there had also been town-wide initiatives through the local Education Action Zone/Excellence Cluster. There was some positive impact but much less improvement than was sought and disproportionately little to the level of investment made. By early 2007, the LA, supported by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF, now DfE) judged that the schools were not achieving acceptable levels of attainment for their students and that, in particular, the rate of improvement was not satisfactory. The DCSF supported ESCC's desire to take actions that would bring about rapid improvement; its speaker at the key seminar [3.5] said that transformation was necessary and that "federation is only the first step, but a vital one".

3.5 By early 2007, the County Council had already determined to take decisive and radical action by federating the three schools and appointing a lead partner school and executive head to lead transformation. A seminar in July 2007 to explore this approach was a key moment: county councillors, senior LA officers, governors and heads of the three schools were involved; speakers from the DCSF and LA spelled out the low performance and slow improvement of the schools, their under-performance in relation to schools in similar settings, and the chosen solution. Speakers, including the present author, presented research findings about how such strategies had worked elsewhere, and a headteacher who had led support improvement partnerships before spoke compellingly about the process and the impact.

3.6 Perhaps inevitably, perhaps because of a failure to differentiate the three schools, what governors in particular had 'received' were blanket accusations of failure and a proposed take-over. The seminar, although very painful for all participants at times and involving much blood-letting, marked a turning point, especially through the contribution of the experienced headteacher - Sir Dexter Hutt, whose school eventually secured the support contract. Although some governors remained unconvinced or kept their powder dry, one governing body publicly committed itself to the process at the seminar, and shortly after the other two came on board and created a Core Group¹, comprising the three headteachers, the three chairs of governors and a nominee of the LA, to take the lead in developing and implementing the collaborative framework and mechanisms. That core group was highly effective; during the second half of 2007, it:

- designed an output-based specification setting out what the partnership should achieve, against which appropriately qualified and experienced schools or other organisations were invited to submit proposals;
- decided that a contract with an improvement partner should run for three years, with a lower level of support for a further year to eighteen months to ensure that the arrangements put in place and improvements achieved during the life of the contract would be sustained;
- set a proposed budget for the project;
- with consultant support, set criteria against which tender proposals were evaluated; and

¹ Set up as a joint committee with fully delegated powers under the School Governance (Collaboration) (England) Regulations 2003

- with support from County Council legal and other officers, designed the selection process, which involved references and site visits by headteachers, followed by presentations by, and interview of, short-listed tenderers.

3.7 DCSF made an allocation of £500,000 “to achieve rapid and sustained improvement through structured collaboration of the three schools with an external lead improvement partner”. The contract was awarded to Ninestiles Plus in March 2008. The total cost of the project, not including the time of Hastings school and LA staff, transpired to be around £1.8m over three plus years (the contract ran from April 2008 to August 2011), or around £200,000/school/year - close to the estimate in the 2004 DCSF research paper School Federation, which proposed that “full costs for substantial and sustainable improvement, omitting building costs, are in the range of £100 – 200k/year for 3 -5 years.”

3.8 Part of this evaluation project involved asking staff across the federation - the three partners and lead partner school - to describe the schools at the point of federation: what, with some hindsight, had characterised the schools? Perceptions varied, with one school being seen by its stakeholders as the most challenging of the schools and another as calmer and more purposeful; very frequent responses were:

- aspirations across the whole community were low;
- the agenda was dominated by behaviour but ways of dealing with it were ad hoc [these first two were universal responses];
- there was a ‘can’t do’ culture - it was not possible with ‘these children’;
- there was a culture of individualism and isolation of individual teachers, with little sharing;
- there were poor models of leadership, with inconsistency around the implementation of policy and ideas not seen through;
- attitudes to learning were poor; the schools were not focused on learning;
- attendance was low and falling;
- there were some weak teachers who had not been confronted; and
- monitoring was inconsistent and weak overall.

Other repeated responses, but more common in the more challenging schools, included:

- poor quality environment with a lack of kit, especially ICT; bare and with graffiti;
- teachers owned lessons - students had no clue as to lesson purposes or their own levels;
- teachers were disempowered and some had lost hope;
- there was distraction by initiative overload: response to problems was a series of overlapping, arguably conflicting, initiatives;
- teaching was dull and lacked variety;
- students held control in some parts of the school building for parts of the day; and
- individuals did not feel accountable for performance in their classroom, department, school.

3.9 In being described thus, the partner schools fell into line with other schools in similar situations. A summary of the research into what might be called ‘struggling schools’ was presented in the work of the current author and others (School Improvement for Schools Facing Challenging Circumstances, Reynolds, Hopkins, Potter and Chapman, DfE, 2001). This study proposed that the problems of such schools may be mutually reinforcing and argued that, since the agencies of effective change are synergistic, so is their absence. The schools may have:

- lost some public support;
- therefore lost student numbers;
- therefore got into budget deficit;
- therefore had to lose staff;
- therefore have had to take other schools’ excludes;
- been vilified in the press;
- suffered multiple staff changes, including at senior management level;
- “enjoyed” false dawns because of the multiple interventions in them;
- a very challenging pupil population, with high special needs demands of all kinds;
- a community of poverty and deprivation;

- a migrant population, many of whom have low literacy and/or EAL issues; and
- a significant number of “ghost” pupils (pupils on the school roll but who have moved elsewhere, including abroad and/or out of the formal education system), who depress exam and attendance statistics, and for whom the administration and paperwork take excessive amounts of time.

To varying degrees, these generalisations applied in the three Hastings schools.

3.10 In this context it is very striking, and a great tribute to everyone, that the staff of the partner schools were so ‘up for change’. As [4.6] describes, one of the key initial actions of the partnership was to take all staff, not just teaching but support, catering and cleaning staff, from the three schools to Ninestiles and to get them to spend time with their counterparts. Hastings staff completed a written three-part response to this visit: what was their impression of Ninestiles; what aspects of the visit had proved most useful; and what sorts of support did they think would be most useful? It would have been understandable if the responses had been cynical or negative: in fact they were the exact opposite - about 80 responses were handed in and, in all of the thousands of words written, almost nothing was negative and very little was even cautious:

- of the 211 impressions given, 205 were positive; of the six negatives, four were about fabric;
- the top four responses were how positive Ninestiles staff and students were about the school (31), how relaxed yet hard-working it seemed (26), how well organised it was (25) and how welcoming everyone had been (20). Other often-repeated responses concerned the good manners and politeness of the students (10) and the focus on learning (11). One striking quote among many: “an ordinary school with extraordinary expectations and achievements”;
- participants found most useful the time spent with their counterparts (27), the sharing of ideas with them (11) and the access to resources, physical and human, the partnership would bring (10). Many found different ways to say the visit had been reassuring: “what looks unbridgeable [the gap between Ninestiles and their own school] is actually bridgeable”. Many commented on Ninestiles’ focus on learning; and
- participants’ responses to what they will need from the partnership focused on a behaviour system (18), ongoing, not just short-term help (16), work with departmental links and counterparts (15) and shared resources (11). Time to plan with support to do it was also frequently mentioned.

These are positive, ‘hungry’ responses and a tribute both to the willingness of the Hastings staff and the quality of what they were being shown.

3.11 One of the key learning points to come out of the process leading up to the contract concerned the use of language: confronted by what they saw (or caricatured) as blanket accusations of failure and proposed take-over, the schools used aspects of their added value, direction of travel and Ofsted reports to argue that they were not weak, certainly not failing, and were making progress. This led to some unhelpful “yes you are; no we’re not” debates, and got in the way of progress. The schools were much more amenable to the following approaches:

- that the schools were going in the right direction, but the progress they were making was slow because of the difficulties they faced in achieving critical masses of good to outstanding teaching and good to outstanding middle/senior leadership;
- that the added capacity of an executive head and his/her school could be used to help build that critical mass rapidly, and thus to accelerate the three schools in their current direction; and
- the term ‘hard federation’ got in the way. The then government’s concept of ‘hardness’ in federations centred on governor structures; it was more helpful to focus on a definition of hardness that makes the lead partner school share accountability for academic results and other areas of progress with the partner schools.

These three points were taken on board in the tender documentation but, used earlier, could have avoided some of the heat.

4. Processes – key actions in each of the phases of improvement identified by the lead partner

4.1 Ninestiles Plus was appointed on a contract lasting just in excess of three years, from April 2008 to August 2011. In their tender, they proposed four phases for the project:

- Preparation and initiation phase: April to August 2008;
- Developmental phase: September 2008 to August 2009;
- Progress towards Excellence: September 2009 to December 2010; and
- Transition Strategy: January to August 2011.

4.2 Ninestiles Plus identified seven interlocking strands - sometimes called 'platforms for school improvement' - that would form the content of their support programme. One distinctive feature of the contract proposal was that all seven would be addressed in each of the four phases:

- Staff recruitment and selection;
- Management support;
- Behaviour and student attitudes;
- Curriculum;
- Teaching and learning;
- ICT infrastructure; and
- Community and parental engagement.

Because of budget instability in parts of the federation, the LA asked for the addition of an eighth strand - finance.

4.3 This creates a seven strand by four phase planning matrix; the straightforward logic, rigour and long-term planning of this model gave structure to the programme and built confidence in the federation schools. Research into effective support programmes shows that balancing top-down direction with bottom-up consultation and ownership - in the jargon, replication and co-construction, or loose/tight - is a sophisticated process and one of the keys to success. That this model would be used was a given: there was negotiation about the detail of what went into each cell of the matrix. This theme of control and instruction to give direction, balanced with using the strengths within the three schools to ensure a sense of ownership and sustainability, will be repeated frequently.

4.4 Rather than a blow-by-blow description of the whole support programme, what follows is a selection of the key actions, drawn from the views of partnership staff and the LA.

4.5 The first aspect to impinge on the partner schools was the speed with which the lead partner got out of the blocks. Even before the contract theoretically began on April 1st 2008, the executive leader had met with staff and students; introduced the eight strands, focusing particularly on key early actions, especially those concerning the management of behaviour; explained arrangements for the whole-staff visit to Ninestiles and its purposes; and described the audit of teaching quality that was to take place. Four things came across to staff: a sense of urgency; a strong sense of direction; confidence that he knew what he was doing; that already strengths had been identified in the schools and that this would be a do-able job. This confidence had its origins in the credibility of the lead school and the executive leader, who could demonstrate a track record of securing significant improvements in three other schools with catchments that were at least if not more deprived than those in Hastings.

4.6 The second thing that staff reported was delivery - the strategic partner did as it said it would in term one of the contract (the preparation and initiation phase). Used to initiatives fizzling out and inconsistent implementation, they were pleased that everything happened and to time. As described, the visit to Ninestiles by all staff took place and was very well received; in addition to the detail of Hastings staff reaction reported in [3.10], the inclusivity of this visit impressed everyone, for two reasons: "we're all in this together" seemed to mean something, and Hastings staff met counterparts who described their jobs in terms of their contribution to learning and high standards at the school. Partner school staff and governors quickly began to believe that things could be different - "I realised that it doesn't have to be this way" (interviewee about behaviour).

4.7 Every interviewee, without exception, focused on the power of seven aspects of the programme which began in its earliest phase - these impinged on all staff; subject consultancy focused more tightly on core subjects:

- the behaviour management programme, imported from Ninestiles and initially called Behaviour for Learning (BfL), later modified to Behaviour to Achieve (BtA). This is not the place to describe this system in detail; suffice it to say that, as well as ensuring consistency in the way students are treated and incidents dealt with, it requires staff to consider, and many to change, the way they talk to students. Three aspects of BtA impressed staff: it addressed their greatest concern - the agenda had been dominated by behaviour but ways of dealing with it were ad hoc [3.8]; it began to work quickly, and therefore began to enable teachers to teach and to free managers from constant firefighting; the extensive professional development, re-training of staff, and the skilling up of in-school leaders to manage the system themselves provided a model of how the strategic partner would work. The coaching and leadership support provided by the Ninestiles Plus behaviour specialist was universally highly regarded;
- all staff interviewed understood that the implementation of BtA was not an end in itself - it was to establish a platform for better teaching and learning. They may not have realised this at the outset, but all saw it in hindsight;
- the focus on teaching and learning running alongside BtA and complementary to it. The quality of teaching of each teacher was audited by former HMI employed by the lead partner. Those teaching satisfactory and inadequate lessons were provided with professional development to improve; those whose lessons were inadequate when re-assessed after professional development left the school. Extensive professional development was provided on lesson planning, and a standard format for lesson plans imposed. The word 'imposed' is chosen carefully - it was popular neither at the time nor subsequently, but it again shows rigour and direction. Although unpopular at the time, it is acknowledged by (almost) all to have been very beneficial. Similar standard systems were developed for the monitoring of teaching;
- a greatly-raised role for assessment: one interviewee talked of the schools being "saturated" by high-quality, levelled objectives and the assessment of learning during lessons;
- spotting and growing talent: an earlier point emphasises the command and control side of teaching and learning; all respondents also acknowledged that the abundant good practice was identified and praised, and that teachers were developed. In the longer term, the number of advanced skills teachers (ASTs) produced from within the three schools is striking [5.7], as is the number of staff grown into new roles;
- raised expectations and accountability are implicit in the above, but need singling out. The one phrase used by every interviewee to describe the schools pre-federation was "low aspirations", and the one change everyone identified by the end of the project was "raised expectations", by everyone, of everyone. It was made clear to staff at all levels and in all roles that they would be held accountable for the quality of their work - teachers for the progress of their students, the conduct of their classrooms and the quality of their teaching; heads of subjects for the standards and progress achieved and the quality provided in their departments; the executive leader for school improvement, reported termly to the county council. The tough side of this is the moving out of staff at all levels, including the most senior, who, following reasonable levels of support, were not able to deliver to raised expectations. Although no-one takes pleasure in staff being displaced, the willingness of the executive leader to tackle these thorniest of issues and to deal decisively with problems many of which had existed and been known about for years, was universally acknowledged by interviewees;
- an increase in the use of ICT, for teaching, administration and organisation. From the outset, improved kit together with targeted professional development played the multiple functions of making staff more efficient in their roles, improving communication and, like the behaviour system, showing the staff that things could change quickly;
- rigorous evaluation: it rapidly became routine, modelled initially through BtA, that the implementation and impact of developments would be systematically evaluated, the results published, and follow-up action, generally in the form of professional development, would take place; and

- meticulous planning: the termly flow charts, showing the most detailed action in respect of each strand in each term, with evaluation carefully built in, provided a model of excellence for the partners. The detail of their compilation allowed the executive leader to manage at a distance; execution of the plans - which were provided early on in the process and negotiated later - formed the vehicle for evaluation and for coaching the headteachers. Planning takes time, and time, including residential time, was provided for it; staff were treated well in their conferences, at good quality venues.

As one interviewee summarised it: “behaviour management and aspiration created the context for improvement, teaching and learning provided its direction”.

4.8 Through the ‘development’ and ‘progress’ phases, the focus shifted more on to support for individuals and teams, especially in the core subjects. Three features in particular were the subject of comment through the middle phases:

- subject consultants: a core team of outstanding teachers with exceptional skills in teaching their subjects, profound understanding of exam requirements, coupled with the generic skills of understanding of school improvement and how to work with adults as well as students. They worked with cross-federation subject leaders (next bullet) to provide expertise in the organisation and provision of professional development, to support at key moments in examination preparation, such as coursework assessment and moderation and revision sessions, and to co-teach with partner school colleagues and thus build capacity. They operated between a subject role and a teaching and learning consultant role, and the most highly-regarded of them, in English and maths for example, operated equally effectively in both roles. Note the comparison with the Annex to this report [Annex 2.7, 3.4 and 4.4] concerning the building of capacity and sustainability;
- the role of directors of improvement, cross-federation subject leaders for English, maths, science and ICT. These key appointments, at senior leadership level, had significant authority: they worked direct to the executive leader and were empowered to require partner schools to change arrangements, such as re-organising teaching groups or withdrawing students from other subjects. They had a one-line job description - to raise performance in (e.g. science) quickly. Their role combined teaching key groups, modelling excellence in teaching, coaching, monitoring and planning. Although they varied in effectiveness, at their best, such as in English, they were equally effective in transmission mode early on, through collaboration in the middle, to helping schools achieve independence by the end; and
- one of the key features of the lead partner was its ability to provide expertise on any aspect of school operation: hence as well as the key strands already described - behaviour management, teaching, learning and subject consultants - the executive leader or partner school heads could call on support for (and these are actual examples used) financial and operations management; data management, both for staff entering and managing data and for senior staff designing systems and interpreting data; teaching humanities subjects. When a new SENCO was appointed to one of the partner schools, s/he was given an internship at Ninestiles to see the systems used and how the role was conducted there. Ninestiles has over-staffed itself and built broad expertise in order to be able to play the lead partner role well.

4.9 The aspect of the programme most highly-regarded by leaders in the three Hastings schools was the leadership support provided by the executive leader. The combination of clarity of vision, experience and knowledge of school improvement, and ability to handle people provided by Sir Dexter was central to the programme and universally admired since he spoke at the July 2007 seminar. He is a high-profile leader both within the schools and in the community: he makes links with key local agencies, such as the local press and business groups, to benefit the schools and the programme. His ability to take decisive action in relation to under-performing senior staff is legendary, and part of his adherence to the Jim Collins principle of getting the right people on and off the ‘bus and in the right seats: this describes one of his two key roles early in the programme, the other being direction setting. At the end of the first full year of the programme, fourteen staff moved on from one of the three schools alone; it has proved easier to recruit high-quality staff to

the federation banner than to the individual schools, and it is quite clear from lesson observations that the new staff represented improvement, as well as lowering costs.

4.10 Recruitment of staff was pro-active, developing close relationships with the post-graduate teacher training department at the University of Brighton, several of whose graduates joined the federation staff.

4.11 The shift from command and control to growing staff in post noted under teaching and learning above [4.7, fourth bullet] is mirrored in leadership roles: once the right people were where they should be, the executive leader's role towards them became one of coach. Two of the three headteachers moved on during the programme (one for promotion), and the transition to academy status [4.14] meant that two of the heads became principals designate and that deputies stepped up to acting headship. The executive leader therefore had two inexperienced headteachers and three acting heads to coach: they all have leadership roles in the academies, and the quality of their leadership is crucial to the strength of those institutions and thus to the sustainability of improvement in Hastings.

4.12 The most concrete evidence of the success of his coaching lies in the most challenging of the three schools: the headteacher having moved on very early in the programme, a new head was put in place in October 2008. Within a week, OfSTED arrived and placed the school in special measures, with a very large agenda of required improvements; good progress was reported in HMI monitoring visits, and the school came out of special measures in just over the year (Nov 2009). In a monitoring report, HMI reported that "the headteacher and executive leader maintain a steely focus on raising standards and provide a strong strategic steer": a very precise analysis.

4.13 Each of the leaders pays glowing tribute to the personal and professional growth s/he experienced by working with the executive leader.

4.14 Other development raised as significant by staff and students included:

- curriculum changes: again at great speed, introducing courses, especially in ICT, better matched to the students' needs than existing provision, and in which they could achieve success. Key curriculum changes included moving to a two-year Key Stage 3 and a three-year Key Stage 4, and the introduction of one-year GCSE courses. These were implemented from Sept 2009 in all three schools, and the rapid change (planning began in March 2009) was supported by specialists from NInestiles who had implemented the model some years earlier. The huge increase in the proportion of students achieving 5AC is in significant part attributable to these courses and changes; and
- students appreciated the increasing calm and the ability to learn and get on with your work created by the behaviour management system; they also said that teachers talked to them a lot more and valued their opinions.

4.15 The processes described between [4.5 and 4.10] report the reflections of staff in the schools and engage with six of the seven platforms for improvement listed in [4.1]; that the community and parental involvement platform is largely 'missing' is a feature of the research, which because of available time did not engage much with the community, not the programme. Governors interviewed spoke with warmth about the rising profile and reputations of the schools in the town, and specifically among parents; the committee reports provided by the executive leader describe an extensive programme of parents' newsletters and forums, links with primary schools and meetings with the press and the local chamber of commerce.

4.16 It is important to record in this account of the actions and approaches adopted by the lead partner that this was a set of partnerships, not one-way traffic. Section [3.10] reported the Hastings school staff's willingness to change and their positive response at the beginning of the federation; all research evidence shows that successful partnerships require more than compliance if the partners are to stand on their own two feet at the end of the process. Whatever scepticism may have existed towards the concept of federation, as soon as the lead partner started work, the overwhelming majority of staff came on side; those few who could not do so moved on. All interviewees reported the active participation of staff from the three schools and the flourishing of

talent which had previously been hidden; some commented on reciprocity, with ideas from Hastings feeding back to Ninestiles as well as across the Hastings schools. The lead partner was able to shift quickly from a transmission model at the outset - the schools were required to adopt certain practices - to collaboration and towards independence.

4.17 Not all plans went smoothly: the plan to create a hard federation across the three schools was aborted because one of the schools was unwilling to participate. This resulted in a formal warning to that school's governing body from the LA in Jan 2009, requiring it to comply with the federated approach. This was overturned by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools on appeal, and the federation proceeded in a 'softer' way. Although energy was lost in friction at this time, the work of school improvement went on with little check; it is not possible to quantify what if any loss to momentum and final outcomes resulted. It is fair to say that governors and senior leaders of the three schools varied in their initial response to the federation: one school was welcoming, one defensive and one hostile. Over time, the welcoming and open school remained so; the defensive school came rapidly on side and was wide open to the federation, especially when the headteacher moved on; the hostile school also warmed and participated fully, again especially after the headteacher left, but it was felt by all partners to be 'semi-detached' from the project. The schools made equally good progress over the period of the project [section 5] and joined together to form a pair of federated academies [4.14] at its end.

4.18 A much bigger disruption to the smooth-running of the project was provided by the transition of the three partner schools into two federated academies in September 2011. This deflected a significant portion of management energy during the last year of the project away from school improvement into academy transition; teachers lost momentum as they focused on the changes that academy status would bring, including changes to their roles. This was somewhat more acute at the two St Leonards school, which have come together to form a single academy, than the Hastings school which was translated into an academy. Two into one is always more difficult, for obvious reasons: it caused high-profile casualties and, as well as the personal trauma for those involved, these created a frisson of stress which cannot help continuity of school improvement. Again, it is not possible to quantify the loss of momentum or to guess what the eventual outcomes would have been had the project proceeded to its end as initially planned. However, the phase which by definition suffered most was the 'transition phase', January to August 2011: for reasons set out in [section 5], I believe that the effect has been to provide a temporary check to forward progress rather than any reversal of it.

4.19 Because only he had significant contact, only the executive leader commented on the significant role played by the LA - in having the courage to set up the contract in the teeth of significant opposition; in backing it with high levels of finance, thereby making clear that this was their top priority; by providing, through senior councillors and officers, what the executive leader calls a 'quality partnership' - ensuring that departments of the County Council such as finance and especially HR understand the federation's aims and play their part - crucially in the case of HR enabling the moving on of staff who could not step up. It is interesting to note that the key LA officer, the Deputy Director of Children's Services, reports that working with the federation has changed the mindset of the LA's school improvement service, which now is clearer about its role to monitor, support and challenge the headteachers and governors who are the leaders of school improvement.

5. Outcomes – the schools (academies) and the end of the contract, and the potential for sustainability

5.1 There is no question but that the federation project has been a great success, and that the schools are transformed. The evidence presented in 5.2 – 5.6 comprises objective measures of progress, in examination results, school quality (as judged by OfSTED), teaching quality and financial stability. Evidence of transformation, as opposed to turnaround, can be best seen in the views of stakeholders, summarised in 5.10.

5.2 The contract began in April 2008 and therefore had little or no influence in the 2008 results, which therefore act as the baseline for the impact of the programme.
[at the time of writing, 2011 results are provisional, but will not change significantly]

School A	%5ACEM	%5AC	%C+ Eng	%C+ Maths
2006	29	33	49	37
2007	25	32	42	43
2008	34	49	43	44
2009	34	66	47	39
2010	44	84	58	46
2011	51	82	65	56

School B	%5ACEM	%5AC	%C+ Eng	%C+ Maths
2006	17	30	28	25
2007	24	36	35	29
2008	12	41	40	13
2009	37	80	47	40
2010	43	98	58	47
2011	38	99	51	44

School C	%5ACEM	%5AC	%C+ Eng	%C+ Maths
2006	17	25	31	28
2007	20	29	32	29
2008	16	23	29	27
2009	34	76	48	36
2010	38	87	56	43
2011	45	86	58	49

5.3 Federation-wide, the proportion of students achieving the key measure of 5ACEM rose by 14 percentage points (21 – 35%) in year one (2009), by a further 7pps in year two (to 42%, thus doubling 2008 figure) and by a further 4pps (to 46%) in the final year. This represents considerable improvement and closure with the national average: in 2008, the federation schools together achieved well under half the national average proportion and by 2011 are within 10 pps of it. There can be no doubt therefore that the schools improved.

5.4 It is possible that the improvement represents only catching up historic under-performance. The best guides here are the estimates provided by the Fischer Family Trust (FFT): their so-called B estimate represents the result that would be achieved if students made average progress - bringing the school up to where it should be, if you will. The more demanding D estimate represents the results achieved by the top 25% of similar schools, and is more demanding; to achieve it would represent improvement beyond catch-up. In year one, all three schools exceeded the expected (FFT B) figure, greatly for 5AC and significantly for 5ACEM; they matched the more demanding FFT D estimate for 5ACEM and greatly exceeded it for 5AC. In year two, all three schools greatly exceeded FFT B for both benchmarks, matched (in one case significantly exceeded) FFT D for 5ACEM and greatly exceeded it for 5AC. The Director of Children's Services, in his annual reports to the County Council Education Standards Panel in November 2009 and 2010, judged performance and progress in the federation to be 'very good' in both years. By the end of the programme in 2011, all three schools had exceeded FFT D for 5AC for all three years of the project; for 5ACEM, the schools overall at least matched FFT D in the first two years, and two of them exceeded it for year three - far beyond catch-up. Although there was a slight setback in one school (School B in the table in 5.2), which I would attribute in part to it being more profoundly affected by academy transition than the other two, the federation as a whole met its contractual target.

5.5 Other outcomes: the federated support programme was, rightly, targeted at raising GCSE results, and saw improvements in other aspects of school performance either as contributory

factors (such as the quality of teaching) or as by-products (such as increases in attendance and admissions). The following sub-paragraphs describe the impact of the programme on some of these aspects:

- views of Ofsted inspectors: one of the three schools was placed in special measures at the very beginning of the contract and emerged with many good features a year later; another of the schools, when inspected a few months after the beginning of the contract, was described as “transforming and improving at a rapid rate”. The third school was inspected shortly after the federation came into being; even at that early stage, the inspectors were able to say that “capacity [to improve] has been significantly enhanced by the expertise and experience brought in by Ninestiles Plus [the chief executive] and his team of advanced skills teachers ... are playing a key role in strategic planning and the setting of targets, as well as modelling and sharing good practice”;
- attendance: national average secondary school attendance in the years 2006 and 2007 was around 91/92%; at this time, attendance in all three of the schools was below average, and well below it (below 90%) in two. By 2010, attendance in the three schools lay between 91.6% and 92.7%, much closer to a national average of around 93%;
- admissions: in 2007, the schools together had a total of 620 places available for new entrants to Year 7; only 285 first preference choices were made, and a total of 462 students were finally admitted. By 2010, the last year of admission to the schools, even given parent’s uncertainties around academy status, first preferences had risen to 319 and admissions to 581;
- budget: the schools’ budgets were in balance at the point of closure, there having been a significant deficit in one of the schools at the start of the contract; and
- quality of teaching: by the end of the programme, monitoring by the executive leader and school leadership teams suggests that 100% of teaching across the federation was satisfactory or better, and 70% of it good or outstanding. The designation of staff as advanced skills teachers (ASTs) is both an accolade and an improvement strategy, since a growing team of ASTs is like an internal advisory service, capable of modelling good practice and supporting colleagues’ improvement. By the end of the programme, 14 federation teachers had been so designated - a remarkable number.

5.6 In his book Beyond Turnaround Leadership¹, the great educationist Michael Fullan describes how the UK Prime Minister’s Delivery Unit in the early 2000s established four categories of quality (awful, adequate, good and excellent - not unlike OfSTED’s four grades) to describe performance in public services such as transport and health. Changes to train services improved their performance from ‘awful’ to ‘adequate’; Fullan records the PMDU’s leader view that “there was nothing to be gained politically by announcing proudly to the public that we have improved our train services from awful to adequate. If anything there was a net loss in public trust as the public of course thought the service should be more than adequate in the first place.” Fullan goes on to liken train services to schools, saying that turnaround schools represent at best moving from awful to adequate with no staying power to continue to improve.

5.7 The term ‘awful’, or Ofsted’s slightly more gentle ‘inadequate’, could only have been applied to one of the three schools at the start of the programme - but there were significant levels of under- achievement and low aspiration in all three. The key question for Hastings is: are the schools merely turned around, which the outcomes above show that they undoubtedly are, or is there a transformation that has them irreversibly on the road the becoming good and outstanding schools? I believe the views of stakeholders listed below, drawn from interviews and written documents, provide sound evidence of transformation. Sustainability is discussed in 5.11.

5.8 For brevity, I have recorded these views as headlines, often quotes; they are however consensus views from across the schools, triangulated with the views of the key staff from the Ninestiles Plus support team including its executive leader:

- high expectations of and by everyone: the schools are especially ambitious for students
- “we can do it”, including “we can become outstanding schools”: the schools are also ambitious for themselves

¹ OISE, University of Toronto Leadership Library in Education, January 2006

- a shift in the discourse from behaviour to learning and achievement;
- staff quality raised by the recruitment of good staff, clearance of dead wood and stability, with fewer changes and supply teachers;
- students are the same, but now order and calm prevail in classrooms and around the sites;
- staff are confident to run dynamic, exciting classrooms in ways not possible previously;
- staff are more receptive to change;
- consistency and teamwork prevail where once there was ad-hocery and isolation;
- careful attention to continuous cycles of planning, evaluation and professional development;
- as a result of careful planning, we focus our energy and resources on a few key priorities;
- we're reflective when once we grabbed at any idea;
- good planning and greater confidence in systems mean we take risks without fear of failure;
- nothing drifts and festers - issues, even really painful ones, are tackled;
- we do things quickly now - we believe in speed and making a difference;
- better environment and kit, especially IT, which improve variety and interest in the teaching; and
- confident, fluent use of data to monitor and evaluate what we do.

5.9 Value for money is not easy to assess in educational projects; three things can be said:

- the project fulfilled its contractual objectives of transforming the schools and achieving results which at least matched the FFT D estimate [5.4];
- although the sums involved (approximately £1.8m over three years) are substantial, they are in line with the expected costs for projects of this sort, as [3.7] explained;
- a previous project - the Leadership Incentive Grant - had provided the schools with sums of the same order of magnitude, with no discernible impact on results.

5.10 Assessing sustainability is a matter of judgement, not measurement. The two academies successor to the three project schools are led by teams whose members' considerable talents have been supported and nurtured through the partnership with each other and with the lead partner, especially its executive leader. They have not only experienced success but are able to deconstruct it (one of the critical factors listed in section 6); the academies have been set up using the principles developed in the partnership, as their prospectuses show; and they are keen to remain in collaboration as federated academies, because they have seen the value of partnership. Many, but not all, members of the leadership teams see the need for an executive leader for the new federated academies, as is the plan, because they have valued so highly the leadership, direction and opportunity for reflection and coaching that such a post enables. As [4.14] explained, I believe that academy transition undoubtedly deflected some institutional energy away from the improvement programme, providing a temporary check to forward progress, but no reversal of it.

5.11 In summary therefore, I judge that the project has been successful in its aims to improve the school's performance, to transform them culturally and to create sustainable successors, capable of going forward to become good and outstanding schools/academies.

6. Factors (actions and approaches) critical to success

6.1 This section seeks to identify what happens to make support federations successful; what lead and partner schools do, in partnership with the LA, to make improvement happen. Section 7 translates these actions into a set of identifiers for potential lead schools/executive leaders.

6.2 The contract:

- the partnership is built on a written contract which specifies minimum levels of expected improvement; contracts in this case existed between the County Council and Ninestiles Plus and between Ninestiles Plus and the governing bodies of the three schools;

- as [3.6] and especially [3.11] show, careful attention to language and the differences between schools could have made preparation for the contract a little smoother;
- the lead partner, especially the executive leader, has a mandate, understood by the whole school community and accepted by its key players, to bring about rapid and major change;
- the lead partner shares accountability for outcomes with the partner schools; the accountability is enshrined in incentives (penalties or bonuses) within the contract;
- to be accountable the lead partner must have power, including over the budget - managerial control, not just advice or influence;
- if, as in this case, the association is for a defined period, planning for sustainability is built into the contract; and
- the mandate, the brokerage and the transfer of power and financial control require that the governing bodies of all partner schools and the LA, both members and senior officers, are partners in the process.

6.3 **The role of the Local Authority:**

The LA worked in close collaboration with the lead partner, playing a number of key roles:

- by allocating significant finance to the federation, and by receiving regular reports from both the Director of Children's Services and the executive leader, the County Council made very public that improving the Hastings schools was its top priority;
- in the run-up to letting the contract, the LA managed the considerable resistance from parts of the community, and co-ordinated the process of inviting and evaluating tenders;
- the senior LA officer ensured that CC departments such as finance, admissions and especially HR were fully briefed and supportive of the federation. The support of the LA was particularly necessary in moving staff on who needed to be moved on; and
- used the federation to reflect on how it supports school improvement [4.15].

6.4 **Early action by the lead partner/executive leader**

- confronting the partner schools with the realities of their situation, challenging their myths of adequacy and uniqueness and facing them with truths about similar schools' performance, at the same time offering solutions and a way forward;
- laying out the clear programme for school improvement at the outset, making it clear what was non-negotiable and what was to be adapted in detail to the situation;
- exuding confidence by inviting all Hastings staff to Ninestiles ("we've got nothing to hide") and the inclusivity of that visit (improvement is everyone's job) [3.10];
- following a short period of situation analysis, drawing up and publishing an action plan. Publication ensures wide understanding and total clarity about accountability;
- bringing a sense of urgency and pace through doing exactly as you say and early success: not cosmetic 'quick wins', but going to the heart of the problems, especially ...
- ... tackling behaviour from day one, first because it makes good teaching possible, second because it is what teachers see as the main and intractable problem;
- beginning work on all improvement platforms [4.2] from the outset, not one issue at a time;
- emphasising total consistency in implementing required policies and practices (BtA, lesson planning) and eyeballing those likely not to toe the line;
- auditing staff quality rigorously, providing improvement plans and support for those who need them, re-auditing and quickly moving on those who cannot step up;
- developing new management roles, especially the directors of improvement [4.8], half of whom came from within the partner schools, and thus an increase in capacity. Those directors ensured the executive leader had a powerful agent within each core department across the schools. By working together, these postholders also ensured that the core departments worked together;
- identifying blockers to change quickly and precisely, and dealing with them decisively, even if they include the most senior staff; and
- providing high-quality, credible consultants in key areas, especially behaviour management, teaching and learning and ICT: these people don't advise, they show how to do it and work alongside and form a core support team with a high profile in the partner schools.

- 6.5 Action by the lead partner/executive leader through the period of the contract
- maintain the sharpest possible focus on key objectives related to standards and quality of teaching;
 - shift from the early command and control model to one of coaching and collaboration;
 - identify and grow able people in the partner schools - in some cases into headship/acting headship, or into lead teacher roles;
 - supplementing the core support team [6.3 final bullet] with support from the lead partner for any need: financial management support when a new bursar was appointed to one of the schools, special needs leadership support for a new SENCO. Such support was provided both on site and at Ninestiles, sometimes by brief visit, sometimes by short internship. Thus flexibility to meet changing needs is a key feature;
 - maintain careful phasing: although work took place on all platforms throughout the project, some actions were deemed inappropriate to the phase the school was in and were stopped or postponed - although the lead partner was strongly supportive of the schools' work in relation to Creative Partnerships, it was deemed a distraction early on and was suspended;
 - promoting teamwork and collaborative planning; moving staff around the federation to meet their and the schools' needs. Thus deputy heads were seconded to other schools when their skills were needed elsewhere, at the same time promoting their professional development;
 - systematic monitoring of all key variables, with quick feedback loops to ensure that the findings of self-evaluation are embedded in fortnightly, high-quality professional development programmes for staff;
 - seeking to replace person with system, thus promoting consistency in partner schools;
 - the executive leader maintains a close eye on budgets - both the contract budget and those of each school; this had a particularly sharp edge because of the transition of the schools to academy status at the end of the project; and
 - since the purpose is to help schools become self-improving, self-managing organisations, the underlying purpose is capacity building - such as through strategic planning and professional development.
- 6.6 The role of the partner schools
- the term partner school, as explained in the introduction, is chosen to indicate that this is not a passive role;
 - as the executive leader makes clear, the heads of the partner schools are fully headteachers, not site managers; they are their senior leader colleagues must have above average leadership skills to lead and manage the rapid changes that are necessary for school improvement;
 - not only were the staff of the partner schools up for change, shown for example by their remarkably positive response to the visit to Ninestiles [3.10], but they also showed their great flexibility and talent by, for example:
 - The internal promotion of many, and their willingness and skill in moving between schools.
 - The designation of 14 teachers as ASTs [5.7] across the federation - as many as in the whole secondary sector in some small LAs.
 - The population of senior and middle leader posts in the successor academies by staff from federation schools.
- 6.7 Other influential actions or approaches noted by staff in interviews included:
- acknowledging that not everything works well first time: reviewing honestly and making changes - "prototypes have errors and those errors are not a reason to give up";
 - public gestures of acknowledgement to staff - reporting back, thanks, good-quality venues for meetings; and
 - ensuring that all staff are accountable for performance - through clear vision, priorities, monitoring, and performance management systems.

6.8 The key to the school improvement model adopted by this and most other federations is consistent implementation of a few, influential systems, according very closely to the principles of high reliability schools (highreliabilityschools.exeter.ac.uk):

- intolerance of system failure
- a small number of clear goals, understood by all; a strong sense of primary mission
- consistent application of standard operating procedures (SOPs), in systems, teaching and behaviour management
- a culture of monitoring against SOPs
- extensive professional development and retraining; very careful recruitment
- data richness: use of data, especially pupil performance data, to guide decision-making
- early identification and tackling of issues preventing cascading error
- simultaneous top-down and bottom-up leadership
- close attention to the quality of resources and the learning environment.

7. Key characteristics of a lead partner school and executive leader

7.1 This final section translates the actions in [6] into a list of identifiers of lead schools and executive leaders: characteristics that mark out schools' and heads' potential to play these roles in a support federation.

7.2 Good executive leaders additionally have/do/are the following things:

- are expert in all three domains in which improvement leadership takes place: the technical, inter-personal and organisational (based on Richard Elmore¹);
- have successfully lead the lead partner school over many years. Continuity of vision and an eye for detail mean a thousand small steps in the same direction, leading to big breakthroughs. Jim Collins (2001), analysing businesses which have gone “from good to great”, showed that their take-off was not attributable to any one action or person, but to the cumulative effect of the myriad changes made in previous years, likening it to the energy needed to turn a large flywheel;
- as a dimension of the team culture, see their success in the success of others; there is non-stop celebration of everyone's success;
- have considerable intelligence about strategic issues in the locality - detailed knowledge about educational achievement in the area and about other strategic issues concerning, for example, housing, health and social services, and how these impinge on the education service. This is not just a matter of breadth of interest, but of what Michael Fullan calls “moral purpose” in leadership - one of his hallmarks of quality leadership in a culture of change: “In addition to the goal of making a difference in the lives of students ... moral purpose means acting with the intention of making a difference in the (social) environment....school principals have to be almost as concerned about the success of other schools in the district as they are about their own school because sustained improvement of schools is not possible unless the whole system is moving forward. This commitment to the social environment is what the best principals must have” (present author's underlining);
- know who delivers in school, and in what settings: they have sophisticated review procedures to ensure optimal deployment of staff;
- have considerable business acumen, with acute knowledge of funding streams and how to make them work together, with the ability and willingness to bend the rules slightly;
- are tight on values, loose on freedom to act within agreed parameters;
- ensure that all staff, not just teachers, are harnessed to the improvement programme: “if the headteacher's away, people may not notice; if the toilets aren't cleaned or the 'phones aren't answered, everyone notices” (interviewee);
- acknowledge existing strengths in the partner school - departments, individuals and functions - and deliberately set out to identify and grow them; and
- thus they acknowledge reciprocity in the partnership. Although the benefits are mainly in one direction, there are wins for the lead partner too: the professional growth and

¹ Paper presented at the International Conference on Perspectives on Leadership for Systemic Improvement, sponsored by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), July 6 2007 London.

development of its staff and the flow of good ideas from the partners back to the lead school. This in turn boosts staff retention, and a growing reputation for quality and opportunity improves recruitment.

- 7.3 The executive leader and lead partner school together have/are/do:
- seek to replace person with system, thus promoting reliability and consistency;
 - draw links for staff - taking the time to explain how the building blocks of improvement interlock and support each other is key to winning staff over. The perceived coherence gives staff increased confidence in the change process and makes them more receptive to further change;
 - build an action plan and school improvement programme which:
 - go to the heart of the root causes of the problem, addressing head-on tough issues which have been ducked before
 - have the sharpest possible focus on raising examination success, on teaching and learning as the major levers, and on order, system, consistency and an appropriate curriculum as the pre-requisites
 - plan for and manage the exit strategy, so that there is a planned withdrawal, not an abrupt abandonment; and
 - use high-quality daily assemblies to get the message across.

- 7.4 The lead partner school:
- has built a team which can work 'abroad' while ensuring that it does not suffer collateral damage while providing support to other schools;
 - is a school in which evaluation is embedded at all levels, and in which middle managers have as clear understanding of evaluation, planning and improvement as those in the leadership group - an evidence-based school, with decisions effectively informed by data;
 - has a tradition of team responses to projects and plans; in particular, a senior management which has strengths both in management and leadership, strategic and operational fields - strengths in systems and procedures as well as vision;
 - maintains the vision and ethos by internal promotion, and thus build a recognisable brand;
 - believes in immediacy and has a bias to action; is positive and 'can do'; is decisive and ups the pace;
 - has a tradition of openness and honesty, which is important in bringing the partner school to an understanding of the situation;
 - has real expertise in exam requirements, how to maximise grades, what distinguishes a grade A/A* or C piece of work. They know their own curriculum inside out, and how to get the best grades for students using it;
 - has a high degree of consistency in teaching quality, both to sustain improvement and to enable sharing of best practice and innovation;
 - is a professional learning community, providing a range of learning experiences and professional development opportunities; and
 - consider themselves accountable for the partner school's success.

7.5 There is no questioning the ability of a small number of exceptional schools and leaders, Ninestiles among them, to support school transformation; the Harris group of academies in South London, the AET group based in Essex and the Cabot Federation in and around Bristol are other examples. The issue is whether this number can be taken up to the scale required to bring about improvement in all the schools that need it. The Gray, Hopkins, Reynolds and Farrell study¹ concludes that sustained improvement requires strategic action simultaneous with tactical - that grade enhancement tactics are necessary but not sufficient - and it sounded an ominous warning "it would seem unwise to rely too heavily on approaches to change which assume that such a capacity [for sustained improvement] is widely in place". Their findings suggest that only a very small proportion of secondary schools (less than 5% and probably no more than 2%) have the full understanding of improvement that this suggests. As Richard Elmore put it "by definition, only a fraction of the population of potential or actual leaders have the attributes identified with effective leadership, and that fraction never equals anything like the number required for system-wide improvement' (op cit). Perhaps Ninestiles and its small number of counterparts around the country

should train other promising schools to take on the lead partner role effectively. Other potential lead schools need to develop a successful track record and to 'bank their credibility' for future use.