



Learning from schools that have declined

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Lessons and learning from schools that have declined

Figure 5: Advice for supporting a school out of special measures (Ofsted, 2010)

As HMCI (Ofsted, 2010) summarises, *'The best recipe for turning around inadequate schools is clear in Ofsted's evidence from monitoring school improvement. There are three principal ingredients:*

- *Instil or install effective leadership*
- *Provide high-quality technical guidance, particularly in teaching and assessment*
- *Ensure effective governance.*

Progress then needs to be monitored and evaluated so as to provide useful feedback and a mechanism for accountability.'

Methods used by successful local authorities include:

- Ensuring that conversations, and ideally visits, are held regularly with all their schools as these are essential to developing relationships and soft intelligence.
- Holding challenging conversation with the headteacher looking at evidence together: in the majority of cases a change of headteacher or a change in their attitude unlocked progress. If change is needed then it is fast-tracked.
- Using the opportunity of a move into a category to make radical changes if needed.
- Brokering school-to-school support: using known good headteachers including, but not exclusively, NLEs and LLEs; NTS; additional governors; interim executive boards (IEBs); outstanding teachers; hard and soft federations; and supporting moves to academy status.
- Meeting governors, governor development and close engagement with governors.
- Providing joined up support from the full range of local authority services; good quality human resources are particularly important but also includes educational welfare officers, capital and governance.
- Undertaking monitoring visits (most effectively when taken side by side with school leaders) with full reports to leadership team and governors.
- Holding formal review meetings of progress which provide timescales and lead either to success or escalation.

Special measures

In the course of this research it became clear that many headteachers have no or little experience of schools in special measures. Indeed several local authorities had no experience. That is good because it means that most schools are at least satisfactory. The disadvantages are that only those who have experienced it can really understand it; and that some very good heads have not the experience or aptitude to work with schools in special measures which has major implications for the use of NLEs.

Finance

Some local authorities have a policy of withdrawing delegation when a school is deemed to have special measures; too often the school management is chaotic and this is one way of controlling it.

The costs of coming out of special measures are high financially as well as high in the human cost to the children, staff and community. Often decisions are made to, in essence, pay people to leave. This is rather than delay the necessary improvements to the school, the children have suffered long enough and will not get their chance again.

Other potential costs include professional development, additional staff required as staff go off sick or specific skill sets are needed, curriculum resources and, often, something needs doing to a crumbling building or poor environment.

The financial costs are met by the local authority, the school or the Department for Education depending on the circumstances. At least one academy chain has found that the reduction in support coming from the Department has meant that there is now some subsidy needed from the chain to make the initial difference by moving staff on.

Capability

When a school is proved to have declined the leadership of the school is always under scrutiny. Ofsted (2010) see addressing leadership issues as a key early action. In most cases, if the head has been there any time, they are often '*moved on.*' Their willingness to go varies; compromise agreements are commonly used to speed up the processes. Compromise agreements can be very expensive and can also be seen as a reward for failure.

Every local authority spoke of the need to give the departing head dignity in their leaving.

Where the head is not willing to accept that their departure will help the school it can become a long and slow process and improvement is often delayed whilst due process is applied. This includes setting targets, providing support and reviewing progress on the targets. Evidence is essential and could, possibly wait on end of key stage results. Certainly it is often laborious and slows school improvement.

The attitude of the chair of governors is crucial; they may be a barrier or a driver for improvement.

There are a variety of factors that affect the time taken and one is the robustness of the conversations held, often referred to as the '*difficult conversations*.' The difficulty of these conversations should not be underestimated; in essence this involves telling someone that has put their heart and soul into a job that they are not good enough and it is better for the school, which they may love, that they should leave.

There will then be similar processes for any staff who need to improve and are unwilling or unable to do so. As one union representative said in one of the case studies below, "*I don't think eight (dismissed for capability) is excessively high.*" This is on top of those who decided to leave voluntarily.

These difficult actions normally require a high amount of effort and energy. Excellent human resources support is essential but the head may be addressing issues with staff who are: popular, pleasant and long standing; unwilling to change; and/or in very difficult personal circumstances. This is as well as staff who may never have had a real chance to improve before. Judgements have to be made and made quickly.

One authority has a capability process that cuts down the time to four weeks. This is based on intense action and very good relationships with unions underpinned by a belief that the education of children requires urgency. Where this is in place then staff tend to move on of their own accord. Similar outcomes take place in some of the most successful chains. Often HR processes can take up to six months and perhaps years when staff, as often happens, become ill or teeter on the brink of being satisfactory. One secondary head spoke of the eleven staff off on long term sickness absence that created a financial deficit that led to redundancies.

The issues are rarely clear cut. It can be energy consuming territory with a significant effect on morale. All types of school commonly quote a 50% staff turnover in order to get out of special measures. Less common, but it happens, are schools which go into special measures and come out with the same staff. As a chair of the IEB where this happened said, '*Too many governors do not know what to expect... head and staff needed a boot up the arse and got it.*'

Heads who have led schools through special measures say:

- It is all encompassing.
- The rest of your life is on hold.
- It can be very lonely.
- You can be riddled with self doubt.

- You need to take the staff with you but be willing to make hard decisions about staff.
- If a school goes into special measures then there are normally all sorts of problems, *'Every stone I picked up had a cave system beneath it.'*
- Your personnel officer and finance officer may become your new best friends.
- You need to be able to talk completely openly to someone; and that person is unlikely to be a head or a member of the school.
- You have to balance the need to get fast progress with pacing it – how long should children lose out versus considering how much change one school can take. A comparison was made here with a patient on an operating table, too much operating can kill them.
- You need a well written Ofsted report to help you move forward (see B below).
- Once you have done it you can get hooked on the adrenaline.

Advice includes:

- Confront the brutal facts.
- Use your data and make sure people understand it.
- Decide priorities and move fast.
- Don't try to do everything at once.
- Use smart targeted intervention.
- Get good staff in.
- Talent spot: promote people on merit, however young.
- Succession planning at all levels.
- Find ways of recognising good people.
- Find ways of celebrating success.
- Ensure that the moral imperative for staff is the children.

Coming out of special measures – some case studies

This section provides case studies and observations from headteachers who have led, or come in to improve a school in special measures. The schools include:

- two local authority maintained schools;
- two federations; and
- an academy chain.

A tale of two schools: both secondary schools 11 – 18, both had declining standards and both are now out of Ofsted categories.

A has the same head as it had when it went into a category.

B has its third headteacher since going into a category.

School A

‘Despite a strong commitment to improving the school, leadership and management are inadequate.’ (Ofsted, 2007)

‘Nine teachers have left the school and eight new ones, including two part-timers, joined at the start of the school year.’ (Ofsted monitoring report, 2008)

The school, *‘now provides a satisfactory education and has some good features. The senior team, with support from the local authority and the governing body, has worked tirelessly to improve the school.’ (Ofsted, 2009)*

‘This is a good school in which tenacious leadership and committed teamwork have secured strong gains in provision and outcomes since the previous inspection. Students enjoy all that the school has to offer and their achievement is good.’ (Ofsted, 2011)

The headteacher had been in post for one year prior to this inspection. Two other local schools went into special measures that week; both heads, after discussions with the local authority, left. The local authority made its judgement, despite that of Ofsted, that the headteacher had what was needed. The local authority was straight into the school, told the head that he had their confidence and talked to staff and governors about what would happen.

Parents were up in arms and asked why the head and chair of governors were still in post. *‘The school was on its knees but the local authority support put wind in its sails to do what was needed.’*

A local authority chaired monitoring group was set up with the school which formed the basis of an effective partnership. It:

- accelerated the change process by giving a mandate to get things done;
- worked in confidence and consolidated information to provide focus;

- got the right personnel support. First questions were around who could improve and who needed to leave. 42% of staff left including the whole of senior management team (except the head).

The Ofsted report itself was not well written; there were appeals and some changes but the head is not sure that the effort was worth it.

Three heads of department were got through in one key department; the head had to be '*brutal, unforgiving and uncompromising.*' Additional input beyond the schools budget was underwritten by the local authority but the deficit and the staff commitments are still being paid for by the school. The overall financial cost of coming out of special measures is estimated to have been £500,000 to the school.

At first the support team from the local authority was overwhelming, '*like termites*' and following, '*robust discussions,*' the input was reduced to key focus areas. The input of the adviser was '*seminal.*' Support and challenge was provided and a supported self-review approach was successfully developed.

Reports on progress from the local authority were used with governors, staff and Ofsted. They backed up the schools' judgements and provided evidence of progress for staff and Ofsted. Ofsted wanted to delay the re-inspection until there were, '*no issues,*' which is quite unrealistic. During the period the framework changed and the school was being judged on different measures. The school, backed by the local authority, got its re-inspection and was judged satisfactory within 17 months of going in. Two years later it was judged as good.

School B

This large secondary school in a reasonably affluent area had a downward trend in GCSE results. Support offered by the local authority was often deemed unnecessary by the headteacher or input to departments not coordinated at a senior level. An Ofsted inspection gave a notice to improve and judged leadership and management as adequate.

The head was confident he could manage the problem and at first he had a very supportive chair of governors who expressed anger with the local authority. The head criticised the capability of officers working with the school and often insisted on seeing someone more senior.

A new chair of governors worked with the local authority and tried to support the head to succeed. The Ofsted monitoring visit judged progress as satisfactory but noted, amongst other things, that the support offered by the local authority was not being taken up.

At the next visit (a school with notice to improve has to be satisfactory after a year or go into special measures) the school was judged as having made insufficient progress and was put into special measures. The head remained

confident that he could address the situation. The chair of governors now supported the local authority in working to move the head on; this included very difficult and challenging conversations. A very expensive compromise agreement led to the head's resignation.

An interim head was pulled in. He calmed the staff. His experience was all in good schools. Seeing some of the extent of the problems he made his own school his priority and gave notice, leaving after a term and a half.

The third headteacher, experienced in working in schools with special measures, came in as an interim. She says that she was '*drawn to the school in simple outrage at what had been allowed to happen; there were no excuses for this failure for the pupils*'. She found a school with '*a toxic culture that always put the staff before the pupils, made life unpleasant for pupils,*' and, '*a stable staff where fresh ideas withered in the negative environment of jobsworth; sparky staff either lost it or moved on.*'

Problems included, and this is not an exhaustive list:

- No data analysis system or use of data.
- Too much unsatisfactory and satisfactory teaching with some pockets of good practice (Ofsted had judged the teaching as satisfactory, this was generous and unhelpful).
- An elitist culture which focused on the top 20% and virtually disregarded pupils with special needs and the less able.
- Poor behaviour (not properly picked up by Ofsted).
- No special educational needs register or systems in place.
- Standards falling.
- Particularly poor science department.
- Governance poor.
- Budget in crisis.
- A hierarchical staff with a big split between the SLT and the rest.
- An isolated school with little interaction with others.
- The loss of confidence of parents.
- A school trying to pretend it was a public school.

The local authority provided, at the first stage, information to the school on what it saw as the problems; offers of support in improving standards of education; advice and support to the chair of governors; the funding and

negotiations to facilitate the original head leaving; and brokerage to bring in interim leadership.

At the second stage the local authority provided intensive HR support which was essential to sort out many of the staffing matters quickly: this had to be done before real changes could be made to teaching and learning; external reviews and monitoring visits which challenged and supported capability and improvements; brokering good staff into the school from other schools; and provided handpicked governors to improve leadership.

The school:

- Undertook data analysis as the first step. This quickly identified some strong areas and many problems.
- Celebrated and built on the strength of a highly performing team under good leadership and getting results above targets.
- Gave staff support to improve but where unwilling or unable quickly moved them out.
- Transformed science by moving on poor staff, the previously demoralised good staff were now responding to opportunities, team culture was supported by the judicious placing of tea facilities in one room.
- Seconded an excellent deputy and brought in other staff to support specific areas such as special educational needs.
- Reformed the senior team, got rid of some and brought in good people (appointing from within when possible).
- Reduced staff to address a huge deficit (partly due to a falling role).
- Benchmarked spend against similar schools and refocused investment to teaching and learning from less important, and probably overstaffed areas.
- Encouraged new talent coming in with rigorous selection process.
- Appointed new governors with the right expertise and vision.
- Developed partnerships with other schools and higher education to address the tunnel vision.
- Invested in professional development, particularly data analysis and use, teaching and learning, self-evaluation, action research and middle leadership development.

- Interviewed all parents with children in year 11 and this started to re-establish trust.
- Took every chance to celebrate successes.

The local authority spent much time reflecting on how to have prevented decline on this scale. It is unusual for a school to move from notice to improve to special measures.

Factors included:

- The school was not below the floor standards.
- The head and the then chair of governors were confident and adamant that they were able to improve the school.
- The head and a significant proportion of governors did not respect the views or advice of the local authority.
- It was very hard to work with the school, the head talked assertively and at length, with lots of paperwork, on what he was achieving.
- The notice to improve judged leadership and management as satisfactory and the monitoring report judged progress as satisfactory.

In this situation what could have been the basis of a warning notice?

When there was evidence for the warning notice, the head had gone and governors had become receptive and were taking the steps that were required to improve the school.

The school is now judged as satisfactory. The interim head has been appointed as permanent head and results are improving. The school is a much better place for pupils. Staff are still facing redundancies due to budgetary problems; there has been a reduction of 40 staff in the last two years.

Examples from primary school federations

Two federations: very different approaches

Their similarities are:

- Primary schools which were failing are now good or outstanding and willing to help others: *'we have been there.'*
- The approach has evolved, it is based on the local authority knowing people and the context, seeing opportunities and being able to persuade people to give it a go.

- An executive headteacher role has developed which gives very good primary school headteachers the chance to expand and develop but remain headteachers. This is particularly valuable in retaining good leadership in challenging schools.
- Staff stay and grow within the federation, there is little staff turnover.
- The role of the local authority in brokering the deals and the quality of its relationships has been key in supporting successful outcomes.
- There is a loyalty to local children; close geographical and cultural links are highly valued.
- The Dioceses/ faith groups have become persuaded that soft federations are good models and there are examples of faith schools federating with community schools.

Federation X: the head is an NLE who has worked with a variety of primary schools which have caused concern; these deals are brokered by the local authority. These are initially three year federations which are then reviewed; all have continued but this open endedness is seen as being persuasive in getting sign up by schools and winning hearts and minds. Each school retains its own governing body and individuality. Staff can be moved by negotiation. The movement of good staff into weaker school transfers the culture which make systems successful.

A recent ground-breaking development is working with a Muslim school. This was an independent school run by the local mosque which applied for voluntary status. Federation was used as a way to ensure good educational standards as well as preserve religious doctrine.

The lead school remains engaged in federations as:

- This is education for local children so there is a moral purpose.
- It gives staff new challenges and opportunities which keep them engaged; leadership opportunities have opened up at all levels.
- Working across schools gives capacity which allows extra investment through more economic use of resources.

Federation Z: The headteacher took on a failing primary school and developed a successful system which he transfers to other failing schools. Staff are employed by the federation so staff movement is expected. High standards are set on the basis that the children deserve only of the very best; anyone not able or willing to achieve those standards does not stay long.

Federation Z can work with a school and raise key stage outcomes in months rather than years. 100% of pupils achieving level 4 is seen as a basic expectation in schools with pupils with high levels of deprivation. It is level 5

and beyond which provide targets. It is very hard work but now staff applications are very high and few staff leave but get opportunities within the federation.

The approach and outcomes are very similar to that of some academy chains (see below). The federation now has significant capacity and employs its own speech and language therapist and has a full time member of staff for child protection. An opportunity to work with another school outside of the home local authority quickly went wrong and the executive headteacher values the quality of his local authority even more as a result. A second opportunity to work in a different borough where both home and neighbouring boroughs worked together to broker partnership has gone extremely well with a school that had been stubbornly in an Ofsted category for some years brought out within a term.

Example from an academy chain

Schools taken on include ones in which:

- Staff were not observed teaching.
- Data was not used to inform work (e.g. year 8 performance was declining and the head did not know).
- The local authority had colluded in poor practice by papering over the cracks to pass inspection.
- There were low expectations of acceptable behaviour.
- No performance management was in place.
- Pupils had been told to go home, not formally excluded and without alternative provision, and may lose up to a year's education.
- Attendance records were incorrect.

The chain is led by a selected board which is fully accountable for all schools in the chain. Sometimes the local authority can be resistant to the change even after years of failure or scraping by for the pupils.

If the chain takes on a school it installs its systems. There is preparation work undertaken with staff, pupils, parents and the wider community so that on day one, it is a new school with new policies, structures and systems implemented.

All staff and pupils are transferred, *'Children and staff come to us as a new school'* There is intensive training with coaching. *'There has been hardly any need for capability as people make their own decisions.'* In the first period, staff are in one of three categories: 'can do (can stay)'; 'can't do but were never given adequate leadership and are willing to learn (coach and mentor)'; and 'can't / won't do (will go)'.

'Too many leaders in these schools were lax on performance management and unwilling to make the judgements on staff to move them on if necessary.'

Some staff move on because they decide it is not for them. Gaps are filled from staff within the chain; this is easier for management posts than teaching staff. Principals within the group are asked to release staff to assist, *'it is not mandatory or easy but there is a strong collegiate feel and people know that it is the group which gives the strength.'* The children are regarded as the responsibility of everyone across the chain. Morale improves as the school achieves success; staff then stay and succeed too. Once the school is established then there is good stability. Senior staff are normally 'grown' in the chain.

The children soon become proud advocates for their school and its chain of schools. Staff can find it very challenging with a very steep learning curve and may not see tangible benefits for about a year. Coaching is key; supporting alongside people, encouraging them to see the intrinsic reward and the effects on children and young people is a great motivator. Feedback on lessons whereby they recognise good work in terms of the impact they have had is particularly powerful. Markers of progress are used and celebrated, examples are improved behaviour, letters from parents and improved attendance. *'Standards quickly rise.'*

All academy staff engage in the chain's professional development programme which includes staff across all academies coming together. Examples include day for all teaching staff with 150 best practice workshops; similar day for support staff; day for special educational needs staff e.g. on mental health issues; moving from good to outstanding; and days for subject leaders.

'Each school has a governing body which operates on the same basis as other governing bodies. The chief executive interviews the governing body, with the exception of elected parents and staff. Those who join take the role very seriously. They are supported by training and also undertake a wide range of roles including analysis and reporting to other governors. They are articulate, informed, challenging and local.'

Close monitoring of pupil and school outcomes is routine. All pupil outcomes are reviewed annually. Standardised monitoring each term uses data such as finances, exclusions, attendance and punctuality. Sponsored academies are closely monitored until well on the road to success. Monitoring includes two thorough reviews within first 18 months. A distillation of the reports is provided to the committee.

Concerns expressed include:

- The 'limbo' there can be before the school becomes part of the chain; it is not unusual for there to be many supply teachers and lots of pro tem arrangements in the interim which is to the detriment of the education of the children.

- Weaker converter academies joining the chain which require investment and the start-up grant is not available;
- The reduction in the start up grant for sponsored academies will mean that the chain will have to subsidise their improvement.
- *'No-one, neither academy chain nor local authority should have a monopoly; a monopoly is why some local authorities have provided a poor service.'* Competition gives an edge which aids improvement. *'The right to work with failing schools should be based on performance'*
- *'Local accountability does not always lead to improvement as is seen with some failing schools. Local authorities have many responsibilities and priorities. This has two crucial effects. One is that they can lose focus on what is best educationally. Secondly other priorities may mean that the rights of all the children in the area to get a good education may be neglected.'*