



National Audit Office

**DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION AND SKILLS**

Improving poorly performing  
schools in England

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# Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General

## Improving poorly performing schools in England

HC 679 Session 2005-2006

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### CORRECTION

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#### Executive Summary, paragraph 37, 3rd sentence

**Text reads**

"In 2004-05, 28 per cent of primary and 20 per cent of secondary schools had headteacher vacancies."

**Text should read**

"In 2004-05, around 11 per cent of all maintained schools advertised a headteacher post.<sup>1</sup> In a follow up survey of schools placing advertisements, 28 per cent of primary and 20 per cent of secondary schools responding reported that they had not made a permanent appointment."

#### Paragraph 3.27 (page 54)

**Text reads**

"Figure 35 shows that a large minority of schools are without a permanent headteacher or deputy."

**Text should read**

"Survey data in Figure 35 shows that a large minority of schools advertising for a new headteacher or deputy had not made a permanent appointment."

#### Figure 35 (page 54)

**Title reads**

"School leadership vacancy rates, 2004-05 school year"

**Title should read**

"Rates of unfilled school leadership vacancies, 2004-05 school year"

**Y axis label reads**

"Percentage of posts vacant"

**Y axis label should read**

"Percentage of advertised posts vacant"

**Byline reads**

"School leadership vacancy rates are high."

**Byline should read**

"Rates of unfilled school leadership vacancies are high."<sup>2</sup>

1 Additional contextual information provided by the Department for Education and Skills.

2 The full report on which Figure 35 is based is available at [www.educationdatasurveys.org.uk/NAHT-SHA2005.pdf](http://www.educationdatasurveys.org.uk/NAHT-SHA2005.pdf).

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



**1** All children and young people need to develop the skills, knowledge and personal qualities to lead happy and successful lives. Their chances of doing so are strongly influenced by the standard of their school education. Failure to achieve sufficient GCSE passes, vocational qualifications, or proficiency in literacy and numeracy reduces the likelihood of going on to further and higher education and limits job opportunities.

**2** A large proportion of schools provide high standards of education. GCSE and equivalent performance in England has improved, with 56 per cent of pupils achieving the benchmark five or more A\* to C grades in 2005.<sup>1</sup> And primary schools are preparing more of their pupils with the basic literacy and numeracy skills that the pupils will need for their secondary education – in 2005, 79 per cent of pupils achieved the national target level in English and 75 per cent achieved it in mathematics. These achievements reflect the hard work of pupils, teachers and school leaders.

**3** Nevertheless, a sizeable number of schools encounter problems that put children's education at risk, and some of these schools do not provide good value for money. In 2004-05, around £837 million was spent in England through a range of national programmes to help improve schools that were failing or at risk of failing (**Figure 1 overleaf**). In addition, five new academies opened in 2004-05, with an estimated total development cost of around £160 million. This report focuses on whether:

- enough is being done to identify and support schools that show signs of deteriorating performance;

- effective measures are being taken to address poor performance; and
- 'recovered' schools continue to improve and do not start to fail again.

**4** We assess the success of national initiatives and local action, and highlight good practice from which all schools can learn. Our findings are based on an analysis of financial data covering all the 23,000 maintained schools in England and performance data for poorly performing schools, supplemented by a survey of headteachers, visits to 14 schools and consultations with school advisers and school governors (Appendix 1).

## Responsibilities for school performance

**5** Key responsibilities for standards of education and school performance are as follows (and in **Figure 2 on page 3**):

- **Schools** are responsible for educating their pupils, whose collective performance represents the performance of the school. Good schools are fully aware of their strengths and weaknesses and pursue continuous improvement. In particular, schools need an effective leadership team and good teachers. In 2004-05, schools in England received around £25 billion to spend on education and related activities.

<sup>1</sup> All references to GCSEs in this report include equivalent qualifications (including General National Vocational Qualifications). The performance for 2005 is based on provisional figures.

## 1 National programmes to improve schools, 2004-05

<b>Excellence in Cities</b> aims to raise educational standards and promote social inclusion in deprived areas. Much of the funding is focused on improving teaching and learning and school leadership. Schools included in Excellence in Cities are also eligible to receive Leadership Incentive Grant. These schools receive per pupil around £322 more funding than the national average.	£352 million
<b>Leadership Incentive Grant</b> started in April 2003 to support secondary schools in deprived areas (and included in Excellence in Cities) or facing challenging circumstances, with a focus on collaboration between schools so as to strengthen leadership. Each school receives £125,000 a year for three years, and benefits from around £269 more funding per pupil than the national average.	£196 million
<b>The Primary National Strategy</b> assists low achieving primary schools and supports primary school leaders to promote high quality teaching across a broad curriculum through consultancy support. The Strategy includes the Primary Leadership Programme and the Intensifying Support Programme.	£130 million
<b>The Key Stage 3 National Strategy</b> focuses on under-performance of pupils between the ages of 11 and 14, aiming to raise attainment in core subjects. The Strategy provides consultancy support and training for schools as well as teaching materials and guidance. The Strategy extended in 2005 to become the Secondary National Strategy for School Improvement covering the 11 to 16 age range.	£123 million
<b>Fresh Start</b> and <b>Collaborative Restart</b> involve closing and re-opening a poorly performing school on the same site with a new name, mostly new staff and a new governing body. The Department for Education and Skills (the Department) provides additional revenue and capital funding for three years, with the revenue funding amounting to around £387 extra per pupil per year.	£23 million (including £15 million capital funding)
<b>Secondary Performance Project</b> involves over 500 under-performing schools, identified by the Department, that work in <b>collaboratives</b> with support from consultants or with support from the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust.	£8 million
<b>Federations</b> are groups of two or more schools with a formal agreement to work together to raise standards. The Department provides additional revenue funding to the 37 pilot federations which involve 192 schools.	£5 million
<b>Academies</b> are new schools that replace poorly performing schools in deprived areas. By September 2005, there were 27 academies open as autonomous schools, each backed by a private sponsor who works with the Department and local education partners. The capital cost of a 1,300 pupil academy is estimated at around £27 million, but their operating grants are broadly equivalent to other schools in similar circumstances.	Not applicable
<b>Total</b>	£837 million

Source: National Audit Office analysis of data from the Department

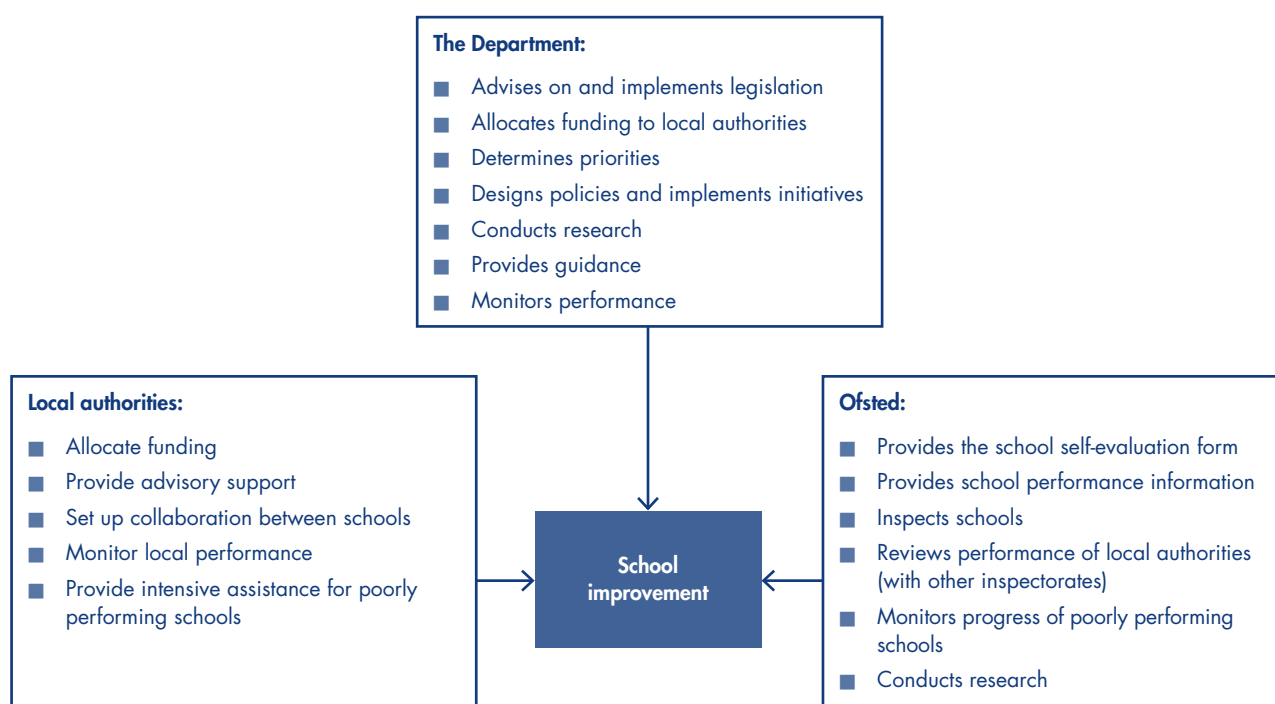
### NOTE

In addition to these programmes, other national programmes such as the Behaviour Improvement Programme are used to improve schools. In 2004-05, local authorities were allocated around £325 million for school improvement advice and support.

- **Governing bodies** support school leadership teams and manage their performance, providing accountability to the local community. Each school has a governing body with extensive responsibilities, including budget and target setting and appointment of the headteacher. Governors are volunteers.
- **Local authorities** are responsible for the strategic leadership of schools in their areas. They provide central services, such as education welfare services, including additional support for schools whose performance is weak. Local authorities have statutory powers to enforce change in poorly performing schools. In addition to the £25 billion of spending that they delegated to schools, local authorities spent around £8 billion on schools and youth-related activities in 2004-05. Including the funding provided to schools, local authorities spent between £2,803 and £4,717 per pupil in 2004-05.
- **Ofsted** carries out independent inspections of all schools in England. Where Ofsted finds serious problems at a school, it puts the school into a category: Special Measures (for schools with the worst performance) or Notice to Improve.<sup>2</sup> Ofsted then monitors the progress of a school in Special Measures and reinspects it two years after recovery, and it reinspects schools with a Notice to Improve a year

<sup>2</sup> Schools inspected before August 2005 that were weak but not needing Special Measures were put in the Serious Weaknesses or Underachieving categories.

## 2 Roles of the Department, Ofsted and local authorities



Source: National Audit Office

### NOTE

150 local authorities have responsibility for schools. Where there is a two-tier local authority structure (for example, county councils and district councils), the higher tier is responsible for schools.

after the original inspection. In 2004-05, the direct cost of Ofsted inspections of schools was around £60 million, with monitoring visits to schools in Special Measures costing an additional £2.5 million.

- **Department for Education and Skills (the Department)** has overall responsibility for the quality of school education in England. The Department provides direction to the schools sector, including through its National Strategies, and allocates funding to local authorities and, in certain circumstances, directly to schools.

**6** In addition, the **National College for School Leadership** aims to be a driving force for better school leadership. It provides training and development for school leaders and works with the wider education community.

**7** The Schools White Paper *Higher Standards, Better Schools For All* (October 2005) sets out changes that are intended to improve standards in schools. The proposals

are wide ranging and particularly emphasise enabling parents to exercise choice, changing the role of local authorities, and adopting stronger measures for tackling poorly performing schools (**Figure 3 overleaf**).

### Over 1,500 schools are performing poorly, but numbers are falling

**8** Schools with weak leadership teams generally fail to recognise their weaknesses and are unable to tackle them when they do. Problems such as falling teaching standards or disruptive pupil behaviour may not be dealt with effectively, and pupil attainment will decline. **Figure 4 overleaf** shows the indicators of a school that is likely to fail an Ofsted inspection and be put into Special Measures or given a Notice to Improve. Not all schools that show some of these indicators are performing poorly. In particular, some schools in deprived areas are good schools where pupils make good progress despite low prior attainment.

### 3 Summary of the White Paper *Higher Standards, Better Schools For All*

**The White Paper envisages:**

a A new school system

Schools will be encouraged to become ‘trust’ schools or ‘foundation’ schools with greater independence and freedom to appoint members of their governing body, manage finances, and control admissions. An Office of the National Schools Commissioner will be created to drive the changes, to match schools to ‘partners’ and to promote parental choice.

b More engagement of parents

Parents will receive information about local schools and their performance. Parents will be able to request Ofsted action or even closure of a school. The Department will also provide funding to enable parents to set up new schools.

c A changed role for local authorities

Local authorities will take on a more strategic role; commissioning rather than providing education. They will work with the Schools Commissioner to promote choice, diversity and fair access in

schools. They will have new powers to act where schools are performing poorly, for example by enforcing collaboration or closing schools.

d Stronger measures to tackle poor performance of schools

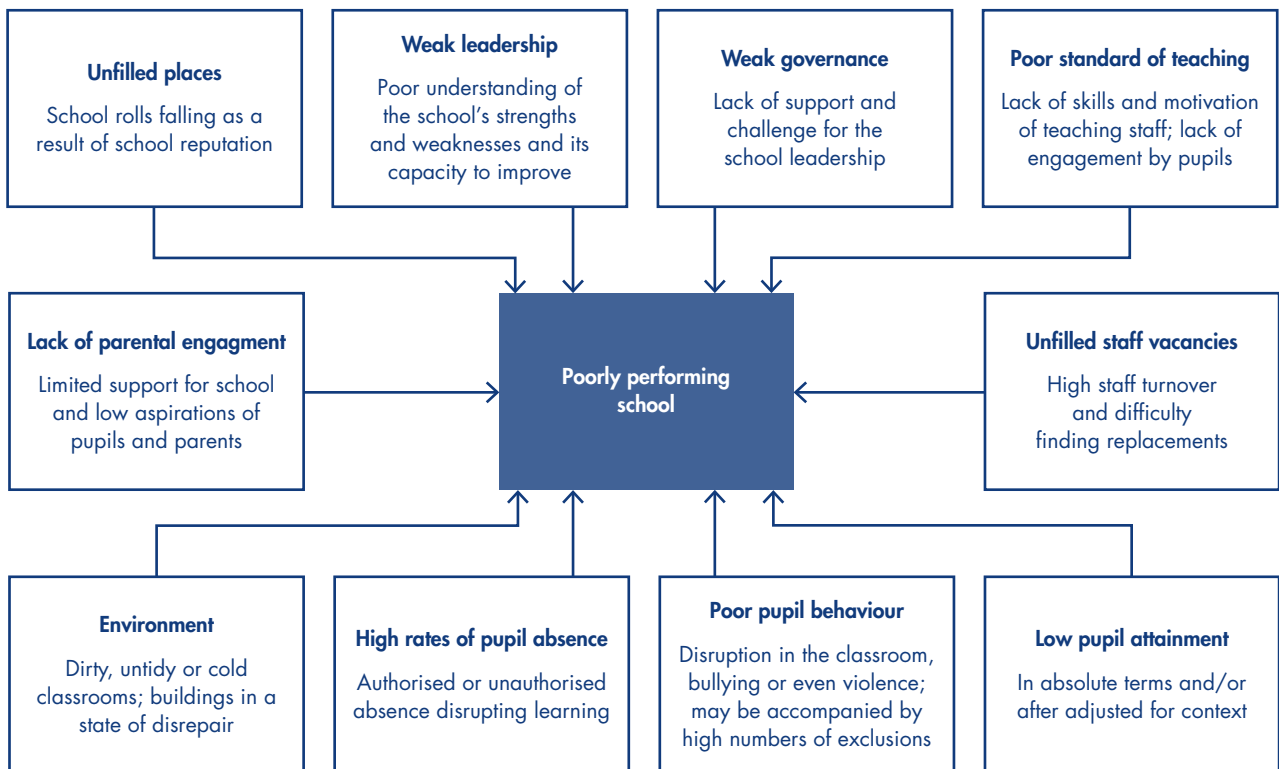
Where a school enters Special Measures, the local authority must consider a range of options including closure and replacement of the school. If the school makes no progress in a year, the local authority must again consider closure. Schools given a Notice to Improve will be put into Special Measures where they fail to make progress over the following year.

e A lighter touch for good schools

Ofsted will consult on whether to adopt a ‘lighter touch’ inspection system for good schools. The best specialist schools will be able to apply for more specialisms and teacher training provision. Good schools will be able to expand and form federations more easily.

Source: National Audit Office summary of the Schools White Paper 2005

### 4 Indicators of a poorly performing school



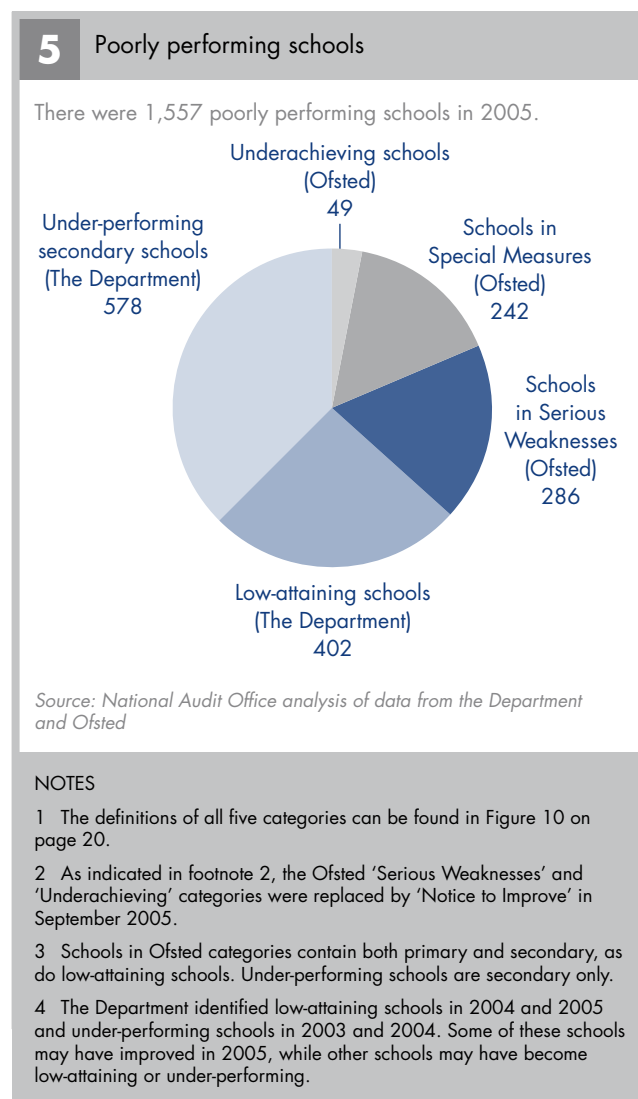
Source: National Audit Office

**9** Until the 2005-06 school year, Ofsted inspected each school every six years. There is always a risk that schools inspected some time ago may have lapsed into poor performance without being identified. Ofsted's new, shorter inspection cycle, under which schools will be inspected at least once every three to four years, will reduce this risk.

**10** The Department analyses school performance data to identify schools that, although not currently in Ofsted categories, are performing poorly. It calls these schools 'low-attaining' or 'under-performing'. Low-attaining schools fall below the government's minimum, or 'floor' target for Key Stage 2 or GCSE results.<sup>3</sup> Under-performing schools are performing inadequately once their circumstances are taken into account: their results can be above average, but their circumstances mean that the results should be even better. The Department identifies under-performing secondary schools in order to give them additional support. It has begun the process of identifying under-performing primary schools, and has advised local authorities to use their own data to identify primary schools that perform worse than expected and may need additional support. For the remainder of this report, we use the term 'poorly performing' to refer to all such schools identified by Ofsted and the Department (**Figure 5**), although it should be noted that the different categories of 'poorly performing' school are likely to require different types of support or intervention according to their situation.

**11** As at July 2005, there were 1,557 poorly performing schools in England, which represented around 4 per cent of primary schools and 23 per cent of secondary schools. The percentage of secondary schools classed as poorly performing is much higher than the percentage of primary schools, largely because only the secondary schools total includes under-performing schools. We estimate that these 1,557 schools educate around 980,000 pupils, or 13 per cent of the school population. They comprised 577 (primary, secondary, special and pupil referral unit) schools in an Ofsted category, 402 (primary and secondary) low-attaining schools, and 578 (secondary) under-performing schools.

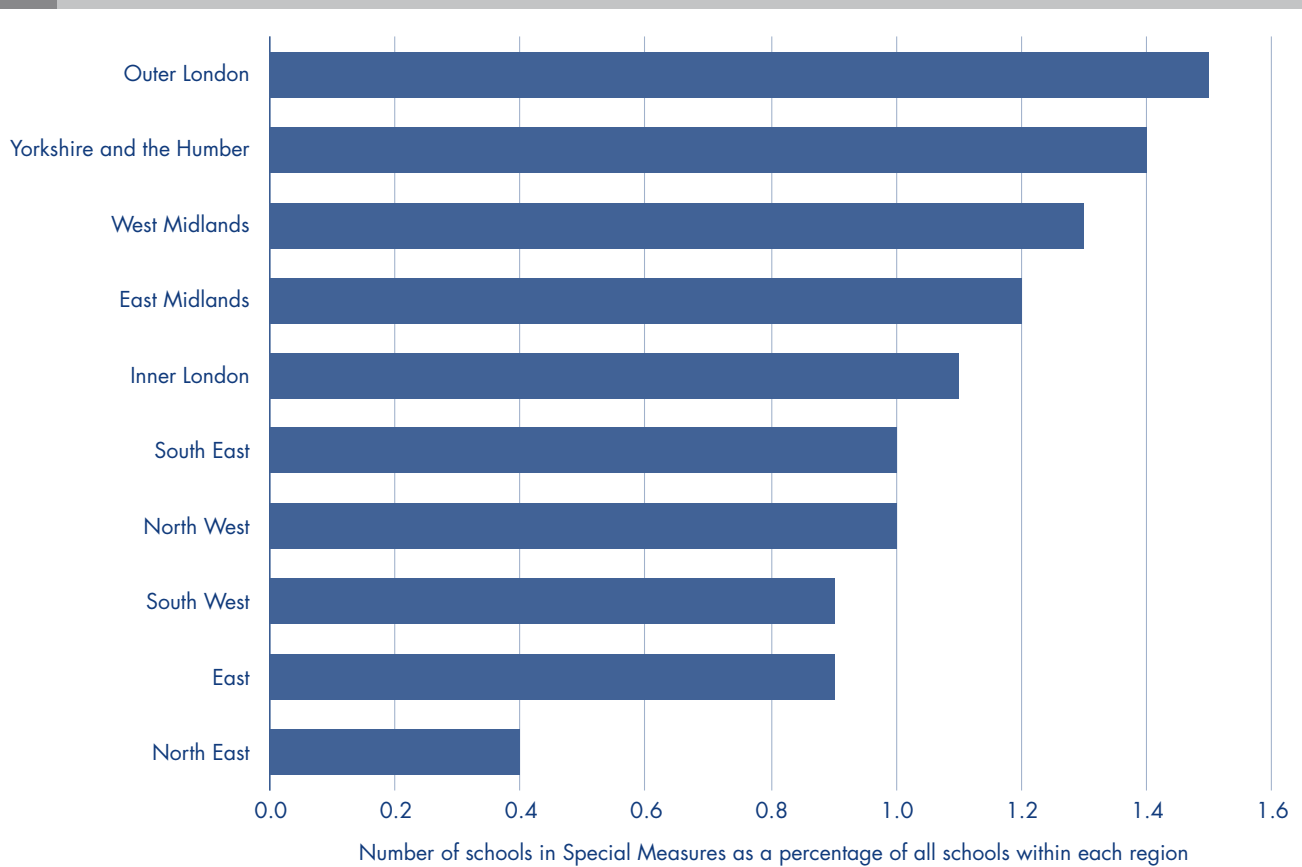
<sup>3</sup> The Department also sets floor targets for the performance of 14 year-olds (Key Stage 3) and monitors the performance of secondary schools against these targets.



**12** The 242 schools in Special Measures in July 2005 comprised 123 primary schools, 90 secondary schools and 29 special schools. Of these schools in Special Measures, **Figure 6 overleaf** shows that Outer London had the highest proportion (1.5 per cent) of its schools in Special Measures while the North East of England had the lowest (0.4 per cent). We found no clear reason for the strong performance of schools in the North East. However, part of the explanation may lie in the performance of local authorities in the region, which are, on average, assessed by the Audit Commission and Ofsted as better performing than the average for authorities in England.



**6** Schools in Special Measures, by region of England, July 2005



Source: National Audit Office analysis of data from Ofsted

**13** Our analysis of the available information on trends shows that the number of schools in Special Measures declined by half between 1998 and 2005; the number of low-attaining secondary schools (where more than 80 per cent of GCSE pupils fail to achieve five passes at grade C or above) declined by over three-quarters between 1998 and 2004 (Figure 7), and the number of persistently low-attaining primary schools fell from 430 in 2004 to 349 in 2005.<sup>4</sup>

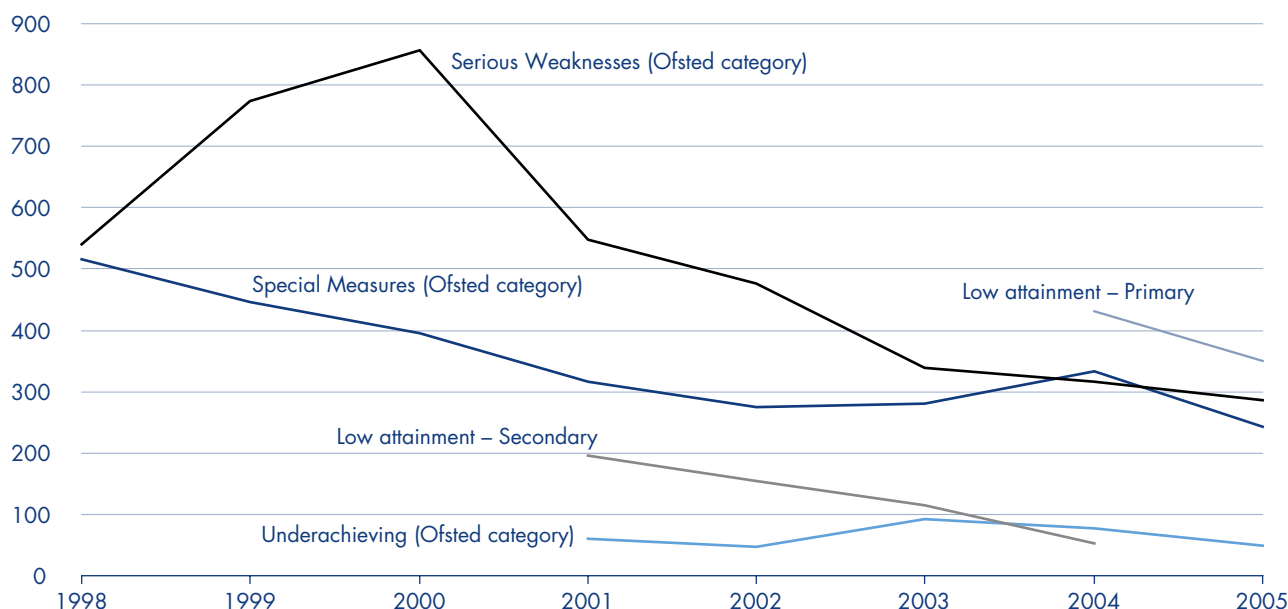
**14** The number of schools in an Ofsted category is influenced by the frequency of inspections and changes to the inspection framework. More frequent inspections, introduced in September 2005, could lead to a modest increase in schools in Ofsted categories, but by spotting signs of trouble earlier, the schools may be able to recover more quickly. Ofsted acknowledges that it has been less effective in giving sufficient attention to under-performing schools, compared with schools that are performing very poorly. It is aiming to make a greater contribution to improvements in under-performing schools through the shorter inspection cycle and by focusing its inspections more intensively on improvement and schools' capacity to improve.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> This group of low-attaining primary schools are those schools whose results have, over a four-year period, been persistently below the Department's 65 per cent targets for either English or mathematics (or both) at Key Stage 2. Due to fluctuating results with small cohorts of pupils, there are many more than this group of low-attaining primary schools below the floor target in each year, although the number has fallen from 5,240 in 2001 to 3,233 in 2005. The Department also has a 2008 target to reduce by 40 per cent the proportion of primary schools in which fewer than 65 per cent of pupils reach the expected level. In 2005, 14 per cent of primary schools were below the floor target in English and 21 per cent were below in mathematics.

<sup>5</sup> *The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools 2004-05*, Ofsted 2005.

## 7 Trends in the numbers of poorly performing schools, 1998 to 2005

There is a downward trend in the numbers of schools in Ofsted categories or with low attainment.



Source: National Audit Office analysis of data from the Department and Ofsted

### NOTE

Data for Ofsted categories is as at the end of the summer term and includes primary and secondary schools. Trend data is not available for under-performing schools.

**15** An inspection cycle that focused more on vulnerable schools and initiated improvement before decline set in could be even more effective. Following the recent White Paper<sup>6</sup>, Ofsted is to consult on whether to move to a 'proportionate' inspection system from September 2006, with minimal inspection of high-performing schools and more frequent inspections of poorly performing schools. Such a system could take account of any representations made by parents.

## Turning a school around takes time and can be expensive

**16** If there is a delay in turning around a poorly performing school, not only do its pupils suffer a poor education for longer, but the damage to the school's reputation makes recovery even more difficult. Until October 2005, Ofsted generally allowed schools two years to improve their performance sufficiently to remove them from Special Measures. Around 85 per cent of schools recover, most within two years, but some take

four years or more. Ofsted's regular monitoring of their progress provides schools with an imperative to improve and helps them to develop their skills in self-evaluation and improvement planning. A minority of schools close after emerging from Special Measures: our analysis indicates that 40 per cent of schools that recovered in the mid-1990s have since closed and about 5 per cent of more recently recovered schools closed soon after recovery.

**17** The 2005 White Paper proposes new arrangements in which schools requiring Special Measures will be given 12 months to demonstrate real progress or be considered for closure and replacement. Of the schools that do not close soon after going in to Special Measures, currently less than 10 per cent make a full recovery within 12 months, although around two-thirds of the schools make at least reasonable progress over the first 12 months. Ofsted will need to be fair and rigorous in collecting and assessing evidence of improvement, and schools will need more effective support, otherwise more schools will have to be closed or replaced.

6 Higher Standards, Better Schools For All – More Choice for Parents and Pupils, Department for Education and Skills, October 2005; Figure 3 on page 4.

**18** When schools recover from an Ofsted category, it is usually by enhancing the capacity of staff, through training and advice provided for the school and individual staff members. Staff who are unable to improve have to be replaced which can be expensive, particularly in the case of school leaders who are entitled to substantial severance payments. Financial information is not available nationally for the cost of recovery from an Ofsted category. Costs vary substantially depending on the circumstance and size of the school. A straightforward case of weakness in a small primary school can sometimes be turned around at little cost, whereas a large secondary school with complex problems within both the school and its local community, together with a long record of poor performance, can cost £500,000 or more to turn around.

**19** The most expensive option for school recovery is closing the school and replacing it with a new school with a new name. The Department has two school renewal programmes, Fresh Start and the Academies Programme, that fund this approach for turning around schools in the most difficult circumstances. Fresh Start schools re-open with refurbished facilities and major changes or additions to staff. Establishing a Fresh Start school costs on average around £2.2 million (a mixture of capital and revenue costs). A poorly performing school enters one of these programmes only after the proposal, either from or involving the local authority, is approved by the Secretary of State.

**20** Academies usually open in new buildings, and therefore involve substantially more expenditure. The Department estimates that the capital cost of a new-build 1,300 pupil academy built under the current academies funding model is around £27 million, and that academies cost around £4 million more than similar-sized secondary schools that will be built under its Building Schools for the Future programme.<sup>7</sup> Academies have been relatively expensive in part because single-school procurements do not achieve the efficiencies that can be obtained through a multi-school procurement strategy. In addition, the cost of the first academies reflected enhancements of facilities beyond recommended standards, and they were often in difficult locations in high cost areas. Academies have other key features, such as the involvement of a sponsor, independence from local authorities and flexibility over the curriculum.

**21** The two school renewal programmes show signs of achieving improved school performance, with particularly good evidence from the Fresh Start programme which began in 1997, but it takes much more than a year before GCSE performance improves to satisfactory levels. For example, on average Fresh Start schools take three years to exceed the Department's current floor target for GCSE performance, and five years to exceed the Department's GCSE target for 2008.<sup>8</sup>

**22** The Academies Programme started more recently, with the first three academies opening in September 2002 and 27 open by September 2005. The Department plans to have 200 academies open or in development by 2010. The programme represents a radical approach to dealing with the challenging problem of poorly performing schools in the most deprived areas. An early evaluation was broadly positive about progress, but it is too early to be clear on whether the programme will be good value for money.<sup>9</sup> There have been difficulties at some academies (in particular, the Unity City Academy in Middlesbrough is in Special Measures), while others have achieved considerable improvements. Evaluation of the programme is continuing.

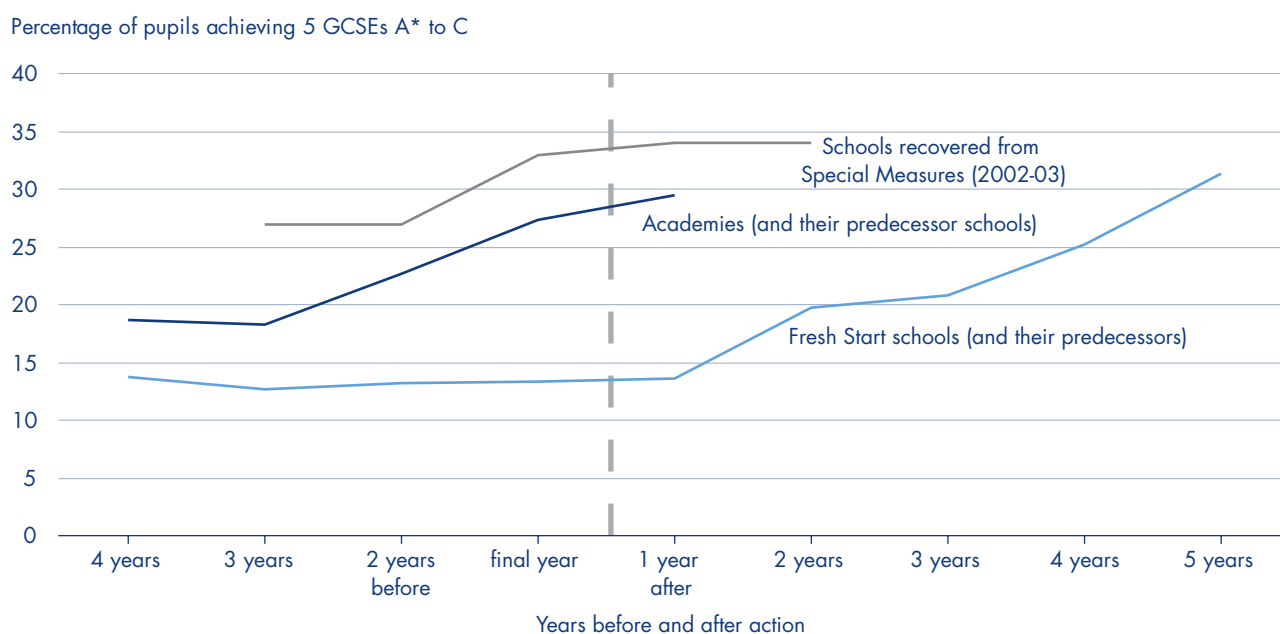
**23** GCSE results for schools that have recovered (whether from the Special Measures category, benefiting from Fresh Start or being turned into an Academy) generally do improve. **Figure 8** shows GCSE results over time for these types of recovered schools. Schools recovered from Special Measures show some improvement during and after their time in the category. Fresh Start schools show a steady and continuing improvement trend. Academy predecessor schools show a similar result in the years leading up to becoming an academy, and most sustain the improvement trend in the first year immediately after the academy has opened.

7 The Department also expects that costs will vary greatly across the country, and will be substantially higher in some locations.

8 The 'floor' targets for GCSEs and equivalent are: by 2004, no secondary schools have less than 20 per cent of pupils achieving five passes at grades A\* to C, by 2006 no less than 25 per cent, and by 2008 no less than 30 per cent.

9 The Department commissioned PricewaterhouseCoopers to evaluate the programme over five years, and the *Academies evaluation: second annual report* was published in June 2005.

## 8 GCSE performance of turned around secondary schools



Source: National Audit Office analysis of data from the Department and Ofsted

### NOTE

The 'final year' figure represents the results of the last year of the predecessor of the academy or Fresh Start school and the last results achieved before the Special Measures school was removed from the category (a school would typically be in Special Measures for two to three years). By comparison, schools in 2000 where no more than 40 per cent of pupils achieved five A\* to C grade GCSEs then achieved, on average, an improvement of two percentage points each year until 2003.

## Certain problems are common to many poorly performing schools

**24** We identified five main reasons for a school falling below acceptable standards. These reasons are often connected, and weak leadership is nearly always present. A school with these problems tends to have a low reputation, making it less attractive to parents with high expectations for their children.

- **Ineffective leadership** – Without an effective headteacher, a school is unlikely to have a culture of high expectations, or strive for continuous improvement. It will probably not undertake the kind of honest self-evaluation that would help it to identify and tackle emerging problems. Schools are vulnerable where a formerly good headteacher becomes less effective over time, or where a strong headteacher leaves the school without having developed a confident and effective leadership team that can lead the school while a new headteacher is recruited and settles in.
- **Weak governance** – School governors must balance the twin demands of supporting the school leadership and challenging it where necessary. Though they are volunteers, they have major responsibilities, including appointing and managing the performance of the headteacher, managing the school budget and providing local accountability. Most poorly performing schools have weak governing bodies, although a school with a very good leadership team can still succeed in spite of a weak governing body.
- **Poor standards of teaching** – Most poorly performing schools suffer from poor standards of teaching and a consequent lack of progress in pupil learning. Ofsted reported in 2005 that while three-quarters of teaching in secondary schools is 'good' or better, in 10 per cent it is 'unsatisfactory' or worse. Schools with ineffective leaders typically do not address weaknesses in teaching.

- **Lack of external support** – Schools benefit from external support, particularly from their local authority, and its support services, and neighbouring schools. Schools are at risk should their local authority not give funding or advice that fully reflects their circumstances.
- **Challenging circumstances** – Some schools have high proportions of pupils receiving free school meals (an indicator of socio-economic deprivation), pupils whose first language is not English, and pupils who regularly change school. These schools receive additional funding, but they still face the biggest challenges to raise pupils' attainment, and are at more risk of performing poorly than schools in less deprived circumstances. In January 2005, 29 per cent of all schools in Special Measures were located in the most deprived 20 per cent of communities.

**25** In addition to these generic factors, some secondary schools face challenges where many of their new pupils did not reach basic numeracy and literacy standards while at primary school.

## Better information is now available to identify poorly performing schools

**26** The Department has built a National Pupil Database that allows pupil progress to be measured over time and linked to various characteristics collected in the Pupil Level Annual Schools Census. Analysis of this data, undertaken by the Fischer Family Trust,<sup>10</sup> identifies schools with lower than predicted performance, and is provided to local authorities. Ofsted also analyses school performance and shares the results with schools through its Performance and Assessment reports and during inspections.

**27** Schools monitor the progress of individual pupils, and produce and monitor their own information on the quality of teaching and learning.<sup>11</sup> Their analysis informs their self-evaluation, helping to identify weaknesses and monitor improvement.

## Some local authorities give insufficient support to schools at risk

**28** Local authorities should maintain close links with schools, and provide extra funding and support for vulnerable schools. They should monitor all schools' performance and step in when a school shows signs of deteriorating. They can increase schools' capacity to deal effectively with problems as they emerge, for example by providing training for governors in managing the headteacher's performance or selecting a new headteacher. Where a school performs poorly this represents, in part, a failure of the local authority.

**29** Each local authority's support for schools is inspected or independently reviewed each year.<sup>12</sup> In the 2003-04 school year, Ofsted's inspections of local authorities found that 56 per cent of the 29 local authorities it inspected were providing school improvement services that were 'good' or better, while the services of 13 per cent were 'unsatisfactory'. We examined the numbers of primary and secondary schools in Special Measures in July 2005 in each local authority, and found that 94 (63 per cent) of the 150 authorities had at least one school in Special Measures, including nine (6 per cent) with six or more schools in Special Measures. Many headteachers consider that local authorities give sufficient support to vulnerable schools only after they have been put into an Ofsted category.

**30** **Figure 9** illustrates the process of a school declining, entering Special Measures and subsequently recovering, and shows the support that the Department, Ofsted and local authority typically provide at various stages. In this example, the local authority does not identify and tackle the school's weaknesses, and provides the support the school needs only after an unfavourable Ofsted inspection report. In some cases, the local authority is aware of problems but the school is unable or unwilling to cooperate. Local authorities have statutory powers to enforce change but rarely use them.

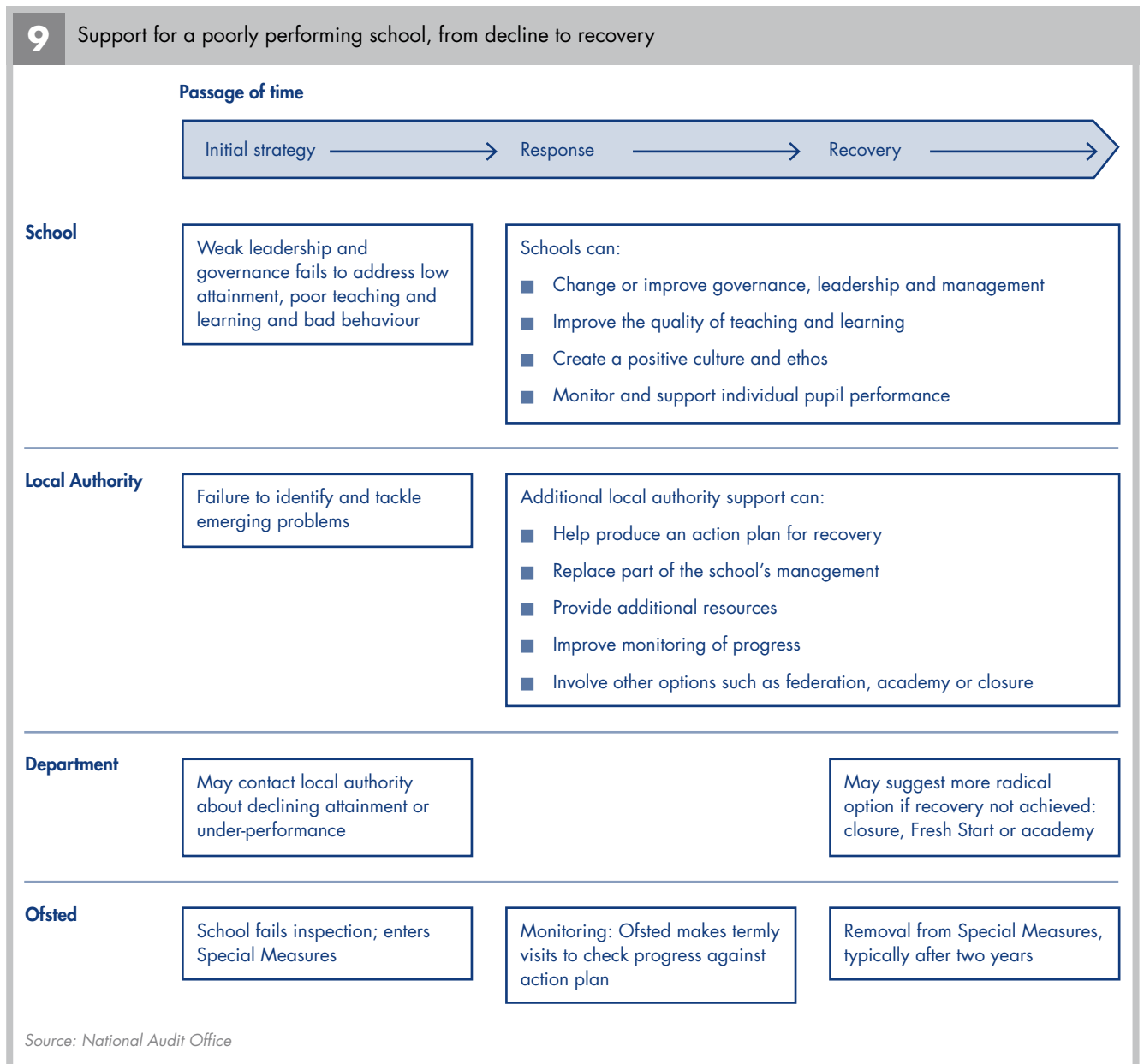
<sup>10</sup> The Fischer Family Trust is an independent, not-for-profit organisation which is mainly involved in projects that address the development of education in the UK.

<sup>11</sup> Teaching is the role performed by teachers and their classroom assistants. Learning is the engagement, and acquiring of skills and knowledge, by pupils.

<sup>12</sup> Since September 2005, 'joint area reviews' of children's services have been carried out by integrated teams involving representatives from up to ten inspectorates and commissions, including Ofsted. Prior to that, inspections of school support services were conducted by Ofsted and the Audit Commission.

31 The Department has recognised the need to improve the challenge and support that local authorities give to schools. In September 2005 it began the introduction of School Improvement Partners – often people with current or recent headship experience – who will liaise between central government, the local authority and the

school.<sup>13</sup> The Partner’s role is to help a school set priorities and advise governors on managing the headteacher’s performance. There is an overlap between the functions of the Partners and local authority school advisers, and it is important that these functions are developed and co-ordinated to provide more effective support for schools.



13 The first School Improvement Partners started in September 2005. Within two years, they will be providing advice to all schools and their governors to help raise standards.

## Lessons can be learned from schools that have been turned around

**32** A poor Ofsted inspection report can be a catalyst to turning around a poorly performing school. While there are often detrimental effects on staff morale, recruitment and retention, and the school's reputation suffers, the benefits include support from the local authority, better awareness of the key issues facing the school and how to deal with them, and improvements in governance.

**33** Developing and sustaining a culture of continuous improvement is crucial to school recovery. In addition, we identified five specific actions that have proved most successful in turning around poorly performing schools.

- **Improving school leadership** – Around two-thirds of schools that recover from Ofsted categories change their headteacher, and many schools change other members of the leadership team. Governing bodies can also improve school leadership by managing leaders' performance more effectively.
- **Improving teaching standards** – Teaching and learning are the basic school activities, and the Department has sought to raise standards through the National Strategies. Teaching quality can be improved by providing better assessment (through classroom observation) and coaching of teachers, but sometimes weak teachers have to leave. Standards in teaching and learning should be assessed through regular monitoring of the progress of pupils in all subjects.
- **Better management of pupil behaviour** – Most headteachers of recovered schools believe that initiatives to improve behaviour contributed to their school's recovery. A clear, consistently enforced behaviour policy reduces disruption that is likely to inhibit learning.
- **Collaboration with other schools** – School collaboration can include sharing staff and facilities and each school helping with each other's problems. Around half of schools in our survey benefited from the support of nearby schools, and some others would have liked support. The Schools White Paper

### **Improving school leadership: The Heartlands High School, Birmingham**

After the school went into Special Measures in March 2003, the local authority seconded a deputy headteacher with experience of working in schools in challenging circumstances. As a secondee, the new headteacher was supported by a retired headteacher who had herself improved a school dramatically. The governing body was also strengthened. The new headteacher communicated a positive vision to staff and pupils and had a strong focus on improving the areas that Ofsted had listed as a priority. She quickly introduced new systems for monitoring teaching, and piloted them in the summer term so that any problems could be resolved before the new systems came into operation at the beginning of the school year. The school came out of Special Measures in May 2004.

### **Improving teaching standards: Onslow St Audrey's School, Hatfield**

This secondary school was in Special Measures from 2001 until 2004. The headteacher placed particular emphasis on improving standards of teaching and learning. He made it clear that the weaker teachers must improve or leave, and introduced a staff development policy to help improve teaching standards. With the agreement of Ofsted, he recruited very able Newly Qualified Teachers and took a personal interest in their development. The school has developed a good reputation for staff development. Ofsted inspectors reported in 2004 that teaching was 'good' or better than 'good' in two-thirds of lessons.

### **Better management of pupil behaviour: King George V School, South Shields**

Ofsted placed this secondary school in Special Measures in March 2003 and it had recovered by December 2004. It needed to improve the poor behaviour of its pupils. Additional funding from the Department released the deputy headteacher from teaching so that she could set up a new behaviour management policy. Ofsted inspectors trained the school leaders in how to collate and interpret information on behaviour. Ofsted inspectors subsequently observed 'good' behaviour in most lessons.

### **Collaboration with other schools: Cardinal Hinsley High School, Brent**

This secondary school for boys went into Special Measures in 2002. The local authority and the Diocese organised a federation with a nearby Catholic school for girls. The headteacher of the girls' school became executive headteacher of the federation and spent much of her time turning around Cardinal Hinsley, drawing in resources from the other school. Becoming a federation brought additional funding from the Department. Ofsted inspectors considered that the federation contributed powerfully to the school's rapid progress and took it out of Special Measures in 2004.

### **Fresh Start: The King's Church of England School, Wolverhampton**

The Regis School was a poorly performing and rundown secondary school for a number of years before it was closed in 1998. Under Fresh Start, the school was re-opened as The King's Church of England School. The new school had refurbished buildings and better sports and music facilities. The restart created a new identity and the school built an ethos that encouraged pupils to raise their expectations. It also resolved some of the staffing difficulties that the Regis School had faced.

raises the expectation that local authorities should organise collaboration to help turn around a poorly performing school.

- **Fresh Start** – As well as getting extra funding from the Department, under this programme schools have changed their identity, their governing body and some or all staff. The Department encourages schools entering the programme to collaborate with other schools.

Parents and the local community also have an important role in supporting schools and helping them to recover, with most headteachers considering that strengthening links with parents had contributed to the recovery of their school.

## More targeted effort is needed to sustain recovered schools

**34** A second Ofsted failure can severely damage a school's reputation. Most schools perform well in the two years following their emergence from Special Measures, and almost all headteachers of recovered schools who responded to our survey are confident that their school will sustain improvement. Headteachers whom we met considered that being in Special Measures had greatly improved their leadership skills and the schools' governance capacity, monitoring and observation, and teaching and learning. Only five per cent of schools that recover from Special Measures are assessed by Ofsted as 'unsatisfactory' or worse two years later, while 60 per cent of them are assessed as good or better. But there is limited evidence available about the performance of recovered schools in the longer term, and our review of schools that came out of Special Measures between April 1995 and March 1997 showed that ten years later around 40 per cent of the schools had closed. However, these schools were among the first to recover from Special Measures and their characteristics, and the way that they were turned around, could be different from schools that recovered more recently. And, by the end of the 2004-05 school year, just 44 schools had been subject to Special Measures for a second time.<sup>14</sup>

**35** Schools that sustain their recovery are generally those that seek to address key risks by:

- **conducting regular, honest self-evaluation**, and acknowledging and responding to weaknesses: all schools develop weaknesses from time to time; poorly performing schools often do not acknowledge and deal with them;

- **continuously assessing risks**, such as possible departure of key staff: poorly performing schools often do not have robust systems and procedures that their staff can continue to operate after key people have moved on; and
- **maintaining good relations** with parents, the local authority and other schools: poorly performing schools are often slow to organise or even to take up the offer of outside support and expertise.

**36** The Department and local authorities can provide an environment in which improvement is more likely to be sustained by:

- **helping schools to recruit good teachers**, especially where there are teacher shortages in some areas and subjects;
- **improving information and certainty about future funding**: new school funding arrangements from 2006-07 will simplify funding streams, though there will still need to be flexibility to provide special support to vulnerable schools;
- **helping schools to identify and manage their many responsibilities** and requirements placed on them: including help with providing better information to parents, and dealing with parental choice, school admissions procedures, (in many areas) falling school rolls, the need to find school places for 'hard to place' pupils and increases in the autonomy of individual schools; and
- **building capacity of governing bodies** by helping with governor recruitment and training, especially in areas where few suitable volunteers are available.

**37** The headteacher is key to sustaining performance and improvement in any school. However, the numbers of appropriately experienced people applying for headteacher posts are generally falling, despite salary increases and the introduction of the National Professional Qualification for Headship, and there are concerns that it could be difficult to replace the large numbers of headteachers approaching retirement over the next five to ten years. In 2004-05, 28 per cent of primary and 20 per cent of secondary schools had headteacher vacancies. In some places, headteachers have been asked to act as 'executive headteachers' and lead more than one school. This approach works in some cases and can help poorer schools by linking them with good schools, but it can also be risky given the challenges of school leadership and the importance of the personal presence of the leader.

<sup>14</sup> *The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools 2004-05, Ofsted 2005.*





## RECOMMENDATIONS

**38** Because of the adverse impact of poor performance on pupils and the high costs of continued failure, good value for money is achieved through increased emphasis on prevention and speedy recovery where failure does occur. The schools sector is making progress in that the combined efforts of school leaders and teachers, local authorities and the Department have contributed to a reduction in the number of poorly performing schools. However, more can and should be done to reduce poorly performing schools still further, and to support poorly performing schools in turning their performance around quickly and in sustaining their recovery. The following recommendations set out the main areas where action is both possible and required.

**a** **The Department and local authorities need to combine their efforts to identify schools at risk and intervene before they fail.**

Fewer schools would fail if their symptoms were identified much sooner so that effective remedial action could be taken quickly. The main indicators that a school is experiencing problems are: lower than expected pupil attainment and progress; ineffective leadership; poor standard of teaching; increasing problems with pupil behaviour; and declining applications for school places.

The Department should:

- provide to local authorities, through its website and personal contact, a national perspective that draws on knowledge of warning signs and recovery operations in schools throughout England;
- share its analysis of primary and secondary school performance data with local authorities and School Improvement Partners to help them identify the schools at risk; and
- maintain regular formal contact with all local authorities, and challenge those that do not take effective action to support and improve vulnerable schools.

The local authorities should:

- provide sufficient training for governing bodies so that they can be effective in appointing headteachers and managing their performance;
- work with School Improvement Partners to analyse, monitor and better understand school performance;
- provide speedy extra support (and funding if necessary) to all identified vulnerable schools and monitor their progress closely; and
- be prepared to use their statutory powers to enforce changes in vulnerable schools that will not cooperate in accepting support.



Although the Department and local authorities will incur some additional costs if they implement this recommendation, these actions are aimed mainly at making existing practices more effective and should produce savings from preventing schools from failing.

**b To recover quickly, poorly performing schools need to give priority to improving school leadership and establishing a positive culture centred on teaching and learning.**

Schools that perform poorly fail to put teaching and learning at the centre of their strategy for recovery. Most recovered schools find that the greatest contribution to recovery comes from initiatives to improve their teaching and learning, and their school leadership.

Schools should:

- put teaching at the heart of the school's self-evaluation: including, for example, commitment to regular curriculum reviews and assessment of teaching quality;
- build effective leadership teams that provide collective leadership and responsibility, based on mutual trust and the high expectations of all staff and pupils that they will fulfil their potential; and
- seek external support for school improvement, particularly from their local authority services and neighbouring schools.

School governing bodies should:

- be ready to take any hard decisions necessary to maintain the performance of the school; this includes helping the headteacher to take such decisions.

Any costs of implementing this recommendation should be seen as core costs, not additional, because the actions are crucial to the school's recovery.

**c Poorly performing schools need an assessment of their potential to improve and a plan that minimises the number of 'pupil years' lost to a poor education.**

Where a school is performing poorly, getting it to improve quickly – or closing it where it cannot – means fewer pupils miss out on a good education, and for a shorter period. Currently very few schools placed in Special Measures recover within 12 months, though most do so within two years. It is totally unacceptable for a school to go on providing a poor education beyond two years, or to improve only to fail again.

Local authorities should:

- in conjunction with Ofsted, assess the potential of a poorly performing school to recover quickly. Where this is unlikely, they should take fast and effective action to replace the leadership team or close the school;

## RECOMMENDATIONS CONTINUED

- challenge the school to recover quickly and support it as necessary, for example by helping it with action planning and self-evaluation, by getting it to bring in new systems that it needs to secure its recovery, by recruiting effective governors, and by organising collaboration with other schools; and
- support the school in addressing issues such as falling rolls and the relatively large numbers of vulnerable pupils that these schools often have, who may require relatively intensive support.

The Department and Ofsted should:

- measure the performance of local authorities in turning around schools.

Costs of implementing this recommendation would not be substantial because good local authorities are already doing these things and the Department and Ofsted already have some information on the performance of local authorities. By comparison, the average revenue cost of school education in 2004-05 was £3,180 per pupil, and this sum is not used effectively where schools perform poorly and their pupils do not make progress.

**d Ofsted should introduce a risk-based approach to selecting schools for inspection and for following up the progress of schools in Special Measures or with a Notice to Improve.**

While inspections focus on areas of risk, Ofsted does not inspect schools more often if they are at risk: it inspects all schools with the same frequency. The shorter inspection cycle from September 2005 will

help identify some poorly performing schools earlier, but there is still a risk that schools will have been performing poorly for up to three years before being identified through inspection.

Ofsted should:

- inspect vulnerable or poorly performing schools more frequently than it inspects schools that have demonstrated a strong culture of continuous improvement and capable self-evaluation;
- encourage local authorities to notify Ofsted where they consider that the inspection of a school in decline should be brought forward;
- clarify its assessments of schools' 'capacity to improve', to help identify those that are on a path to improvement but not yet good enough to leave Special Measures; and
- offer schools in Special Measures and with a Notice to Improve more extensive support and expertise from inspectors, building on support already given at its school improvement seminars.

Ofsted should not incur additional costs from implementing this recommendation, because it should aim to offset its extra work with poorly performing schools with reductions in the time spent in inspecting more capable schools. It could measure the effect of the changes as part of ongoing work to measure the impact of inspections.

**e More needs to be done to identify and tackle the barriers that discourage potentially suitable candidates from becoming headteachers.**

As children's and young people's chances in life depend on the effectiveness of their school, headteachers have a challenging and vital role in leading their school and, for some, in turning around a poorly performing school. Headteachers have come under increasing pressure in recent years from extended responsibilities and external scrutiny, and recent surveys of headteacher recruitment have indicated that there are growing shortages of headteachers.

The Department should:

- commission research to determine, in more depth than currently known, the barriers that discourage experienced teachers from developing into a managerial role, and experienced managers from becoming headteachers;
- commission research to identify the critical success factors associated with executive headteachers;
- do more to encourage school managers to consider undertaking the National Professional Qualification for Headship; and
- develop the role of federations of schools and School Improvement Partners in enhancing the support provided to school leaders to strengthen their skills and performance.

The National College for School Leadership should:

- extend training to develop among headteachers the particular skills required to turn around a poorly performing or declining school.

The Department considers that the recommendation could be implemented without it incurring any additional costs. The impact could be seen in improvements to leadership, as measured by Ofsted inspections, and reductions in the number of poorly performing schools.