



National Audit Office

Partnering for school improvement

REPORT BY THE COMPTROLLER AND AUDITOR GENERAL | HC 822 Session 2008-2009 | 9 July 2009

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Partnering for school improvement

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3 July 2009

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SUMMARY

1 The Department for Children, Schools and Families (the Department) spent around £400 million on initiatives that featured partnering in 2007-08. While this sum is small relative to the £16 billion spent on secondary schools in England by central and local government, partnering has considerable potential to lever change in educational standards for the benefit of children and young people.

2 The Department's aim is for partnering to help schools learn from one another, share resources and expertise, improve the quality of teaching and learning, broaden the curriculum, increase choice for pupils and improve services to their communities. Partnering is defined in this report as a school working with one or more other schools or organisations towards agreed objectives. The nature of partnering varies considerably and is difficult to classify, but can be categorised by the range and extent of activities in which a partnership engages, and the level of commitment from partners (**Figure 1**).

3 This report evaluates the extent and nature of partnering in secondary schools, and assesses its impact on the attainment and behaviour of 11-14 year olds. We focused on early secondary education because the transition from primary education is a particularly important stage in a pupil's education.

4 Comprehensive data about the full range of schools' partnering activities are not routinely collected, so we used a variety of methods to generate and analyse information. We:

- measured the extent and nature of partnering activity among secondary schools in England through a survey of 398 schools;
- compared the results of our survey on the extent of schools' partnering activity with data on the standards of attainment and behaviour of their pupils aged 11-14 years to test for associations;

- collected available data on the cost of partnership working from schools and the Department;
- interviewed headteachers and staff in schools to understand the realities of working in partnership; and
- interviewed representatives from the Department and education experts.

Full details of our methodology are presented in a separate Analytical Supplement, available at <http://www.nao.org.uk/schools09supplement>.

5 We focused on partnering itself as a tool for school improvement. While we took account of the main Departmental initiatives that feature partnering, we did not examine specific initiatives.

Findings

Extent and nature of partnering

6 Partnering with a direct focus on improving the attainment and behaviour of 11-14 year olds was widespread among secondary schools in England.

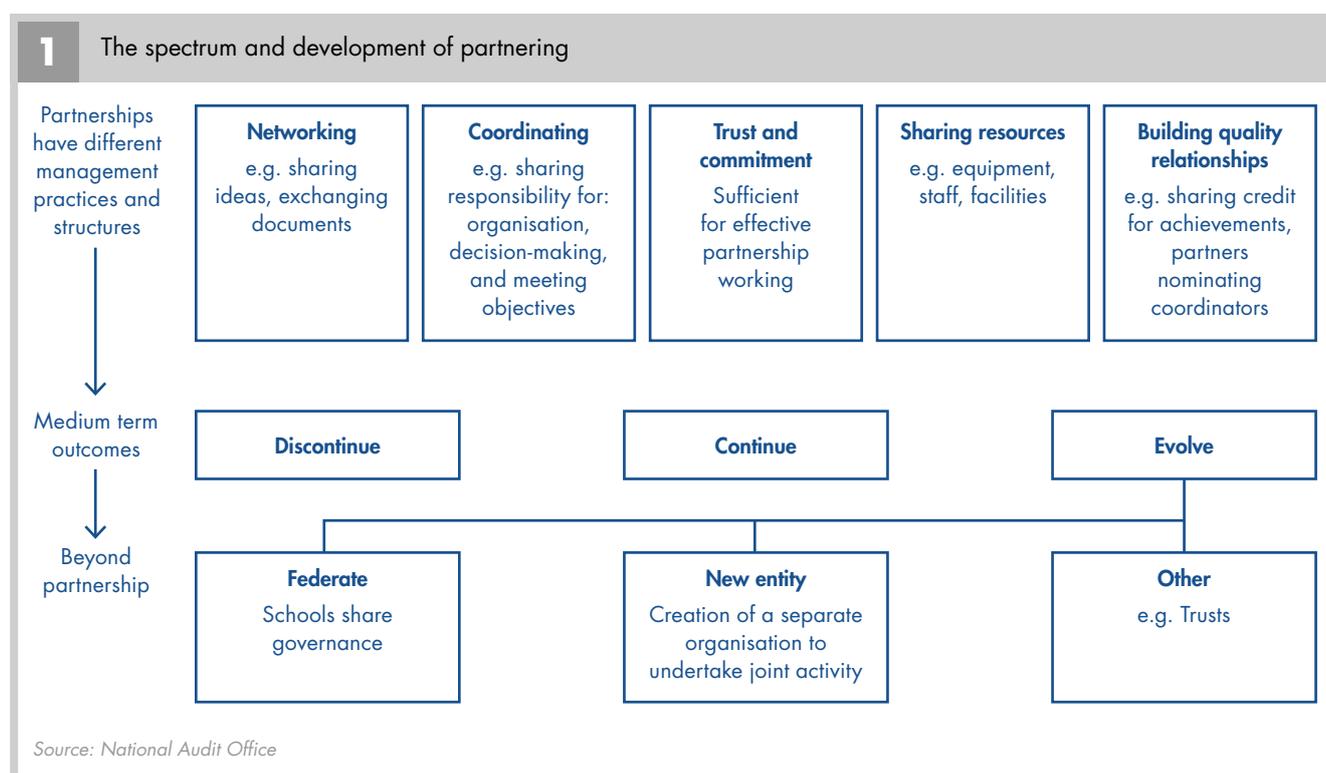
Partnering to improve attainment ('attainment partnership') was more common than partnering to improve behaviour ('behaviour partnership'). Only 13 per cent of secondary schools were not involved in either an attainment or a behaviour partnership (**Figure 2 overleaf**).

7 Partnering had most commonly developed in response to locally identified needs, such as to improve pupil attainment. Departmental initiatives were occasionally, but less often, the direct prompt for the creation of schools' most effective partnerships (Figure 8).

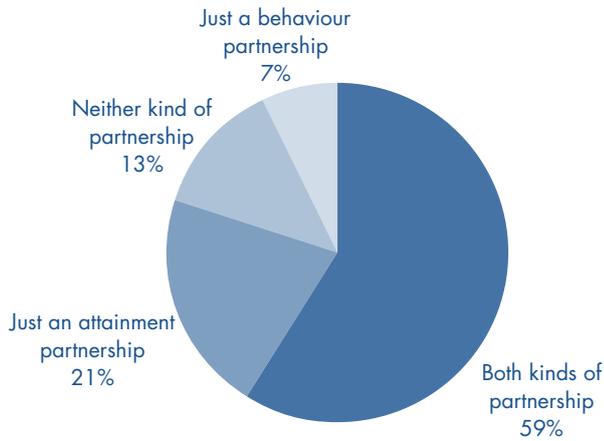
8 Our fieldwork left us with some concerns about partnerships' clarity of objectives, external scrutiny, and accountability. The internal management of partnerships varied in maturity. The level of governance should be balanced against the nature of the partnership. Over-complex governance can stifle innovation, but if there is insufficient oversight, poor use of resources may result.

9 We found little evidence that schools felt over-burdened by participation in too many partnerships, despite the existence of a wide range of initiatives that feature partnering.

10 Some of the formal Behaviour and Attendance Partnerships – local groupings of secondary schools to improve pupil behaviour and tackle persistent absence – were essentially administrative arrangements for moving excluded pupils, rather than collaborative partnering to improve behaviour. If they are to realise their full potential, all schools in Behaviour and Attendance Partnerships need to develop collective good practices for improving behaviour.



2 Secondary schools' membership of partnerships



Source: National Audit Office/Ipsos MORI survey of secondary schools, 2009

NOTE
 Calculated on weighted data for 393 secondary schools asked about partnerships to improve either attainment or behaviour among 11-14 year olds.

Impact of partnering

11 Overwhelmingly, schools that worked in partnership regarded partnering as a valuable tool for improving standards of attainment and behaviour. Around 80 per cent of headteachers or their nominated representatives (hereafter 'headteachers') responding to our survey believed that their most effective partnerships had improved attainment and behaviour, though this also indicates that at least one-fifth of partnerships were not yet meeting their full potential. Our quantitative analysis (Figure 3) could not demonstrate a direct impact of partnering on attainment and behaviour across schools nationally, because other factors are likely to have substantial effects, and partnering has wider positive outcomes beyond the impact on pupils' test results.

12 Schools' most effective partnership was often one which covered the transition of pupils between primary and secondary schools, a period in education when young people's progress is at relatively high risk. Over 40 per cent of schools' most effective attainment partnerships involved partnering with primary schools.

13 Trust between partners, which develops over time, is fundamental to effective joint working. Introducing partnering arrangements across partners which have not built up trust is a less effective way to start a partnership. Informal sharing of equipment or facilities between schools can develop relationships and lead to more formal partnering.

14 Better performing schools could do more to share their expertise and support other schools in their locality.¹ Despite the Department wanting strong schools to support poorer performers, better performing schools were less likely to be partnering. Those that were not in partnerships typically cited the absence of problems with attainment or behaviour in their school as the main reasons. Schools with more pupils in receipt of free school meals are less likely to be performing well, and need successful partners as sources of support in tackling their challenges.

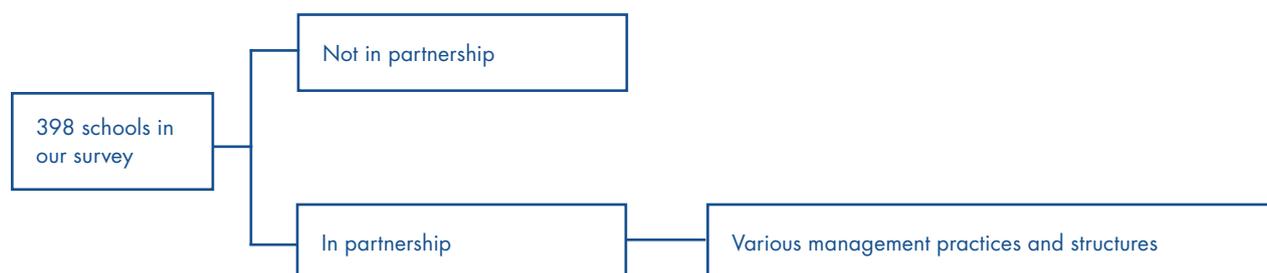
15 Among schools that were partnering, only a few specific features of partnering were associated with levels of attainment or standards of behaviour (Figure 3). Our statistical analysis showed that, for example, being in a longer established attainment partnership and sharing resources had a positive association. Other factors not related to the organisation of the partnership were also implicated. For example, good rates of pupil attendance were positively associated with attainment and good behaviour. Evidence from our interviews also indicated that partnerships work best when their organisation fits with local circumstances.

Costs of partnering

16 For many schools, lack of funding was not a barrier to sustaining partnering, though schools could not provide a cost for it. Schools reported that the main resource required for partnering was staff time, so much of the cost is subsumed within salary budgets. Some schools believed that effective partnering resulted in savings as other activities were reduced as the partnership achieved its aims, offsetting some costs, but were not able to quantify savings.

¹ We define better or higher performing schools as those in the highest quartile (25 per cent) of attainment in age 14 tests, or in receipt of good or outstanding ratings from Ofsted for progression of learners or behaviour.

3 Our analysis in summary



Question

Do schools in partnerships have different levels of attainment and behaviour compared to schools that are not in partnership?

Among schools in partnerships, does the presence of these features have a statistical relationship with their levels of attainment and behaviour?

Answer: attainment

Probably yes.

Though not all results were statistically significant¹, they pointed in the same direction: on average, schools in partnerships had lower attainment, were less likely to be making improvements to attainment, and Ofsted² rated their learner progression as poorer.

Possible explanations:

- Schools join partnerships to address poor attainment. Those schools that do not join often perceive they have no issues to address (confirmed by survey). We do not conclude that being a member of a partnership is the cause of poor results.
- Three years of data may not be sufficient to draw a reliable trend.
- Academic results may provide a limited measure of achievement for some of these schools and pupils.

Inconclusive.

Eight partnership practices and structures were tested against three attainment outcomes.

Schools' test results for 14 year olds adjusted for intake³:

Only one feature of partnering was associated with better results: longer time in an attainment partnership.

Trend in schools' test results for 14 year olds: The only features of partnering which predicted an improving trend were sharing resources and being a member of a behaviour partnership. The impact of both was strong.

Ofsted ratings of learner progression: Only one attribute of partnering – longer time in an attainment partnership – predicted a better rating, but this was a stronger predictor than the other school characteristics which were implicated, for example, pupil attendance rate.

With all three outcomes, the amount of variation between schools that was explained by the models was generally small. A variety of school characteristics, for example, attendance rates, was also significant in explaining the differences between schools.

Answer: behaviour

Yes.

Schools in partnership tended to have greater problems with behaviour.

Possible explanations:

- Schools join partnerships to address poor behaviour. Those schools that do not join often perceive they have no issues to address (confirmed by survey). We do not conclude that being a member of a partnership is the cause of poor behaviour.
- The most recent available data on exclusions (2006) substantially predate our data on partnering (2009).

Inconclusive.

Eight partnership practices and structures were tested against two behaviour outcomes.

Rate of exclusion: The only feature of partnering which predicted exclusion was the length of time in an attainment partnership, but its influence was small.

Ofsted ratings of behaviour: Sharing resources was the only partnering practice or structure that was associated with better ratings. This was the best predictor of the rating, ahead of attendance or attainment scores.

Other school characteristics, particularly attendance, were also significant in explaining the differences between schools.

Source: National Audit Office analysis

NOTES

1 Statistically significant results: there is a one in 20 chance that these results occurred by chance. Where results are not statistically significant, the results may be due to random variation. The separate Analytical Supplement provides a full explanation of our statistical analysis.

2 Ofsted is the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills.

3 We used the 'contextual value-added' results for schools.

Conclusion on value for money

17 Partnering is widespread across secondary education in England. The Department is therefore achieving its aim of promoting partnering, either through its own initiatives or more commonly through schools adopting partnering independently.

18 It is difficult to demonstrate a direct, quantifiable impact of partnering on attainment and behaviour across schools nationally because other factors are likely to have substantial effects. Nevertheless, the potential for partnering to lever improvement has not yet been fully realised. Our qualitative evidence indicated that partnering has wider benefits, such as sharing resources, energising teachers to review their practice, and helping schools to identify and tackle their most pressing problems. In addition, where teachers are facing particular challenges, partnering can be a source of practical and moral support.

19 Schools generally see partnering as an affordable method of school improvement, and it has the potential to lever major improvements from the £16 billion spent each year in secondary schools. However, partnering still has a cost that is generally concealed in overall costs, particularly salaries. Objectives are often not clearly articulated, and the costs and benefits of partnering are rarely independently reviewed. Benefits can be difficult to value and to relate directly to partnering activity, for example, the wider savings achieved through reducing pupil exclusions. We conclude that at local level there is greater scope to evaluate costs and benefits of individual partnerships. Without such evaluation there is a risk that some partnering activities could continue while the costs outweigh the benefits.

Recommendations

20 Partnering has the potential to raise pupil attainment and improve behaviour through schools sharing and making better use of existing resources and expertise. To maximise its impact partnering needs to have the following essential features:

- a** **All partnering activity should have a clear focus on what it is intended to achieve.** At present, some schools struggle to plan for clear outcomes, and need to share experience of partnering activity where clearly formulated objectives and planned outcomes have led to tangible achievements.
- b** **School governors should have a more prominent role in enabling partnering to make good progress.** At present, governors have little knowledge of, and

still less involvement in, partnering. Schools should develop simple ways of supporting governors' understanding and oversight of partnering activity.

- c** **There should be greater clarity about the valuable resources that partnering consumes.** Schools should periodically assess resource demands, plan future requirements and discontinue any activities where the costs outweigh benefits.
- d** **Except in cases where there is a good reason otherwise, schools should have the freedom to determine the best form and management of partnerships for their local context.** Their decisions should be informed by key principles of partnering (**Box 1**).

BOX 1

Key principles for effective partnering

- Trust, goodwill and commitment among members
- Clear and consensual objectives
- Good alignment with local context
- Inclusive of all those who have the skills and knowledge to usefully contribute, whatever their role
- Local authority support and, where there is a clear role to play, direct involvement
- Recognition that all partner schools have something to contribute, and willingness to share success
- Regular evaluation with independent input
- Simple governance with periodic review to assess whether the partnership is meeting its full potential and should continue

Source: National Audit Office

- 21** In addition:
 - e** **Schools with better attaining 11-14 year olds and a stronger record of success in managing behaviour should be incentivised to share their expertise.** A potentially strong incentive could be achieved through Ofsted's plans to evaluate, from September 2009, how effectively schools work in partnership to promote better attainment, learning and progress for their pupils.
 - f** **The Department has launched national initiatives that feature partnering.** Evaluation of national initiatives should seek to identify new ways in which the potential of partnering can be extended, and the Department should end any that are no longer contributing demonstrably to educational objectives.



Partnering policy and expenditure

Partnering as a tool for school improvement

1.1 Partnering is a feature of many of the Department's programmes and initiatives that aim to improve the behaviour and attainment of 11-14 year-old pupils (**Figure 4 overleaf**). It is used to encourage schools to learn from one another, share resources and expertise, improve the quality of teaching and learning, broaden the curriculum, increase choice for pupils and improve services to their communities. The Government's white paper, *Your child, your schools, our future: building a 21st century schools system*, sets out the expectation that schools will be outward-facing and use partnering where appropriate.

1.2 This report seeks to evaluate the extent to which partnering has contributed to schools' success in improving the attainment and behaviour of pupils in the first three years of secondary education. It was not practical to examine partnering across the whole range of compulsory education, and we selected the 11-14 age range because it builds upon the transition from primary to secondary education, and is an important time during which pupils' knowledge and attitudes are developed that will influence their future education.

Expenditure on partnering

1.3 Much of the cost of partnering comprises the staff costs of the teachers and other employees involved. The Department's requirements for schools' financial reporting do not expect the cost of different management and teaching practices to be identified. Schools seldom assess the extent or cost of staff time spent on particular activities such as partnering, so it is not possible to determine how much of the £16 billion expended on secondary education is spent on partnering.

1.4 There are a range of ways through which funding is allocated to activities which involve partnering.

- We estimate that in 2007-08, key initiatives featuring partnering techniques (Figure 4) collectively cost around £400 million. A significant proportion of these funds will have been used to support local partnering. For example, schools awarded subject specialist status are expected to spend around one third of their specialist school grant on work with school and community partners. £400 million represents approximately 2.5 per cent of national spend on secondary education.
- The Department funds other bodies that support partnering, such as the National College for School Leadership, which ran a programme of Networked Learning Communities until 2006, and has since commissioned research into partnership models of leadership (for example Federations); developed resources and support for partnering schools; and developed a website to share information with school leaders.
- Other organisations, including other government departments, engage in initiatives involving partnering that seek to improve pupil attainment. For example, the Aimhigher programme of the former Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills aims to help more young people to access higher education.
- Some funding comes from outside of government. For example, Bank of America Merrill Lynch funds a partnership with three secondary schools in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets (**Case Example 1 on page 11**).

4 The Department's spend on school improvement programmes aimed at improving attainment and behaviour among 11-14 year olds that feature partnering methods

| Initiative and when launched | Purpose | Annual funding |
|--|---|---|
| Education Business Partnerships (late 1970s) | To encourage stronger links between education and business, and to give pupils opportunities to experience business environments. | £25 million in 2007-08 |
| Specialist Schools Programme (1994) | To work collaboratively with partner schools to provide or facilitate high quality learning opportunities and outcomes in their specialist subjects. The majority of maintained schools are specialist schools, and they are expected to spend a third of their grant on work with school and community partners. | £345 million in 2007-08 |
| Independent/State School Partnership scheme (1997) | To encourage collaborative working between the independent and state sectors, raising standards and widening educational opportunities for pupils and teachers. | £1.2 million in 2007-08 |
| Creative Partnerships (2002) | To develop the skills of young people across England, raising their aspirations and equipping them for their futures. | £2.5 million in 2007-08 |
| Federations (2002) | To form a single governing body for two or more schools, which discharge their responsibilities jointly. Funding provided through the Targeted Capital Fund. | £14 million capital funding in 2007-08 for both Federations and Trust Schools. No additional recurrent funding for Federations |
| Safer School Partnerships (2002) | To provide a formal structured mechanism for joint working between schools, police and other local partners, particularly but not exclusively local authority children's services. | No direct funding to partnerships |
| School Improvement Partners (2004) | To help tackle the bureaucracy faced by primary and secondary schools, the School Improvement Partner acts as a link between the local authority and the school to improve accountability. They also support the school's partnership with the local authority and other parties. | £23.5 million in 2008-09 Approximately the same amount spent in 2007-08 |
| Education Improvement Partnerships (2005) | To allow schools to collaborate to deliver services that would usually be delivered by their local authority, to raise standards to the benefit of young people and children in the local community. | No direct funding to partnerships |
| Trust Schools (2006) | Trust Schools are state-funded foundation schools supported by a charitable trust. Acquiring a trust will be a way for schools to use the experience of external partners to support the school's leadership, management and direction. | £1.4 million in 2007-08 |
| Behaviour and Attendance Partnerships (2007) | To improve behaviour and tackle persistent absence by sharing expertise, resources and facilities for that purpose. | No direct funding to partnerships |
| National Challenge (2008) | To secure higher standards in all secondary schools so that, by 2011, at least 30 per cent of pupils in every school will gain five or more GCSE grades A* to C, including both English and mathematics. | National Challenge did not exist in 2007-08. £400 million for all support to National Challenge schools over 2008-09 to 2010-11 |

Source: National Audit Office

CASE EXAMPLE 1

Swanlea School and the Bank of America Merrill Lynch Enterprise and Entrepreneurship programme

| | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Purpose: | 500 pupils aged 11-14 each year develop skills, attitudes and knowledge related to financial literacy and enterprise, keeping a portfolio throughout to encourage them to reflect upon and record their learning. It appeals to all pupils, including those at risk of becoming disengaged and of being not in education, employment or training from age 16. |
| Partners: | Swanlea School (and others), Bank of America Merrill Lynch. |
| Length of involvement: | Since 2005. |
| Funding: | Bank of America Merrill Lynch: \$200,000-\$300,000 annually for work with three schools. |
| Impact: | Since Swanlea School began to take part in the programme, Business GCSE results have improved markedly and now exceed national results: |

GCSE Business results: achievement of five grade A* to Cs (per cent)

| | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 |
|---|------|------|------|------|
| School's target | 52 | 54 | 80 | 85 |
| School's actual | 27 | 54 | 95 | 100 |
| Percentage point difference between target and actual | -25 | 0 | +15 | +15 |

A similar pattern is seen in information and communication technology grades. In 2009 Swanlea School expects over 90 per cent to achieve Business GCSE grades A* to C with a higher proportion achieving A and A* grades than in 2008 (50 per cent). The school also reports that the Enterprise and Entrepreneurship programme complements the BTEC First Diploma. This means that all students starting the BTEC course do so with a high level of financial literacy and a good understanding of basic business concepts, allowing some students to complete enough units to achieve the BTEC First Diploma, equivalent to four GCSEs. Bank of America Merrill Lynch hopes to recruit some of its alumni after they graduate.

At the end of the programme, the student's portfolio is submitted for an externally recognised qualification in Enterprise Capability equivalent to a grade B at GCSE.

Description of partnership:

Tower Hamlets Education Business Partnership is a charitable organisation that also plays a key role in developing partnerships in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. It facilitated the arrangement with Bank of America Merrill Lynch. Raising the attainment of pupils is a key objective for Swanlea School and Bank of America Merrill Lynch. A wide range of activities have been carried out over the 10 years since the partnership between Bank of America Merrill Lynch and Tower Hamlets Education Business Partnership began that reflect the diversity of partnership working across many schools. Activities include:

- mentoring of secondary school pupils by Bank of America Merrill Lynch staff;
- mock interviews given to secondary school pupils by Bank of America Merrill Lynch staff;
- a school governor programme;
- a reading and number partnership with a primary school;
- awards ceremonies; and
- the Prime Minister visited the school in connection with the scheme and enterprise initiatives.

Source: National Audit Office/Bank of America Merrill Lynch/Tower Hamlets Education Business Partnership/Swanlea School



Extent and form of partnering activity in schools

2.1 There are no existing comprehensive data about the extent and nature of schools' partnering activities. We therefore asked a representative sample of schools about how they worked with schools or other organisations to improve attainment and behaviour across the first three years of secondary education (**Box 2**). Case-example research has suggested that the structural features and processes of partnerships were important to their success,² but that there was a lack of information about these processes.³

Extent of partnering activity

2.2 Partnering to improve attainment and behaviour for 11-14 year olds was widespread among secondary schools in England (Figure 2, Summary). Around 60 per cent of schools were involved in both types of partnership, but around 13 per cent were involved in neither. Eighty per cent of schools were involved in at least one partnership with a focus on improving attainment across the first three years of secondary education (hereafter an 'attainment partnership'), while 65 per cent were involved in at least one partnership with a focus on improving behaviour (hereafter a 'behaviour partnership'). These behaviour partnerships include the Behaviour and Attendance Partnerships in which the Department expected all schools to participate by September 2007 and, subject to Parliamentary approval of provisions in the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Bill, membership will become a statutory requirement from 2010. **Case Example 2** demonstrates how the London Borough of Tower Hamlets is using a Behaviour and Attendance Partnership and its impact.

2.3 In March 2008 the Department reported that 97 per cent of schools were involved in Behaviour and Attendance Partnerships, a significantly higher incidence of partnering around behaviour issues than our survey suggested. The Department's definition of a Behaviour and Attendance Partnership is broad – schools must show a commitment to working towards one or more of five design principles:

- schools are able to access services from the local authority, Pupil Referral Units, the private and voluntary sectors;
- schools agree to take a fair share of hard-to-place pupils and pupils for whom a move to another school is appropriate;

BOX 2

Our survey of secondary schools

In January and February 2009, we asked headteachers (or their nominated representatives) in secondary schools to tell us about the partnerships of which they were members. We asked them to focus on the one that they thought most successful in raising attainment across the first three years of secondary education. We asked for detailed information on how this partnership operated. We asked a subset of questions about the most effective partnership aimed at improving behaviour of 11-14 year olds.

We collected answers from 398 schools. This sample allowed us to draw general conclusions about partnering in secondary schools, but the size of the sample is not sufficient to support statistically robust conclusions about different types of school.

The Analytical Supplement provides full details of the survey methodology and analysis, available at <http://www.nao.org.uk/schools09supplement>.

Source: National Audit Office/Ipsos MORI survey of secondary schools, 2009

2 Hill K (ed) (2006) *The impact of networks on pupils, practitioners, organisations and the communities they serve: A summary of the systematic review of literature*, National College of School Leadership.

3 Atkinson M et al (2007) *Inter-school collaboration: a literature review*, National Foundation for Education Research.

- schools commit to a shared vision to improve behaviour and attendance;
- schools agree local targets and the partnership manages its own performance and processes; and
- the partnership arranges additional support to address the educational, personal development and welfare needs of pupils.

2.4 We explored the position further with 10 schools that stated they were not in behaviour partnerships but which the Department believed were in Behaviour and Attendance Partnerships. We found that all 10 schools either managed the movement of excluded pupils with other schools, or accessed central support from the local authority, and therefore met the Department's definition. However, the headteachers generally described such arrangements as long-standing administrative procedures, and not a collaborative or partnership approach to improve poor behaviour. We consider that our finding – that two thirds of schools are in partnerships aiming to address poor pupil behaviour – is more representative of the extent of strategic partnering to improve behaviour.

2.5 Most schools were involved in more than one attainment partnership, with an average of three partnerships, and were involved in fewer behaviour partnerships (**Figure 5 overleaf**). Generally, the schools we visited and other commentators did not believe that the number of partnerships was too high.

2.6 Partnering activity was not evenly spread across the secondary school sector:

- Fewer schools with higher attainment or better behaviour were members of partnerships.⁴ Though the majority did join partnerships to improve attainment, only half of higher-performing schools worked with others on behaviour.
- Schools with a high proportion of pupils receiving free school meals were more likely to be in attainment or behaviour partnerships than schools with relatively few. On average, schools in attainment partnerships had 16 per cent of their pupils in receipt of this benefit, compared to nine per cent of pupils in schools not in a partnership. Although the deprivation of the school's intake is related to whether schools partner or not, partnering appeared unrelated to deprivation in the local area.⁵

CASE EXAMPLE 2

Behaviour and Attendance Partnership in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets

| | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Purpose: | To improve pupil behaviour and tackle persistent absence. |
| Partners: | All but one of the secondary schools, the local authority, the Pupil Referral Unit, and other 14-19 partners (college and training providers) in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. A local authority representative acts as facilitator. |
| Length of involvement: | Since 2007. |
| Funding: | Schools use their main funding – Dedicated Schools Grant – received via the local authority. |
| Impact: | The number of pupil days lost to exclusion was reduced by over 3,000 between 2006-07 and 2007-08, a reduction of 41 per cent. Permanent exclusions dropped to 38 from 51. |

Description of partnership:

The partnership agreed to adopt 10 principles of behaviour management, so that schools are consistent in the management of behaviour and what they expect of all involved.

The partners agreed on the terms of a 'Fair Access' protocol for dealing with excluded and other hard-to-place pupils, and governing access to the Pupil Referral Unit. The protocol includes a 'managed-move' agreement. Previous efforts by headteachers

to organise pupil moves individually were unsuccessful. Now the local authority organises placement by applying an agreed formula to determine how many hard-to-place pupils each school will take. The formula takes into account the size, special educational needs and gender balance of schools. As a result, the less popular schools no longer receive most of the Borough's challenging pupils just because vacant pupil places are more commonly available at those schools.

Source: National Audit Office/London Borough of Tower Hamlets/National College for School Leadership

⁴ We define better or higher performing schools as those in the highest quartile (25 per cent) of attainment in age 14 tests, or in receipt of good or outstanding ratings from Ofsted for progression of learners or behaviour.

⁵ As measured by both the Index of Multiple Deprivation and the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index which measures deprivation in the local area. Free school meal entitlement relates directly to the school's pupils.

2.7 Schools' involvement in an attainment partnership was often long established: 41 per cent had been involved in their most effective attainment partnership for five or more years, with just 11 per cent involved for less than a year.

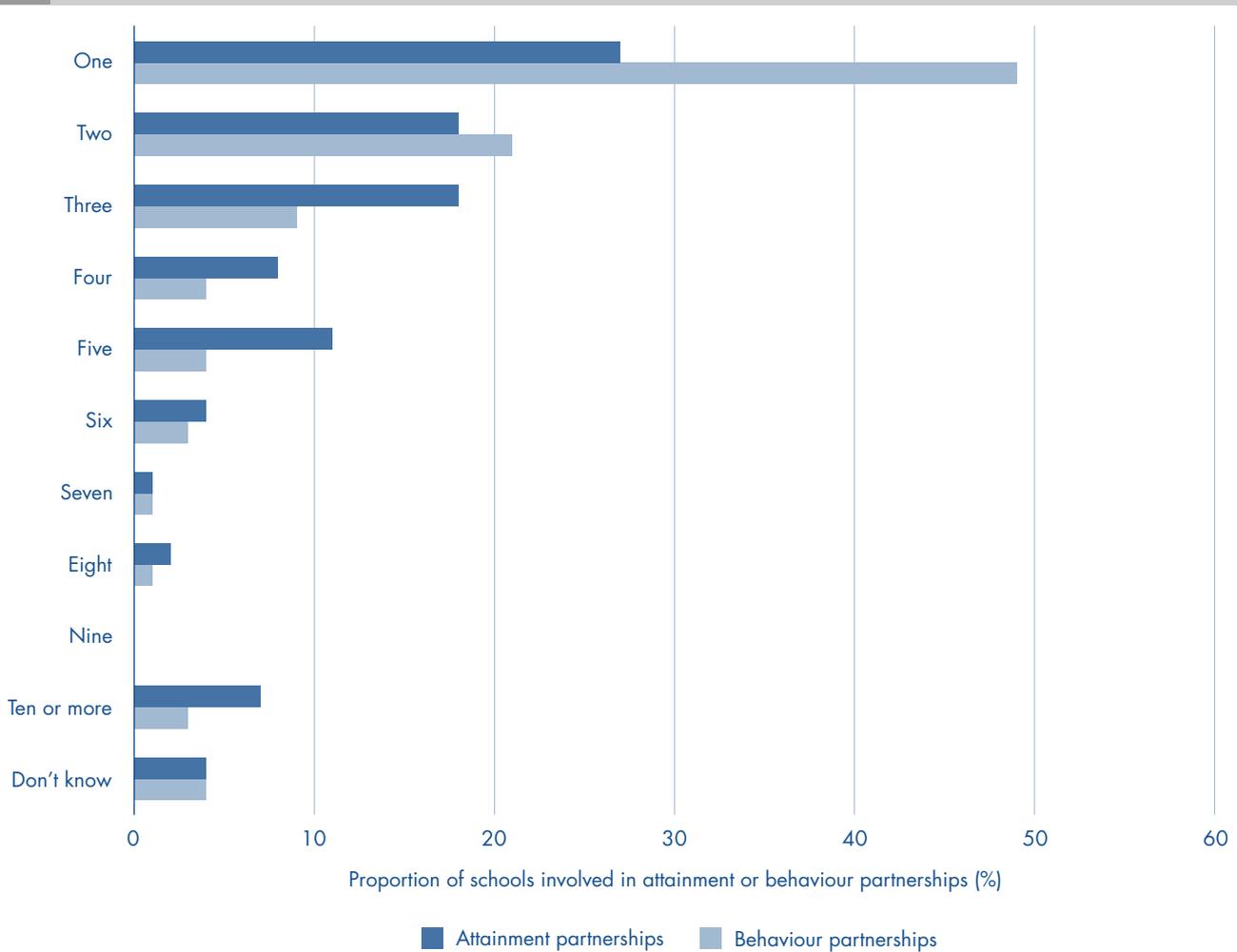
Members of partnerships

2.8 Other maintained schools were the most common partners in attainment partnerships (Figure 6). Most partnerships are small groupings: 67 per cent partnered with five or fewer secondary schools, although 18 per cent partnered with 10 or more secondary schools. Just one per cent of schools had independent schools in their most effective partnership. Forty per cent of schools were partnering with other types of organisation in their most effective partnership (although asking schools solely about

the most effective partnership meant the involvement and impact of other types of organisation was likely to be under-estimated).

2.9 Attainment partnerships had six member organisations on average. The Department's data suggest that the average Behaviour and Attendance Partnership has six or seven members, with 15 schools being the sole member of their 'Partnership' (Figure 7). In some cases, a local authority has all its schools in one partnership – in County Durham for example, all 36 schools are in one partnership. Our analysis could not demonstrate the impact of partnership size: we found no correlation between the total number of members of attainment partnerships and headteachers' assessments of their effectiveness, attainment test scores at age 14, the trend in each school's results or Ofsted's rating for the progression of learners.

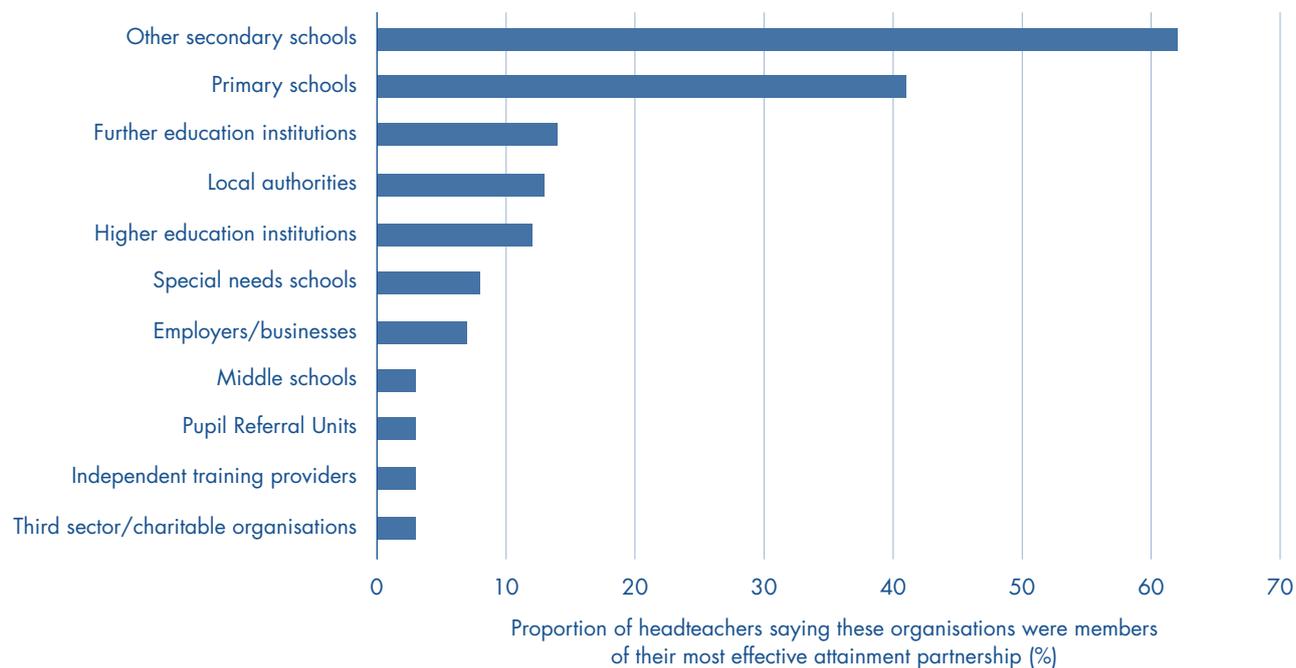
5 Number of attainment and behaviour focused partnerships in which schools are involved



Source: National Audit Office/Ipsos MORI survey of secondary schools, 2009

NOTE
Calculated on weighted data for 393 secondary schools.

6 Composition of the most effective attainment partnership

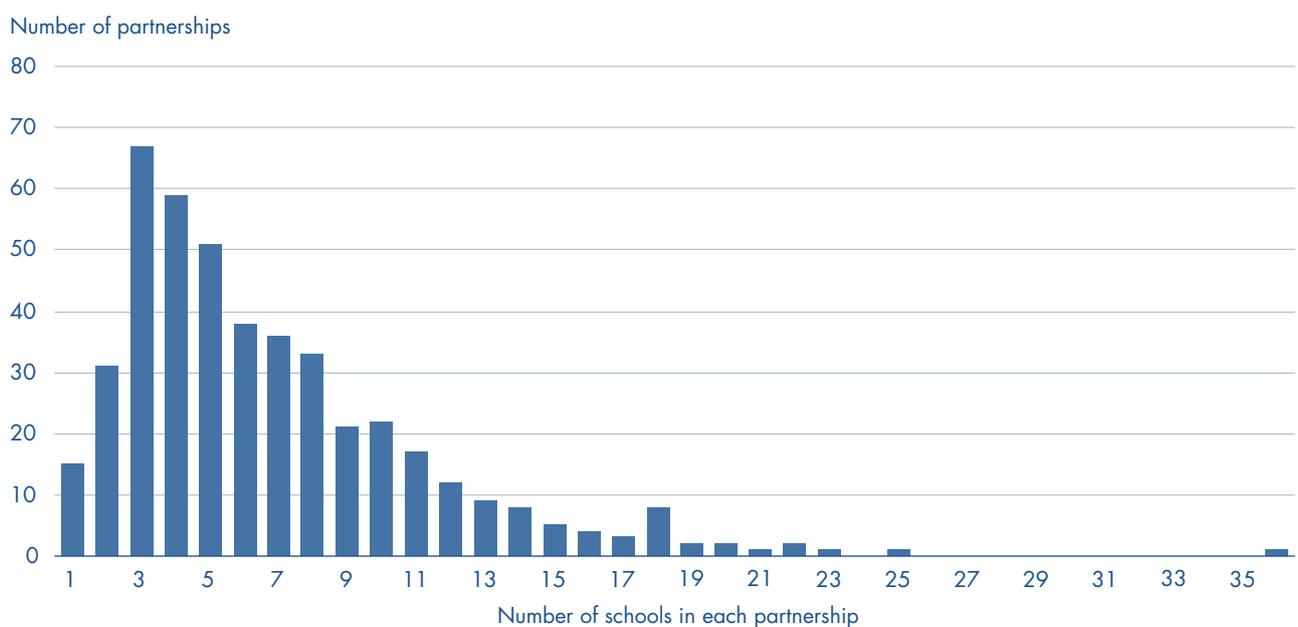


Source: National Audit Office/Ipsos MORI survey of secondary schools, 2009

NOTE

Most common answers. Calculated on weighted data for 315 secondary schools involved in at least one attainment partnership.

7 Number of schools in each Behaviour and Attendance Partnership



Source: National Audit Office analysis of Departmental data

NOTE

As at January 2009.

2.10 Secondary schools frequently partner with neighbouring primary schools to better manage pupils' transition from primary to secondary education (**Case Example 3**). A substantial number of these partnerships have 10 or more primary school members.

2.11 Sixty per cent of schools in an attainment partnership were satisfied with the level of support their school had received from the local authority in developing or working as part of the partnership. Fifteen per cent of headteachers were dissatisfied and 21 per cent felt neutral about the support they received from their local authority.

Reasons for partnering and reasons for not partnering

2.12 Many partnerships were created in response to local need, rather than as a direct result of the Department's initiatives (**Figure 8**). Partnerships were often locally generated and built on established relationships.

2.13 Where schools were not involved in an attainment partnership for pupils aged 11-14, most headteachers thought partnering unnecessary or irrelevant, rather than there being a lack of resources or suitable partners (**Figure 9**). Thirty seven per cent of non-partnering schools said that attainment was not an issue – on average these schools had higher test results for 14 year olds than other schools. Some schools prioritised an age group other than 11-14, or felt they could address attainment without the need for partners.

CASE EXAMPLE 3

The Globetown Learning Community in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets

| | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Purpose: | To keep young people at risk of disengaging from education on track to success by raising attainment and creating curriculum continuity over the 3-16 age range. |
| Partners: | Morpeth Secondary School and four neighbouring primary schools. |
| Length of involvement: | Since 1997. |
| Funding: | The initial partnership began without external funding. For six years it received Education Action Zone funding, then two years of European funding, ending in 2008. It is now a charity that raises funds and is commissioned by member schools to provide its activities. |
| Impact: | Tracking the participants' progress is difficult, but the partnership is experimenting with social networking sites to keep in touch. |

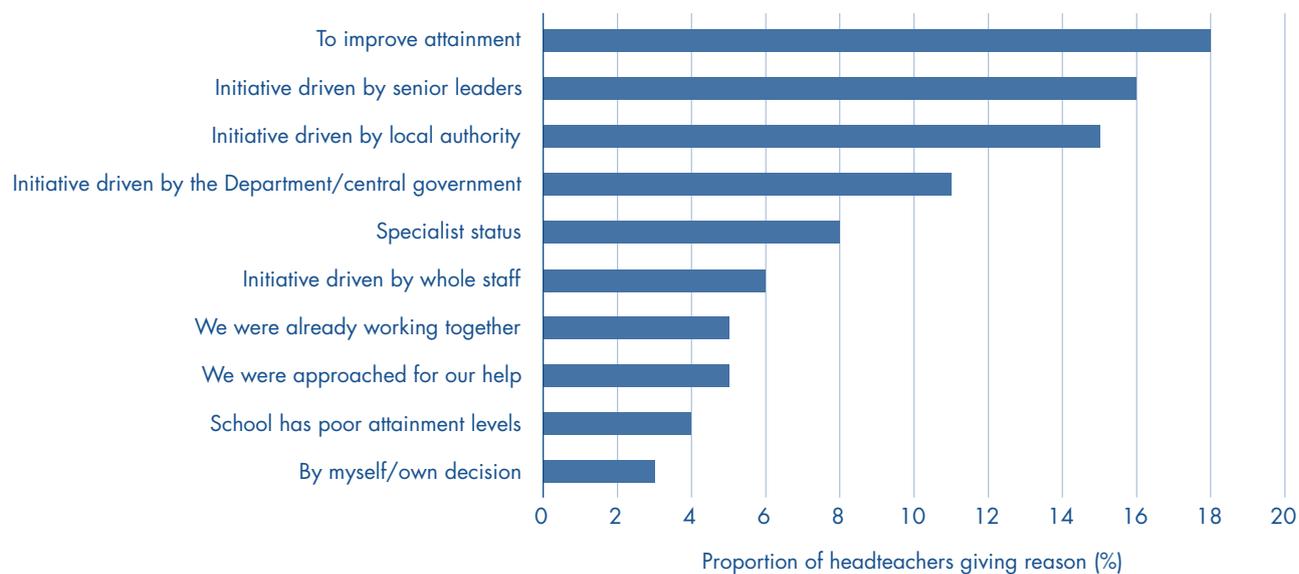
Description of partnership:

The charity has four permanent members of staff and employs sessional staff. Its aims have expanded over time to embrace social and educational inclusivity for the whole community, raising the aspirations of the whole family and improving the engagement of minority groups. Its activities have accordingly widened to include a crèche, adult learning, revision classes and 'life-coaching' by staff from major banks.

Primary schools are asked to identify around 25 young people each year who could benefit from additional support. The young people selected are judged to be otherwise unlikely to achieve their full potential. They may come from families who cannot help with school work, be at risk of disengagement, or exhibiting poor behaviour. Cognitive tests highlight the potential to achieve grades A*-C at GCSE. The partnership undertakes targeted work with families, providing peer support, and may continue to provide support into adulthood.

Source: National Audit Office/London Borough of Tower Hamlets

8 Reasons for forming or joining the most effective attainment partnership

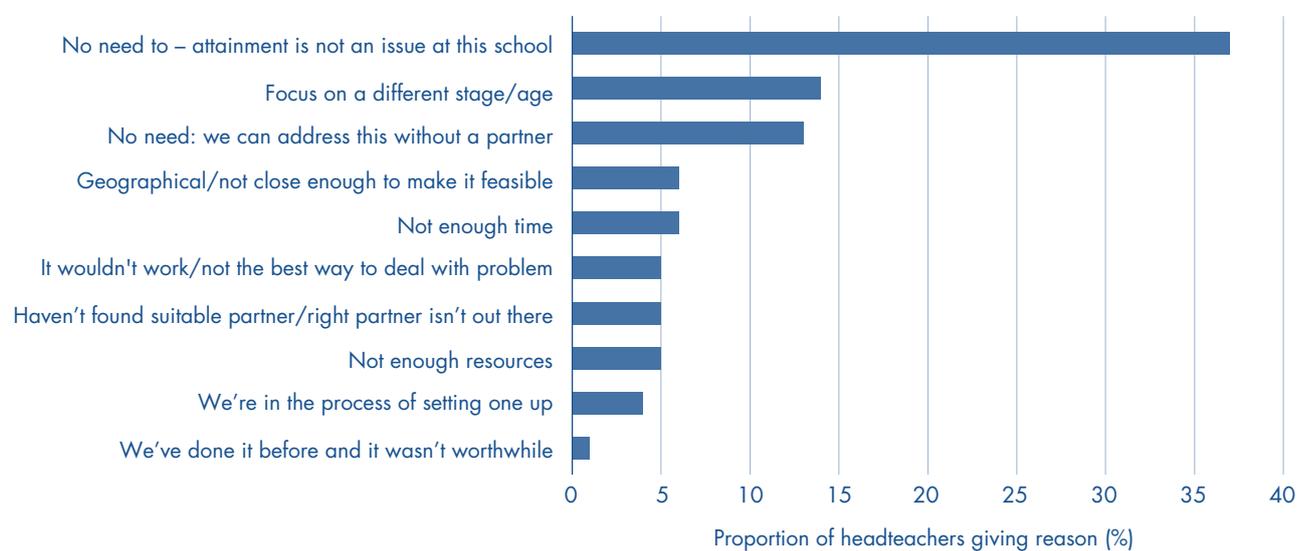


Source: National Audit Office/Ipsos MORI survey of secondary schools, 2009

NOTE

Top ten answers. Calculated on weighted data for 315 secondary schools involved in at least one attainment partnership.

9 Reasons for not being involved in an attainment partnership



Source: National Audit Office/Ipsos MORI survey of secondary schools, 2009

NOTE

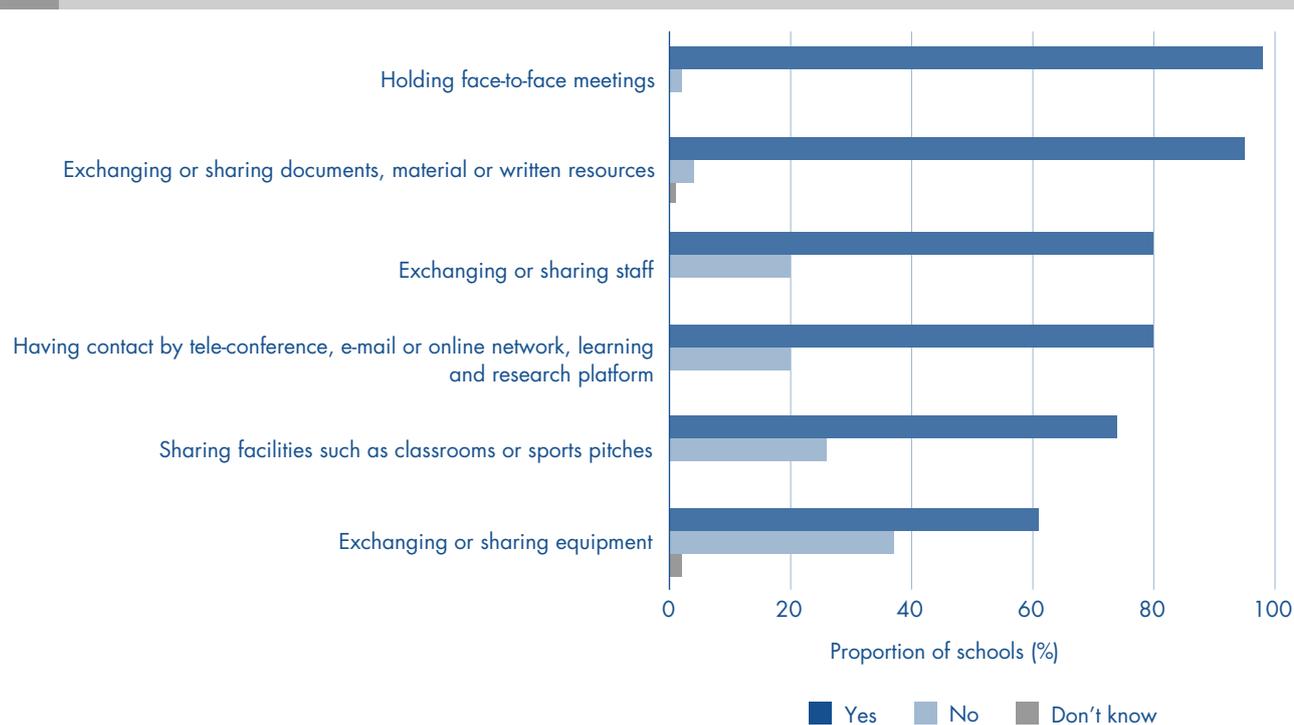
Top ten answers. Calculated on weighted data for 82 secondary schools not involved in an attainment partnership.

2.14 Similarly, the third of headteachers reporting in our survey that their school was not involved in a behaviour partnership most commonly gave the reason that poor behaviour was not an issue in their school. Nine per cent stated that they could address behaviour issues without a partner. These schools are not following the Department's policy that all schools in an area should work in partnership to deliver the social inclusion agenda for children and young people. The Department considers that the non-participation of just one or two schools can have a negative impact on the effectiveness of Behaviour and Attendance Partnerships.⁶

Management of partnerships

2.15 Sharing resources between partners, commonly documents and materials, or staff, facilities or equipment, was widespread (**Figure 10**). Blackheath High School, an independent school, told us how their partnership with local state schools and the Greenwich Maritime estate had opened up access to historic buildings, for example, Queens House, and a local theatre as locations for drama activities. Members of partnerships also shared: information and ideas for mutual benefit (99 per cent); decision-making and responsibility for ensuring that partnership objectives are met (92 per cent); responsibility for organising the operation of the partnership (86 per cent); and credit for each other's achievements resulting from their collaboration (87 per cent). Our case examples identified that organising and attending meetings absorb a lot of time and account for a significant proportion of resources dedicated to partnering.

10 Activities in which members of the most effective attainment partnership engage



Source: National Audit Office/Ipsos MORI survey of secondary schools, 2009

NOTE

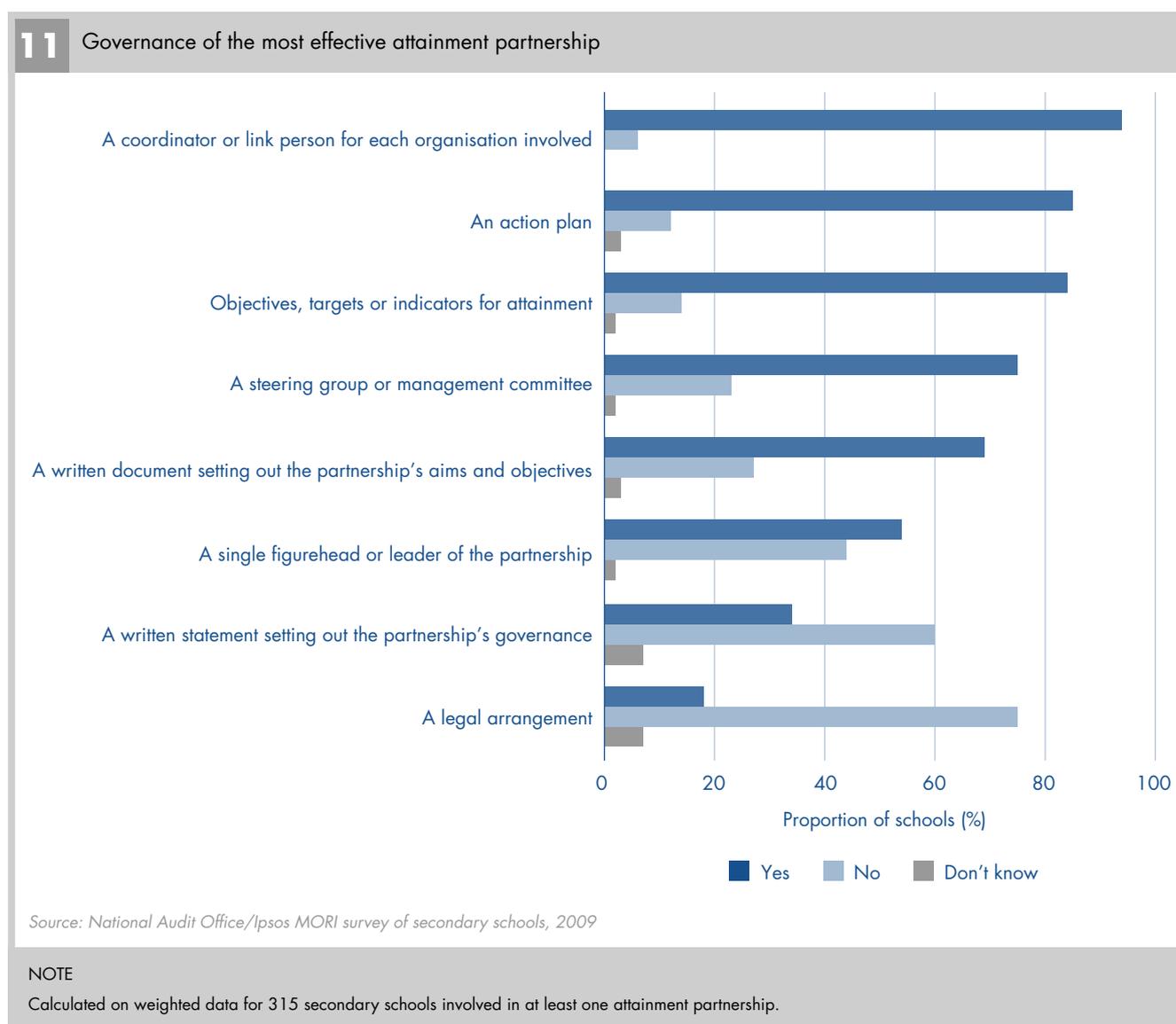
Calculated on weighted data for 315 secondary schools involved in at least one attainment partnership.

⁶ <http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/wholeschool/behaviour/collaboration/>

Governance and leadership

2.16 Governance arrangements are generally not formal. Only 34 per cent had a written document setting out the governance of the partnership and fewer still had a legal arrangement (Figure 11). Partnerships tend to be locally driven and built on trust, and do not regard formal structures as necessary.

2.17 Most partnerships in our survey had objectives, targets or indicators for improvement, or an action plan, and many had a written document setting out the aims and objectives of the partnership. For example, the Inclusion Network within the Redbridge Networked Learning Communities partnership has documented six high-level aims to enhance pupil progress (Case Example 4 overleaf). Ninety four per cent of attainment partnerships had a dedicated coordinator or link person for each organisation involved in the partnership, and 54 per cent had a single figurehead or leader, usually a headteacher or deputy headteacher.



CASE EXAMPLE 4

Mayfield School and the Redbridge Networked Learning Communities

| | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Purpose: | To narrow the spread of achievement among schools by enabling schools and individuals to learn from one another and share good practice. |
| Partners: | All primary and secondary schools in the London Borough of Redbridge. |
| Length of involvement: | Since 2002. |
| Funding: | From the London Borough of Redbridge and National College for School Leadership. The key cost is releasing teachers from their daily duties to get involved in the partnership. |
| Impact: | Benefits of the partnership highlighted by Mayfield School include: providing an opportunity for teachers and other stakeholders to think differently; enabling debate to take place in the forum; exchanging approaches and new ideas; and building inter-network and inter-community links. |

Description of partnership:

The Redbridge Networked Learning Communities partnership is organised around 10 thematic networks. For example, the Inclusion Network has 14 active member schools and a local authority representative. Its aims are to:

- identify ways in which pupil progress can be enhanced, articulated and recorded;

- learn about and reflect upon partnership activities between schools;
- stimulate new partnerships between schools;
- place individual school activities within a larger frame;
- provide a forum to share experiences across schools; and
- learn about the latest trends and research findings.

Source: Mayfield School, and adapted from Redbridge Networked Learning Communities' Newsletter, Autumn 2007 and Networks update, February 2009

Monitoring and evaluation

2.18 Monitoring or evaluation of attainment partnerships was common (95 per cent of cases), but was usually a self-evaluation (75 per cent of cases) and therefore may lack sufficient external scrutiny (Figure 12). Only one in five partnerships evaluating themselves considered that they were also directly accountable to an external organisation. Local authorities were the most common external monitor or evaluator (19 per cent of partnerships). Only one per cent of partnerships we surveyed were monitored or evaluated by the school's governors, and no partnerships were directly accountable to parents or pupils.

Sustainability

2.19 Schools had a long-term commitment to their attainment partnerships and 35 per cent expected to continue after their dedicated funding ceased (Figure 13, Case Example 5 on page 22). For another third of partnerships, continuation was dependent on finding alternative funding. Only eight per cent of partnerships planned to end when the funding ended.

2.20 Some partnerships reported they were reliant on particular people: 23 per cent stated that the attainment partnership would fail if certain individuals moved on. Some partnerships are alive to this risk and put in place arrangements, such as memoranda of understanding, to provide a more formal basis for a sustained relationship.

2.21 Partnerships can evolve into other types of organisation as they mature. For example, the Globetown Learning Community in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets began as an informal partnership and evolved to create a separate charity (Case Example 3). There is the opportunity for others to become a Federation or a Trust School (Figure 1, Summary).⁷

⁷ A Federation is a governance structure whereby two or more schools share a single governing body under section 24 of the Education Act (2002). A Trust School is a foundation school supported by a charitable foundation.

12 Lead on monitoring or evaluation of the most effective attainment partnership

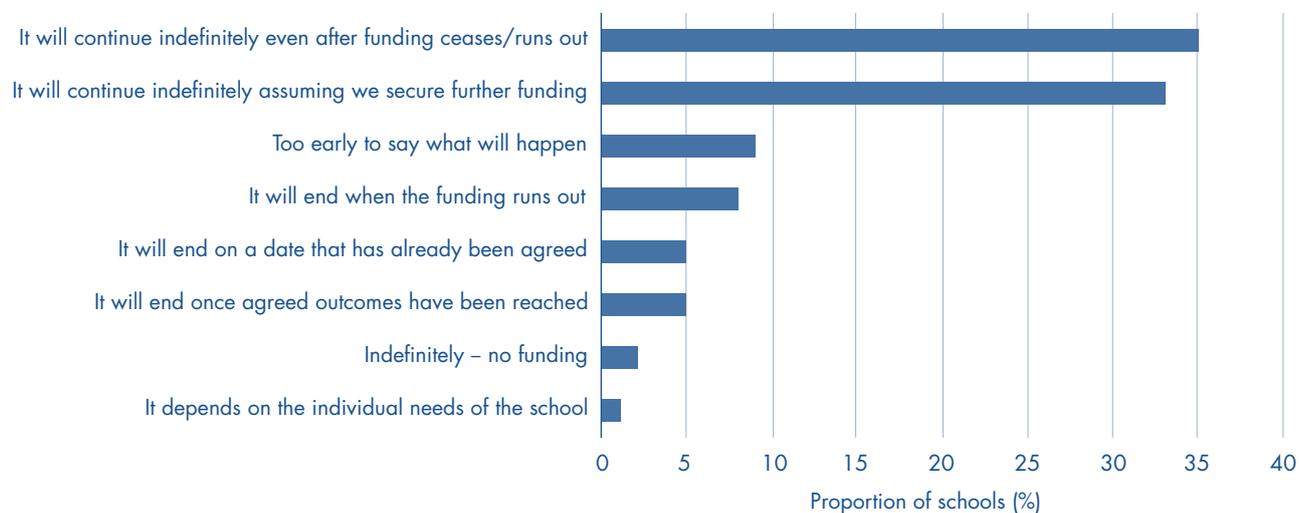


Source: National Audit Office/Ipsos MORI survey of secondary schools, 2009

NOTE

Top eight answers. Calculated on weighted data for 298 secondary schools involved in at least one attainment partnership that said the partnership was monitored or evaluated.

13 Expected continuation of the most effective attainment partnership



Source: National Audit Office/Ipsos MORI survey of secondary schools, 2009

NOTE

Calculated on weighted data for 315 secondary schools involved in at least one attainment partnership.

CASE EXAMPLE 5

An independent/state school partnership that continued after funding ceased

| | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Purpose: | Encouraging pupils predicted to be on the borderline between GCSE grades C and D in sciences to achieve, and to provide a wider curriculum for gifted and talented pupils. |
| Partners: | Three schools in Bedford: Wootton Upper School, John Bunyan Upper School and their independent sector partner, Dame Alice Harpur High School. |
| Length of involvement: | Since 2002-03. |
| Funding: | Initially from the Independent State School Partnership programme, then mainstreamed from 2006. Total grant funding was £52,400, paid to the partnership over three years. |
| Impact: | Teachers believe that as a result of the partnership's activities, greater numbers have chosen to study sciences at A level, and GCSE exam grades have improved. Staff at Wootton Upper School also noticed increased levels of motivation, pupils from different backgrounds mixing and long-term partnerships developing between partner schools. |

Description of partnership:

The partnership initially operated over three years, from 2003-04 to 2005-06. It provided additional science tuition and activities for pupils, typically involving working on science-related projects. Key costs included:

- Payments for temporary cover which released permanent staff to engage in partnership activities. Partners cited time as being the main resource, and not all time was paid for.

- Enhanced salaries for staff taking on additional responsibilities in the partnership.
- Materials such as compact discs, and travel expenses for staff and pupils moving between the three partner schools.

Most costs (particularly time related) were incurred in the early stages of the partnership and reduced as the partnership stabilised. The schools believe that some of the activities now cost less to run, and fewer meetings are required. Goodwill from staff contributed to the success of the partnership.

Source: National Audit Office/Wootton Upper School/Dame Alice Harpur High School

Financial management of partnering

2.22 The most common source of funding, used by 37 per cent of schools for attainment partnerships, was the school's Dedicated Schools Grant alone (**Figure 14**).

2.23 Schools using their own funds for partnering generally believed that they were spending more on improving attainment than they had before the partnership began. Fifty six per cent said that they were spending more, 37 per cent spent about the same, and just one per cent spent less. The figures for spending on behaviour partnerships followed a similar pattern. Among partnerships spending more on attainment than before, 60 per cent had not yet reduced expenditure on other activities as a consequence.

14 Sources of funding for attainment partnerships

| | Proportion of schools % |
|--|-------------------------|
| From Dedicated Schools Grant or school's general budget alone | 37 |
| From a grant to the school specifically for use in the attainment partnership alone | 19 |
| From a grant to the partnership as a whole alone | 18 |
| More than one source of funding | 16 |
| Other sources of funding (for example, the Department, local authorities, charitable organisations or private sector businesses) alone | 7 |
| Did not know | 2 |
| No funding | 1 |

Source: National Audit Office/Ipsos MORI survey of secondary schools, 2009

NOTE

Calculated on weighted data for 315 secondary schools involved in at least one attainment partnership.

2.24 The additional cost to schools of partnering is principally staff time, especially at the start of a partnership. Staff salaries typically account for 80 per cent of school budgets,⁸ but generally teachers do not complete timesheets recording their hours against activity codes and therefore schools were unable to generate estimates of time or staff cost spent on partnering. While the additional staff costs for partnering were thought to be small compared to the overall staff budget, schools believed that over time effective partnership working became embedded in day to day operations and resulted in savings as the need to undertake other activities reduced.

2.25 Schools transfer funding with excluded pupils to their new schools. We found an example of a Behaviour and Attendance Partnership that took this further to encourage more positive behaviour among member schools. In Tower Hamlets, schools have signed a protocol to the effect that when they exclude, partner schools not only transfer pupil funding, but the excluding school is also liable for the cost of the Pupil Referral Unit placement, the administration of a pupil transfer, any additional support the pupil may require to settle and a lump sum to the new school (**Figure 15**). The protocol is designed to encourage member schools to consider the financial implications of exclusions and explore other means of addressing poor behaviour, resulting in more effective use of available resources.

15 The London Borough of Tower Hamlet's protocol for exclusion and schools' costs

| | | | | | |
|--|---|---|--|---|--|
| All schools develop and maintain internal alternatives to short-term exclusion | Where exclusion is necessary, parents are required to arrange for the child to be supervised for days 1-5 | From sixth day of exclusion, the Pupil Referral Unit provides supervision and tuition | Eight week programme for reintegration to original school | Eight week programme of reintegration and a managed move to a new school | One term programme following permanent exclusion leading to a move to a new school |
| Costs paid by excluding school | | | | | |
| Use of schools' internal resources. Senior staff time, subsumed within salary budget | Administration costs | £100 per day paid to cover costs of provision at the Pupil Referral Unit and administration | £3,345 (including 40 days of Pupil Referral Unit provision plus five reintegration support sessions) | £6,345 (including 40 days of Pupil Referral Unit provision plus five reintegration support sessions plus £3,000 dowry paid by old school to new school) | £8,685 (including one term of Pupil Referral Unit provision plus five reintegration support sessions plus £4,000 dowry paid by old school to new school) |

Source: National Audit Office/London Borough of Tower Hamlets' Behaviour and Attendance Partnership

8 <http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/vfm/school/>



PART THREE

Partnering outcomes and requisites for success

Attainment and behaviour

3.1 In the first three years of secondary education, pupils need to build upon primary school achievements and prepare to take qualifications, for example, GCSE courses. Until 2008 all pupils were tested at age 14 to assess their progress in key subjects.⁹ There have been steady improvements in attainment over time, but many pupils still fall behind and do not catch up.

3.2 Poor standards of pupil behaviour can disrupt teaching and adversely affect well behaved pupils, divert teaching resources and reduce staff motivation and morale. Pupils in the first three years of secondary school are more likely to be excluded for poor behaviour than other pupils, and Ofsted have found that in around two per cent of schools standards of pupil behaviour were judged as inadequate, and that in a further 26 per cent of schools standards are no better than satisfactory.¹⁰

The associations between partnering, attainment and behaviour

3.3 An important test for partnership working is whether the schools involved in partnering have better results in attainment and behaviour among pupils aged 11-14 than schools that do not partner. We investigated whether there was a link between partnering activity (as measured in January and February 2009) and three measures of attainment:

- the results of attainment tests at age 14 for schools in 2008 adjusted for the characteristics of each school's intake, for example, deprivation and pupils' prior attainment;¹¹

- whether schools' 14 year olds' test results over the years 2006 to 2008 were improving, worsening, steady, or variable; and
- Ofsted's rating of the progress made by schools' learners. Ofsted rates schools as outstanding, good, satisfactory or inadequate.

3.4 For behaviour, we examined:

- the number of fixed-term exclusions in each school in 2006 relative to the number of pupils aged 14;¹² and
- Ofsted's ratings of pupil behaviour in each school.

3.5 For both the attainment and behaviour indicators, we used the most up to date information that was available. There is an unavoidable time lag, however, between the measurement of the outcome and the subsequent measurement of partnering activity. Previous research has noted the difficulty of determining whether partnership working is related to standards of attainment. These reasons, and the large amount of activity within a school that is not related to partnering, may affect our results.

3.6 Furthermore, schools in our survey involved in an attainment partnership tended to have lower results against each measure of attainment outcome than those that did not partner, although the results against each measure were not all statistically significant. Consequently it is not possible to identify a control group of schools which do not partner. We cannot conclude from this analysis that being a member of a partnership is the cause of poor or good results. Rather partnering is often a response by schools to poor results (Figure 8) and may generate improvement in the schools that take part.

⁹ From 2009, these tests are no longer mandatory.

¹⁰ Further information about levels of attainment and standards of behaviour is given in the separate Analytical Supplement.

¹¹ We used 'contextual value-added' scores which assess the impact that the school has had on pupil attainment, accounting for prior attainment and characteristics of pupils.

¹² Schools may also permanently exclude pupils, but the numbers involved are usually small and permanent exclusions do not therefore make a good outcome measure.

3.7 While other factors will have an impact on recorded standards of attainment and behaviour, our quantitative analysis found that:

- Fewer schools in an attainment partnership achieved test scores among their 14 year-old pupils that indicated the school was performing better than would be expected given its intake (34 per cent, compared to 51 per cent of schools that were not members of attainment partnerships). This result was statistically significant.
- There was no clear or statistically significant relationship between the trend in schools' test results for 14 year olds over the last three years and membership of an attainment partnership.
- A smaller proportion of schools in an attainment partnership were rated as outstanding by Ofsted for the rate of progress of learners (11 per cent, compared to 24 per cent of non-partnering schools). This result was statistically significant.

3.8 On behaviour, schools which did partner tended to have poorer outcomes. Members of behaviour partnerships:

- appeared to have higher rates of exclusion than schools which did not partner, but this result was not statistically significant; and
- were much less likely to be rated as outstanding for behaviour by Ofsted (39 per cent of schools not in partnerships, compared to 16 per cent of schools in behaviour partnerships). This was a statistically significant result.

Relationship between partnerships' management and structures, and performance

3.9 Looking in detail at schools in partnerships revealed little evidence that how partnerships are organised and run has any impact on their member schools' results. For this modelling, we used a range of statistical techniques (**Box 3**), but they explained few of the differences between schools. We found (summarised in Figure 3, Summary):

- across all five outcome measures, other characteristics of the school and its intake, most often rates of pupil attendance, could successfully predict performance;
- better attainment outcomes were statistically associated with longer in an attainment partnership, membership of a behaviour partnership and sharing resources; and

- better behaviour was statistically associated with sharing resources and duration of attainment partnership.

Full results of the modelling are presented in the separate Analytical Supplement.

3.10 A large majority of headteachers considered that their most effective attainment and behaviour partnerships had improved standards in their school – 82 per cent considered that their attainment partnership was effective, as did 78 per cent for their behaviour partnership.

3.11 The apparent contradiction between our results and headteachers' opinions may in part be due to differences in the impacts on which they are based. As evidence for their conclusion about effectiveness, relatively few headteachers cited our measure of effectiveness – improved results in the tests pupils sit at age 14 (28 per cent). Around 23 per cent pointed to an improvement in the level of attainment generally (for example, Case Example 1). Headteachers also saw improvements through their internal monitoring (19 per cent), better pupil behaviour, or attitudes to learning (18 per cent). This important, softer evidence is not well reflected in the hard data used in our statistical analysis.

BOX 3

Modelling the relationship between the organisation of partnering and improved outcomes

Regression analysis determines which features of partnering (for example, sharing facilities or exchanging documents), or characteristics of the school and its intake, predict more successful educational outcomes.

Regression modelling has important limitations. Firstly, there is limited information about the wide variety of other interventions which may impact on attainment and behaviour at a school. Secondly, modelling can only identify an association between partnering and improved outcomes, but cannot prove that one caused the other.

Our survey provided a large amount of information about how partnerships operate. Survey answers were combined, using Principal Components Analysis, into five groups which sat well together statistically and conceptually. These covered exchanging information, sharing in the operation of the partnership, trust and commitment, sharing resources, and having effective working relationships. In addition to these measures of partnering, other school characteristics were included in the models, for example, the Index of Multiple Deprivation, attendance rate and proportion of pupils with special educational needs.

Source: National Audit Office

3.12 Schools and experts believed that the benefits of partnering were diverse. Developing a strong professional learning culture within and between schools has been identified as a key way of improving learning opportunities for pupils.¹³ We heard how working in partnership had energised teachers to make positive changes to the quality of teaching and learning, and refreshed schools' efforts to address local issues. For example, by: identifying good practice; broadening the subject choices for pupils; enhancing teacher confidence, motivation and morale; making wider use of resources, such as laboratories; breaking down barriers between independent and state sectors, mainstream and special-needs provision, primary and secondary schools, or schools with different ethnic/religious profiles; acting as a catalyst for outward-looking activity generally; and attracting additional funding.

3.13 Staff development featured particularly highly in our case-example schools' rationales for partnering. Representatives from organisations with an interest in teaching standards told us that schools were often too small to offer continuing development on their own, and that partnering broadened opportunities. Our case-example schools told us how schools working together can promote the professional development of staff, and sometimes staff from partner schools critique lesson delivery. Staff in higher performing schools benefit as well as their peers in more challenging schools.

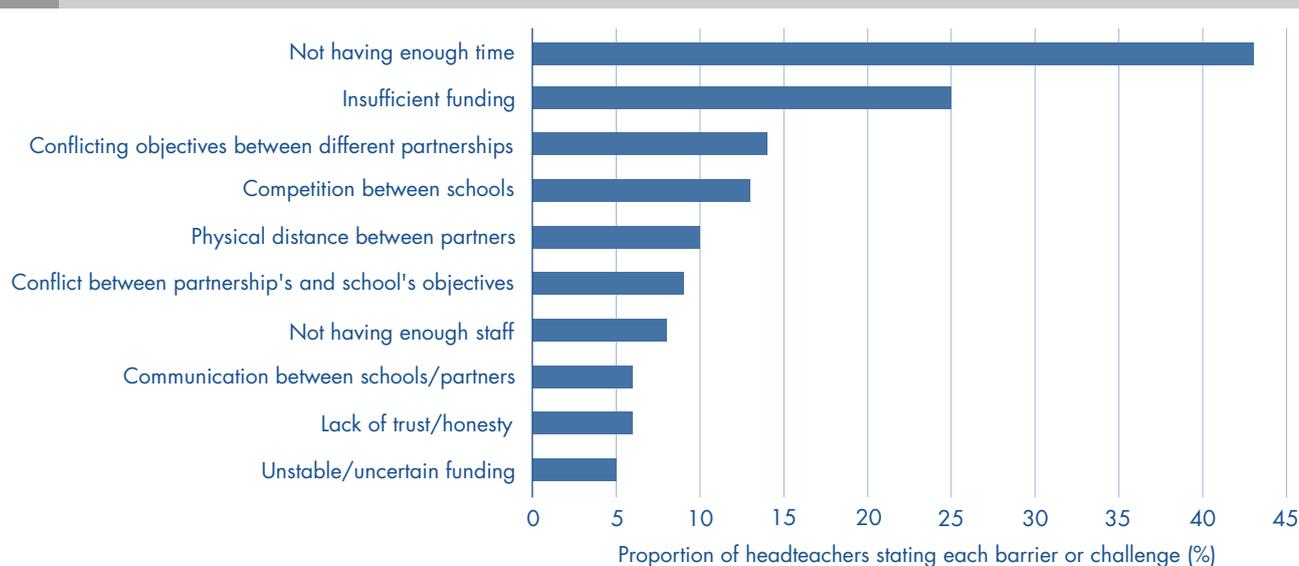
Requisites for effective partnering

3.14 By far the most commonly cited barrier to effective partnering was staff not having enough time (Figure 16). Our case-example schools and others said that in the early stages of a partnership the time demands are high and often underestimated. Only one in ten headteachers, however, said the burden on staff was a disadvantage.

3.15 Evidence on the contribution of funding to effective partnership working is contradictory. Insufficient funding was considered a challenge to working effectively in respect of one in four partnerships, but only six per cent stated that additional costs were a disadvantage of partnering. Around half of attainment partnerships and one third of behaviour partnerships reported that partnerships' effectiveness could be most enhanced by increasing funding.

3.16 Many headteachers involved in partnerships believed trust and commitment were essential attributes of an effective partnership (Figure 17). One school told us how one of its partnerships had foundered in this respect (Case Example 6). Nearly all headteachers (97 per cent) judged that there was trust between partners in their most effective attainment partnership, and were overwhelmingly positive about their partners' commitment to the partnership. They also believed that their partners were willing to change what they did in their own schools to achieve the partnership's objectives, and that responsibility for negative events would be shared.

16 Barriers or challenges to working effectively in partnerships



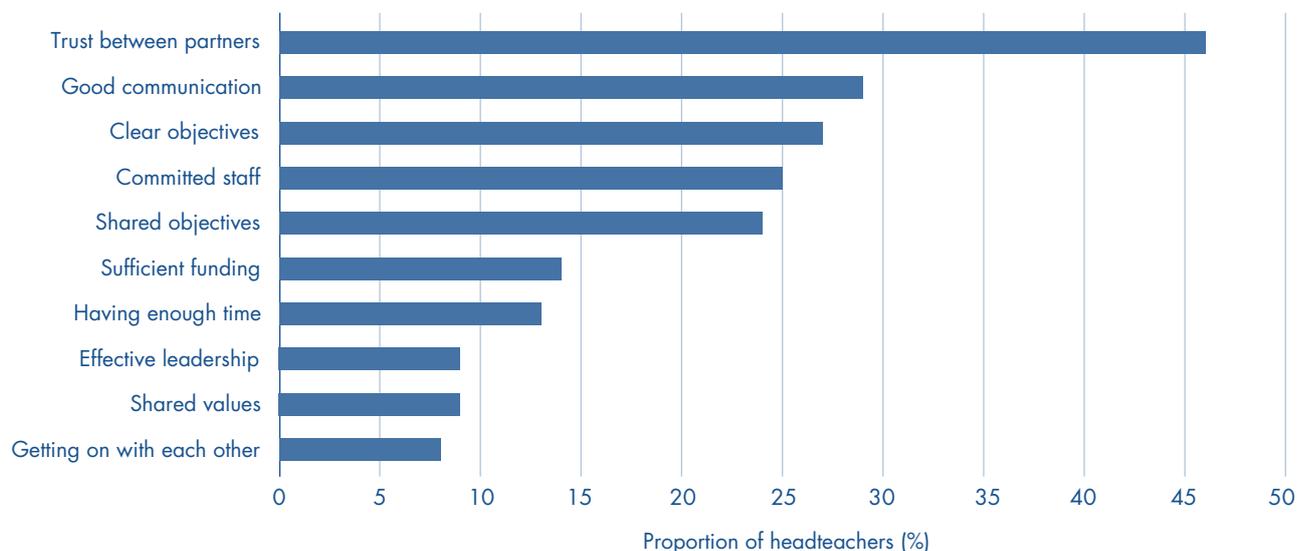
Source: National Audit Office/Ipsos MORI survey of secondary schools, 2009

NOTE

Calculated on weighted data for 342 secondary schools involved in at least one attainment or behaviour partnership.

13 Hill (2006).

17 Essential attributes of effective partnerships



Source: National Audit Office/Ipsos MORI survey of secondary schools, 2009

NOTE

Calculated on weighted data for 342 secondary schools involved in at least one attainment or behaviour partnership.

CASE EXAMPLE 6

Requirement for trust and commitment for partnering to work well

- Purpose:** To encourage high achieving schools to partner with struggling schools to improve their performance.
- Partners:** Lord Lawson of Beamish School and a number of schools across the North East.
- Length of involvement:** Between 2003 and 2006.
- Funding:** Funded by the former Department for Education and Skills as part of the Leading Edge Programme. The Department for Children, Schools and Families continues to fund the programme as an option for High Performing Specialist Schools.
- Impact:** Judged by the school to be negligible.

Description of partnership:

Lord Lawson of Beamish School was one of the first schools to take part in the Leading Edge Programme, but did not think that this partnership had offered full value for money. While there had been benefits for students, staff did not think that it had led to sustained improved attainment for all schools across the partnership. In particular, they highlighted tensions that had arisen from one school identified as effective being asked to lead others. Reciprocity was not always apparent in the partnership. Staff felt that there were more effective forms of partnering, for example, Federations, which they cited as being more formal, and on a one to one basis.

The Leading Edge Programme has since been refocused, and is now aligned to the High Performing Specialist Schools programme. Managed on behalf of the Department by the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, the programme sets clearer objectives for partnerships and performance is monitored more closely.

Lord Lawson of Beamish School is currently involved in other partnerships which it sees as beneficial. In particular, a transition partnership with primary schools in the locality has helped to raise achievement. The school's wide range of existing partnerships highlights that they can be effective when tailored to suit the partners involved.

Source: National Audit Office/Lord Lawson of Beamish School

3.17 Schools viewed clear objectives as an essential attribute of effective partnering, and 69 per cent of schools in an attainment partnership had written objectives. We asked our case-example schools to show us their partnerships' objectives. Few produced a written statement, and those we were given seldom had 'SMART' (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time-bound) objectives. More commonly objectives were intangible (for example, to encourage 'meaningful collaboration') or related to outputs rather than outcomes (for example, delivery of a workshop but not a measure of its effectiveness).

3.18 Previous National Audit Office research has emphasised the need for strong leadership and a strong desire for success from headteachers, particularly at the start of a partnership.¹⁴ A range of organisations support the development of expertise in partnership working for senior staff, including the National College for School Leadership, the Association of School and College Leaders and the National Association of Head Teachers. The National College for School Leadership includes a non-compulsory module on new models of leadership and partnership working in the National Professional Qualification for headteachers.

3.19 Conflict and competition were relatively low on the list of barriers to effective partnership. Although schools are commonly judged on their individual results our expert interviewees considered competition to be a greater problem than headteachers in our survey suggested. Competition was listed as a barrier to effective partnership working by a minority (13 per cent) of schools and few non-partnering schools gave competition as a reason for not getting involved. Most schools were willing to work with other schools on attainment. One partnership we examined, the Redbridge Networked Learning Communities (Case Example 4), was founded in part to break down protectionist barriers between local schools.

¹⁴ National Audit Office (2007) *Partnering for success: Preparing to deliver the 14-19 education reforms in England*, HC 99 2007-2008.

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