



# 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**).

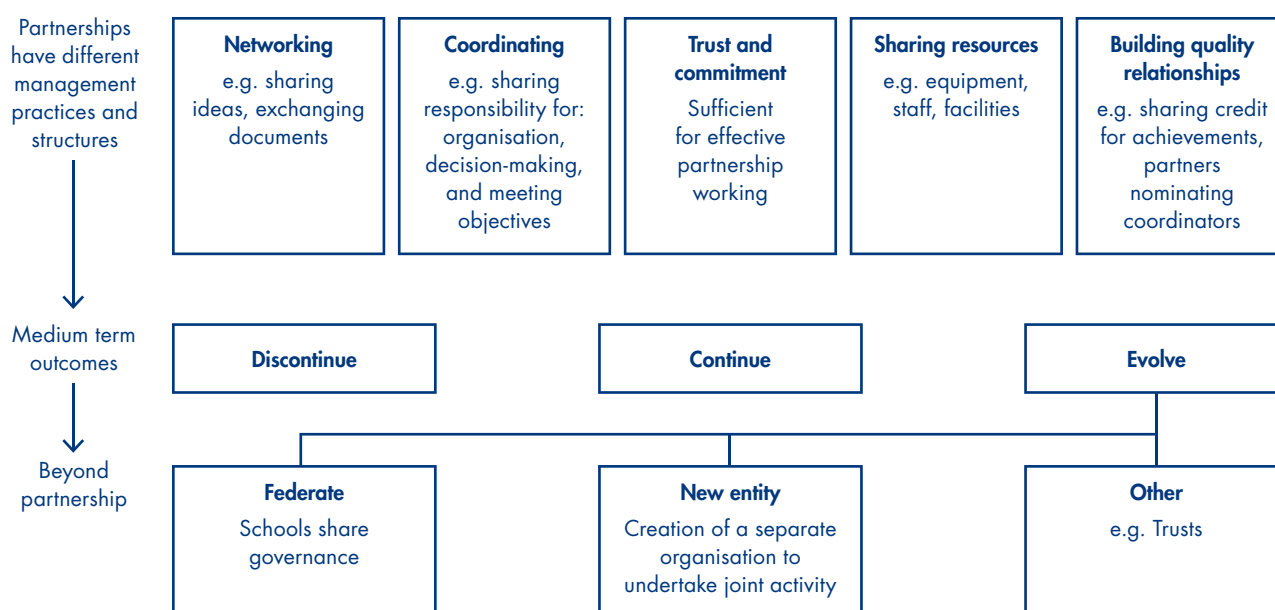
**7 Partnering had most commonly developed in response to locally identified needs, such as to improve pupil attainment.** Departmental initiatives were occasionally, but less often, the direct prompt for the creation of schools' most effective partnerships (Figure 8).

**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.

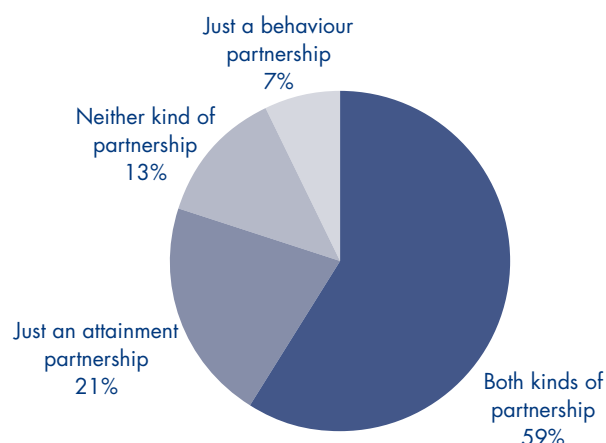
**10 Some of the formal Behaviour and Attendance Partnerships – local groupings of secondary schools to improve pupil behaviour and tackle persistent absence – were essentially administrative arrangements for moving excluded pupils, rather than collaborative partnering to improve behaviour.** If they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

### 1 The spectrum and development of partnering



Source: National Audit Office

## 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.<sup>1</sup>** 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.

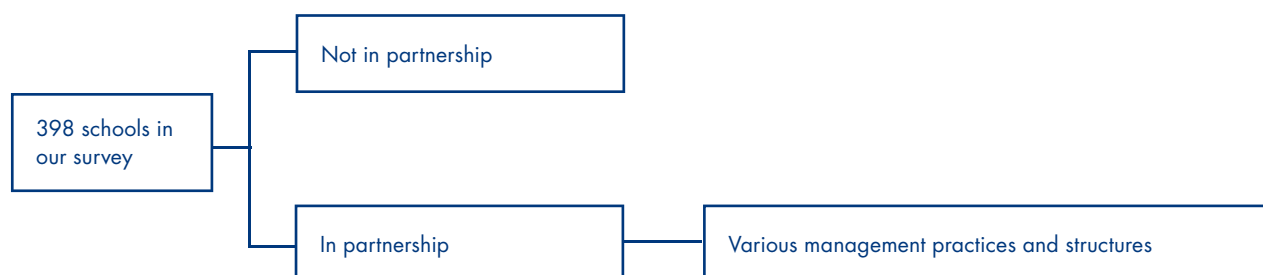
**15 Among schools that were partnering, only a few specific features of partnering were associated with levels of attainment or standards of behaviour (Figure 3).** Our statistical analysis showed that, for example, being in a longer established attainment partnership and sharing resources had a positive 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.

<sup>1</sup> 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 significant<sup>1</sup>, they pointed in the same direction: on average, schools in partnerships had lower attainment, were less likely to be making improvements to attainment, and Ofsted<sup>2</sup> 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 intake<sup>3</sup>:

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.