



National College for  
Teaching & Leadership

# **Freedom to lead: a study of outstanding primary school leadership in England**

**Research report: July 2014**

**Peter Matthews, Simon Rea, Robert Hill  
& Qing Gu**

**Isos Partnership**

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## Executive summary

1. This qualitative research examines the leadership of a sample of outstanding primary schools, many of them in challenging circumstances, to understand what part leadership – including governance – plays in their success. Increasingly, successful leadership reaches beyond the school in support of other schools and the children in them. The study therefore includes some examples of primary system leadership at different stages of evolution. The evidence for its findings is drawn from 19 case studies, available in the technical annexe: Findings from schools.
2. The research shows that the most effective primary leadership has some core characteristics concerned with the attributes and values of primary education leaders, what they do and how they do it. The nature of the challenges they face, whether turning round an inadequate school or sustaining excellence, may draw on different skills but a consistent purpose or vision. This finding suggests a differential leadership model related to school effectiveness. The quality of governance is an important but not usually a determining factor in school improvement, where outstanding school leaders are in post. Their ability to inspire, develop and empower staff and – through them – pupils and parents is paramount. The case studies suggest that governance is becoming more capable, especially in academies, federations and multi-academy trusts, where it is typically strengthened by the inclusion of successful professionals from areas such as business, finance, law and human resource management.
3. The study highlights common features of some highly effective primary schools, providing evidence to inform the perennial debate about teaching approaches and pupils' progress. Overall, the findings point to early successes and high potential in the government's policy of devolving more responsibility for teacher development and school improvement to the profession, and demonstrate the readiness of the most capable leaders to grasp the opportunity to the benefit of their schools and others. The case studies relating to system leadership show the early impact of some intervention strategies for rapid school improvement, managed by system leaders who have usually made the journey themselves.
4. This report starts by summarising *what is known* about effective primary leadership (Section 1) from what the best led and governed primary schools have demonstrated over the last 10 years. Section 2 identifies characteristic skills, approaches and qualities demonstrated by the leaders of the most effective primary schools. In Section 3, the report illustrates the varied *career pathways* through which a sample of the headteachers have developed their leadership expertise.
5. Section 4 shows how consistency, responsibility and accountability can be enhanced through the *empowerment* of other leaders within the school, staff and pupils. Section 5 gives examples of how leaders have turned schools around and improved outcomes for children through first *rescuing*, then *reinforcing* and *refining* their schools

and in many cases *replicating* the best aspects through their leadership of the system, using new structural solutions for raising standards in primary schools. These examples are related to a model for organisational growth and improvement which suggests that regeneration is necessary to sustain excellence.

6. Section 6 considers *system leadership and new aggregations of schools* as represented by the case studies. Section 7 records evidence from the case studies of how the *leadership of governing bodies* and boards is changing in response to the new climate and reflects on the characteristics of effective governance.

7. The report and case studies provide clear evidence of how schools can set about ensuring that every child has a great primary education. Although succeeding in this demands a high level of professional skill and commitment, we see no compelling reason why primary schools judged outstanding should not be the norm rather than the exception. The evidence suggests that there is nothing these schools do that others could not, given effective leadership and an enabling infrastructure that includes, for example, an ongoing supply of good teachers.

8. Many of the case studies show the consequences of policy changes, in particular the response of headteachers and governors to the new freedoms and increased autonomy available to them. It is important to bear two things in mind when reading this report. The first is that it focuses on outstanding leaders of what are, under their direction, very successful schools. The findings do not reflect primary school leadership as a whole and are not intended to. But they show what such leaders are like, what can be done to provide notable primary education and how to do it. It is hoped that accounts of what these leaders do will challenge and inspire others.

9. Secondly, the report was finalised at a time when primary education was preparing for changes in the curriculum and assessment and when debates about what is or is not effective teaching tended to be based more on polemic than research. This report does not engage with such debates but – particularly through the case studies – describes what these schools do and what works for their children. The progress of those children and the standards they attain are the ultimate test of the methods used, and the schools stand by them.

10. This short report is supported by a literature review and the 19 case studies, to be supplemented by a guide on their use for leadership development.

## Conclusions and recommendations

I. The culture established in outstanding primary schools is one in which leaders have very high expectations, a no-excuses culture and a single-minded focus on making the school a place of learning for all. *The evidence illustrates 10 core beliefs and practices of outstanding primary leaders which should be part of the mindset of all headteachers* (paragraphs 22 -38).

II. The research suggests that outstanding primary leaders are people of exceptional character, determination and courage – firm in their values, clear about priorities and with the leadership and interpersonal skills needed to carry people with them. *Governors should look for such characteristics when making senior leadership appointments and headteachers when growing leaders* (paragraphs 39-53). *Where applicants of suitable quality are lacking, governors should consider whether federation with a well-led primary school or joining a successful multi-academy trust would be in the best interests of their school and its children.*

III. The paths taken by the sample of outstanding school and system leaders to their present posts are many and varied. *The evidence points to the advantages of leaders of primary schools, particularly those in challenging circumstances, having acquired a range of experience – including some in a school in a similar context – before taking up a headship. It is also clear that acting headships and head of school roles are invaluable stepping stones to headship, as is the role modelled by outstanding headteachers* (paragraphs 54-72).

IV. The evidence of outstanding leadership points strongly to the commitment of outstanding primary headteachers and governors not simply to distribute leadership but to develop it at all levels among adults and children in the school. *Headteachers are at their most effective when they have a direct and close involvement in the leadership of learning and ensure they model and monitor teaching and progress so as to promote continuing improvement* (paragraphs 73-96).

V. Leadership has different emphases depending on the quality and context of the school. The evidence suggests distinctly different approaches depending on whether the main task is that of rescuing an underperforming school, reinforcing, refining or renewing it. As a group, the outstanding leaders in the sample have accumulated considerable experience in all phases of improvement. *Policy makers should also note that there is evidence of these great leaders seeking out the more challenging post when they have had a choice of school* (97-124).

VI. The S-curve model of organisational growth and decline is relevant to school leadership. Organisations can benefit from a change or re-focusing of leadership after a period of improvement. Change is accomplished in some other systems through fixed term but renewable contracts for school principals. In any case *it is recommended that a longer term view of the performance of leadership is desirable alongside annual appraisal* (paragraphs 126-135).

VII. The evidence of the case studies – which cover a range of school partnership arrangements – reflects the rapid growth of interest and understanding relating to system leadership. The outstanding primary schools have demonstrated their potential and achievements in supporting other schools and many schools newly judged outstanding are keen to become national support or teaching schools. *There is a need to bring all*

*primary schools, particularly the smallest ones, into school improvement partnerships so as to pool staffing and secure succession (paragraphs 136-168).*

VIII. The examples of different types of school partnership illustrate successful aspects of the freedoms available to academies, federations and multi-academy trusts. There is a thirst for system leadership among the best headteachers and schools, and this is generally supported, though not always completely shared, by governing bodies. *The two-tier governance structures of some multi-academy trusts or federations, where individual school governing bodies are retained but with fewer executive powers alongside a trust- or federation-wide board, appear important in ensuring that local and individual school interests are represented in the governance of the trust or federation as a whole (paragraphs 169-195).*

## Methodology

11. This research was commissioned jointly by the National College for Teaching and Leadership and Ofsted and funded by the Department for Education. The research was based on more than 20 examples of outstanding primary leadership in a range of situations, most of which were written up as case studies. Evidence was collected primarily by interviewing the headteacher, chair of governors and a cross-section of staff individually to obtain their accounts of the recent history of the school or organisation and the part played by its leadership. Interviews were broadly structured so as to follow the same pattern in all the case studies, but were necessarily adapted to the type of organisation visited. Inspection reports and school performance data supplemented the oral evidence.

12. The chosen sample consisted of two groups. The first was a core group of 10 high-performing primary schools eight of which were drawn from all those inspected between September and December 2012 (to the inspection framework introduced on 1 September 2012) which:

- earned outstanding judgements on all counts
- had outcomes of at least 90% of pupils attaining level 4 or above in English and mathematics in the 2012 national curriculum tests.

13. The schools that met these conditions were then subject to secondary criteria which identified:

- schools of different sizes from one to four forms of entry
- schools that had improved from Ofsted categories as well as those that had moved from good to outstanding or sustained outstanding judgements
- schools serving communities with different degrees of disadvantage
- schools serving different ethnic compositions ranging from some with an intake which was virtually all White British to schools serving many ethnicities with very high proportions of children speaking English as an additional language
- strong governance and features of interest in their inspection reports.

14. In selecting the sample of 10 core schools, the data and all 84 of the Ofsted inspection reports of full range primary schools judged outstanding in autumn 2012 inspections were screened. There was a very high level of consistency in the evidence supporting judgements of outstanding leadership and governance and schools in the final list. Indeed, similar characteristics of professional leadership – and to a lesser extent, governance (about which there was less evidence) – appear throughout the case studies. The core sample schools had additional features or sufficient detail in their reports to be of wider interest. Only two of the core schools were academies at the time of selection, but that number has increased during the period of this study, which spanned the



calendar year 2013. The majority of the schools have also become engaged in system leadership as national support schools or teaching schools.

15. A second complementary group of schools and other organisations was chosen to illustrate aspects of primary leadership that extended beyond one school or operated at a system level. This was a purposive sample based on what was known about the leadership of the organisations, all of which had – at their heart – a connection with outstanding primary provision. The schools and organisations are listed in the next section. One of the case studies examines how the schools described in Ofsted’s 2009 study *Twenty outstanding primary schools: excelling against the odds*<sup>1</sup> are faring five years on.

## Acknowledgements

16. The team greatly appreciates the substantial help in time, access and expertise provided by the outstanding school and system leaders who contributed to this research and to their colleagues and governors, parents and children. They included the headteachers, or executive leaders, and members of the following school communities.

### **Core sample group of schools**

- Ash Grove Primary and Nursery School, Macclesfield
- Booth Wood Primary School, Loughborough
- Dearham Primary School, near Maryport
- Dedham Church of England Voluntary Controlled Primary School, near Colchester
- John Donne Primary, Peckham
- Newstead Primary School, Stoke on Trent
- Prestolee Primary School, near Bolton
- St Peter's C.E. Primary School, Bristol
- Taylor Road Primary School, Leicester
- Vauxhall Primary School, Lambeth

### **Additional group of outstanding leadership examples**

- The Colmore Federation, Birmingham
- Greenwood Academies Trust, Nottingham
- L.E.A.D. Academy Trust, Nottingham
- Sir Robin Bosher (Ex-Fairlawn School and Harris Federation)
- South Farnham School, Surrey
- West Thornton Primary Academy, Croydon
- White Horse Federation, Swindon
- Wroxham Primary School, Potters Bar

### **Longitudinal study**

- 'Twenty outstanding primary schools' – five years on

17. A selection of leadership strategies and priorities illustrated in the case studies is listed in Annex A. The team is also grateful to the other schools and organisations that were visited as prospective case studies. These included the Carmel Education Trust, Cuckoo Hall Academies Trust and Lynch Hill Academy.

18. The authors thank the steering group for their support and advice. This report benefited greatly from the comments of Dame Reena Keeble and Emma Knights and the editorial assistance of Caroline McLaughlin.

## Aims of this study

19. This investigation into outstanding primary leadership examines examples of leadership and governance of outstanding primary schools and school partnerships in a range of contexts. The study was commissioned:

- to understand the issues facing primary leaders and the ways in which leaders are responding to these challenges
- to identify and research examples of schools and leaders who are responding to policy changes in ways which improve outcomes for children
- to identify the leadership approaches, knowledge and behaviours that are most effective in raising standards in the current climate.

20. The findings are based on a detailed study of outstanding primary leadership through case studies of primary provision in individual schools, federations and multi-academy trusts, augmented by other relevant evidence from our studies of primary school and system leadership.

21. The case studies include outstanding and high-achieving primary schools serving a range of communities, some of which present schools with substantial challenges. Most of these schools have improved under their current leadership, some of them from inadequate to outstanding, or have sustained their embedded excellence. Many have changed status during the course of this research, becoming academies or sponsoring, partnering or founding trusts, with a diminishing number remaining under local authority control. The remaining case studies examine primary provision in different structural arrangements, for example federations and multi-academy trusts. Each of these organisations has one or more outstanding primary leaders in a pivotal role.

# 1. Core principles

**Some basic tenets of outstanding primary school leadership:**

- i. All children can succeed.**
- ii. Primary schools determine life chances.**
- iii. Background should not limit outcomes.**
- iv. Successful primary schools do the right things consistently well.**
- v. Almost all primary teachers can be good or better.**
- vi. Teaching which focuses on clear learning objectives, effective instruction for all, the steps needed to make progress, feedback and assessment, is essential to children's good progress.**
- vii. School leadership is key to raising standards.**
- viii. The most effective school leaders readily model good teaching.**
- ix. The most effective support for teachers comes from other expert practitioners.**
- x. The quality of the curriculum makes a significant contribution to the children's interest, engagement and learning and thus to the outcomes they achieve.**

22. Many of the principles associated with outstanding schools and their leadership have been known for many years. For 21 years the annual reports of successive HM Chief Inspectors have chronicled the quality and standards of primary schools. Inspection criteria have sought to focus on the aspects of teaching and learning, leadership and governance considered to be most closely associated with pupils' achievement, and research – from Sammons<sup>2</sup> to Hattie<sup>3</sup> and many others – has illuminated the things schools do that matter most. Many of the fundamentals of effective primary leadership and management have changed little, but leaders now have more autonomy than ever before in how they operate. This research not only reinforces what is known about outstanding leadership but provides new insights and evidence as to how leaders operate in a new school policy landscape.

23. Part of the battle to raise the quality and standards of schools has been to fight the mindset of low expectations – a common mantra in Ofsted annual reports. But in the last 10 years particularly, the growing number of primary schools that succeed against the odds have demonstrated the following beliefs.

## **i. All children can succeed.**

24. Almost all children<sup>4</sup> can learn to read and write by the age of seven and achieve at least level 4 by the age of 11. Success depends on a no-excuses approach by schools, an expectation that every child will succeed, and productive teaching and learning. The experience of the case study schools is that if you remove preconceptions about children's ability, many will achieve more than might have been expected. This was evident in many of the case study schools and has been the subject of extensive research in one.<sup>5</sup>

## ii. Primary schools determine life chances.

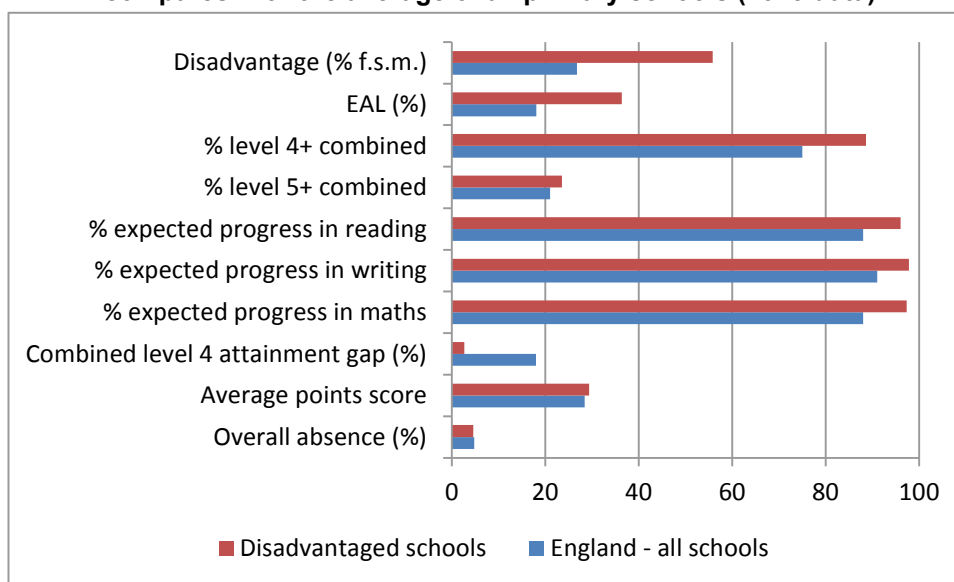
25. The case study schools give priority to a thorough grounding in the basic skills of communication, language, literacy and numeracy, and interest in using and applying these skills, recognising that unless they do so children's chances of becoming functionally literate and numerate later are low.

26. Ofsted has shown that the proportion of children and young people who are not functionally literate and numerate by the end of primary education reduces little thereafter.<sup>6</sup> In 2012, 21% of 11 year olds did not achieve level 4 in English and mathematics; only 60% of 16 year olds achieved GCSE grades A\* to C in English and mathematics; and 20% of further education learners were either not functionally literate or not functionally numerate – or both – by age 19.

## iii. Background should not limit outcomes.

27. Case study primary schools serving complex or disadvantaged communities show they can achieve very high standards (Figure 1), significantly better than the averages for schools in England. They see neither poverty nor ethnicity as insurmountable barriers to achievement. In one school, for example, where pupil premium exceeds 60%, over 90% of year 6 pupils reached at least level 4 in English and mathematics in 2012 and 55% reached level 5.

**Figure 1. How the average performance of the 10 most disadvantaged primary schools in this study compares with the average of all primary schools (2013 data)**



## iv. Successful primary schools do the right things well.

28. The characteristics of effective primary schools are well known but need to be consistently and rigorously applied. The quality of teaching is paramount and reports on the sample of schools echo Ofsted's findings in its *Twenty outstanding primary schools* report of 2009 (Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Common features of outstanding teaching and learning**

- Stimulating and enthusiastic teaching which interests, excites and motivates pupils and accelerates their learning
- High expectations of what pupils can do
- Consistency in the quality of teaching across the school
- Development of good learning habits with many opportunities for pupils to find things out for themselves
- Highly structured approaches to reading, writing and mathematics
- Well-planned lessons that provide for the differing needs of pupils
- Stimulating classroom environment
- Frequent praise and a valued reward system
- Well-trained and deployed teaching assistants
- A close check on learning during lessons, with effective marking and assessment

*to which should be added*

- Clear evidence of progress

29. Examples from the Ofsted reports on the schools in the sample continue to reflect these essentials.

“Lessons are interesting, well planned and set at the right level for all pupils. Pupils learn exceptionally well.”

“Teachers expect much of their pupils; questions are probing and tasks are creative, imaginative and demanding.”

“Consistently high-quality teaching and excellent attention to individual needs mean that all pupils thrive and want to learn. Topic work is imaginative and exciting; the learning environment is vibrant and of exceptionally high quality. It is a showcase for pupils’ excellent work and their experiences.”

“Lessons are skilfully matched to what pupils need to learn next.”

“Teachers have high expectations of their pupils; they set tasks that are sufficiently challenging and build consistently on pupils’ prior learning.”

**v. Almost all primary teachers can be good or better.**

30. Producing consistently good lessons and a proportion that are outstanding should be the gauge of competence for an experienced teacher. Most committed primary teachers working in mediocre schools have the potential to be great teachers – with the right leadership, example and development.

31. This is shown by the case study primary schools, in many of which teaching has been transformed without wholesale staff changes. Outstanding schools invest in the development of all their staff as a fundamental aspect of how the school operates.

**vi. Teaching which focuses on clear learning objectives, effective instruction for all, the steps needed to make progress, feedback and assessment, is essential to children's good progress.**

32. Assessment for learning, reflective marking and feedback are among the practices that help accelerate children's progress. The best primary schools use assessment and feedback very productively to plan and adapt the curriculum and promote individual learning. Children know what they are aiming towards and what they need to do to improve. The older ones respond to personal targets, often expressed as 'challenges'.

**vii. School leadership is key to raising standards.**

33. While effective learning needs great teaching, the quality of leadership is the key to successful primary education. The best leaders can transform any school through what they stand for, what they do and how they do it. This study identifies the key characteristics, strategies and methods of outstanding headteachers and effective governing bodies and how they respond to the opportunities and constraints of education policy. Two fundamental characteristics of outstanding headteachers are their focus on the needs and progress of all children and commitment to the empowerment of staff and pupils. Many of them are active in training and developing other leaders.<sup>7</sup>

**viii. The most effective school leaders readily model good teaching.**

34. 'Do as I do' is much in evidence in primary schools with outstanding leaders, especially where the school needs higher expectations and a change of culture in respect of teaching and learning. Many of the case studies include evidence of outstanding leaders who have modelled what they want to see from others and retain a teaching commitment. This gives them huge credibility as respected instructional leaders, and adds authenticity to the constant monitoring and dialogue that are core aspects of their work.

**ix. The most effective support for teachers comes from other expert practitioners.**

35. The efficacy of peer support has been comprehensively documented.<sup>8</sup> All the outstanding schools in the case studies are sharing their skills through school improvement partnerships of one kind or another, although they were not particularly selected for that reason. This study illustrates a range of ways in which outstanding leaders are ensuring that they and their schools contribute to the improvement of others, including as national support schools, teaching schools and leading federations or multi-academy trusts.

**x. The quality of the curriculum makes a significant contribution to the children's interest, engagement and learning and thus to the outcomes they achieve.**

36. Designing an exciting curriculum that teaches core skills rigorously, incorporates national curriculum requirements creatively and widens children's experience and horizons ambitiously is a particular accomplishment of these schools. These schools have rich and imaginative curricula, both within and beyond the classroom, which add value in many ways. Often the curriculum has to compensate for children's limited experience, language and powers of communication. Creative curriculum planning provides a strong stimulus for learning. A fascinating curriculum has a direct effect on children coming to school and wanting to learn. They do not want to miss anything and attendance rates are higher than average.

37. The great majority of case study schools are relaxed about national curriculum changes, confident that they will still be able to design and manage the curriculum in the way that best responds to the needs of their children. Most would wish to continue to use some form of age-related levels which contribute so much to formative assessment and end-of-key-stage tests. As one headteacher said: "It is vital that children's progress and outcomes are benchmarked at regular intervals in their school career. How can you target children's learning if you cannot assess the level they are working at or the next steps required?" It will therefore be important to ensure that both teachers and pupils know their targets (or challenges) and levels as the assessment regime changes and be able to measure pupils' learning and attainment regularly and objectively.

## **Commentary**

38. There is strong evidence that a single-minded focus on high-quality teaching does much to reduce achievement gaps. Most of the schools in our sample have little or no achievement gap. Their emphasis on the progress of each individual child, together with a preponderance of very high-quality teaching can – and does – make a difference. This is notably true of the schools serving White British disadvantaged communities where we found schools that show how success can be achieved under strong school leadership that is determined to improve teaching and raise standards. There is a strong commitment to attracting, retaining and rewarding committed and outstanding teachers in these schools because it is believed that children in these communities need the best teaching. Their case studies should be promulgated to all schools serving such communities.



## 2. A simple model of primary leadership

**This section identifies common features of outstanding primary leadership. The case studies show that exceptional school leaders have strong personal characteristics which govern the drive, determination, vision and courage to effect change and take people with them. They have clear focus and priorities which, together with expertise, ensure that they do the right things to raise standards. They also have the interpersonal skills to find the most effective way of achieving their goals. These dimensions of leadership may be summarised by considering leaders in terms of *who they are* (which is developed further in Section 3), *what they do* (Sections 4 and 5) and *how they do it* (Sections 5 to 7), which broadly equate to values, knowledge and skills. The case studies provide copious further evidence of the three aspects.**

39. School leadership must be judged ultimately in terms of how well it serves its children. What will children be like having attended that school? What has it done for them? What sort of people are they? It is worth reflecting on what leadership characteristics would produce a school in which over 90% of pupils achieve level 4 or above and nearly 50% of pupils level 5 or above in reading, writing and mathematics; where 100% make at least the expected progress in all three aspects and where value added is nearly 103 as a result of the following reported characteristics in one school.

“Pupils are very inquisitive; they thoroughly enjoy learning and take pride in their work. Pupils’ speaking skills are excellent because of teachers’ probing questions and high expectations. For example, older pupils present a very well-balanced, well-informed and persuasive argument debating whether five years is the appropriate age for starting school.

Pupils read fluently, accurately and with very good comprehension skills, as a result of very effective teaching and their regular exposure to stimulating literature. They write with flair and imagination, often at length and for a wide range of purposes. They enjoy working independently or with others and make excellent use of different sources of reference such as dictionaries and the internet. They have a very good capacity to assess their own learning and work towards the next stage. They develop an outstanding vocabulary and use punctuation well. Pupils have a very secure understanding of the relationships between fractions, decimals and percentages because of the many practical activities and very strong focus on a good mathematical vocabulary in many lessons. Pupils apply their very well-established calculation skills very effectively in history, science and design technology activities.

More able pupils are challenged in lessons to make outstanding progress by the many opportunities to use and apply their skills in investigative and problem-solving situations. Those with special educational needs and/or disabilities and pupils at risk of falling behind make excellent progress because of very well-planned interventions and excellent care, guidance and support.

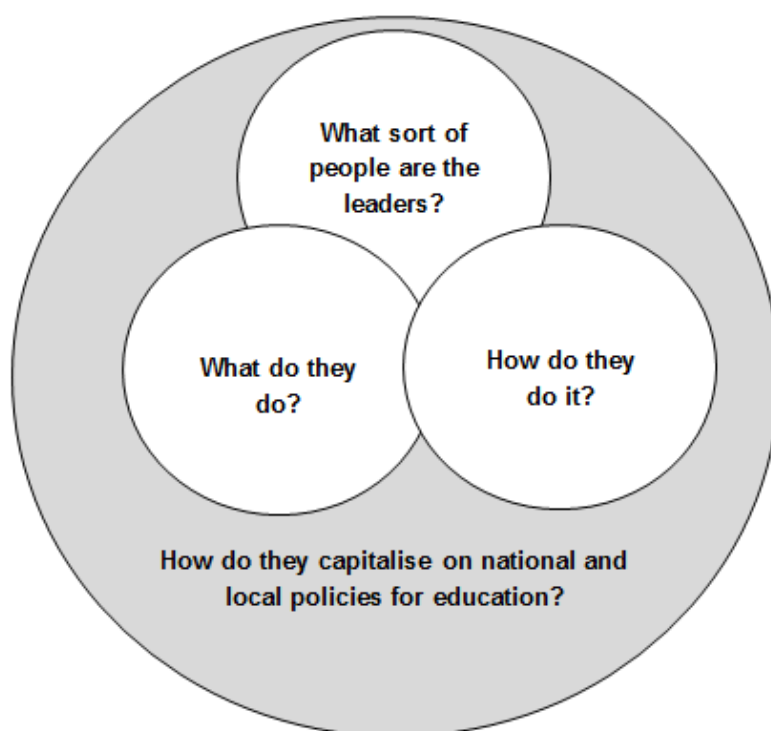
Pupils have an outstanding capacity to consider others' viewpoints and a realistic and deep understanding of many social, moral and religious issues. They write with empathy and understanding on the plight of children in wartime, for example. Pupils show kindness and consideration towards each other and are very attentive to adults and other children. They express this extremely well through written and art work. The pupils have a very good knowledge of the many different cultures and faiths in the local areas and welcome its inclusivity."<sup>9</sup>

Ofsted, 2012

40. Few parents would object to the education described above. Educators should be able to identify what must lie behind these outcomes: consistently effective teaching, a stimulating and well-designed curriculum, rigorously planned lessons, a culture of empowering children to become capable and self-aware learners, high expectations and well-informed attention to the needs of individual pupils. What is the leadership that results in education of this quality?

41. The case studies together illustrate a pattern of characteristics of outstanding primary school leadership. These characteristics can be classified through a combination of the four main aspects shown schematically below (Figure 3).

Figure 3. A simple model for visualising outstanding primary leadership



## 2.1 What sort of people are outstanding primary leaders?

42. The first dimension concerns the *personal and professional character*, or attributes, of leaders of very successful schools, as identified by their colleagues and governors. What sort of people are they? What are their values? Perspectives on each school leader, as viewed by those who work with them, are highly consistent. Some attributes are common to all the leaders featured in the case studies. All are driven by a commitment to do the best for every child in the school. It is in this sense that their schools are 'child-centred'. Children come first. These headteachers also have a strong sense of social justice, seeking to remove the barriers to achievement such as disadvantage and low parental aspiration by compensating for what the children lack and by working closely with families and the community. Necessary qualities include vision, determination, resilience, tenacity and drive, laced with the courage of their convictions and carried forward with an irresistible momentum.

43. Above all, they maintain a *single-minded focus on teaching and learning*, so as to maximise the achievement of all. This discipline, known as the 'hedgehog' concept<sup>10</sup> underpins the work of successful leaders, whether rescuing a failing school or sustaining

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\* The hedgehog's single but highly effective strategy against all forms of attack is to roll into a ball.

an outstanding one. This is important, for one of the issues identified in a report for the government in 2007<sup>11</sup> was that many headteachers in England felt overloaded and were uncertain about how to prioritise their work.

44. A sample of 50 primary school leaders in 2013<sup>12</sup> considered the following characteristics most important among the 150 attributes they identified:

- Resilient
- Driven, determined and committed
- Passionate
- Focused
- Visionary and inspiring
- Clear and communicative
- Relentless and tenacious
- Reflective
- Courageous
- Challenging, with high expectations

Respondents also cited wide-ranging affective attributes to do with moral purpose, honesty, openness, emotional intelligence and belief. Another group of responses was action-orientated and included: energetic, engaged, risk-taking, organised, problem-solving, encouraging and motivating.

## 2.2 What do outstanding leaders do?

45. The second dimension captures *what leaders do* to create excellent schools. Do they know what to do and do they apply this knowledge? This depends on what the school was like when they took the helm, what the priorities were and which barriers needed to be overcome. Their actions are exemplified in section 4 and captured in detail in the case studies.

46. As the culture of the school changes and systems and approaches become implemented and embedded, leaders move the school on, constantly refining, innovating, empowering and developing. School improvement strategies are knowledgeable, rooted in experience and current knowledge of best practice as well as the most powerful research. All actions are focused on what they will mean for children and their learning.

47. Many of the case studies show the consequences of policy changes, in particular the response of headteachers and governors to the new freedoms and increased autonomy available to them. It is important to bear two things in mind when reading this report. The first is that it is focused only on *outstanding* leaders of what are, under their leadership, very successful schools. The findings do not reflect primary school leadership

as a whole and are not intended to. But they show what the most effective leaders are like, what can be done to provide notable primary education and how to achieve it. It is hoped that accounts of what these leaders do will challenge and inspire others.

48. Secondly, the report was being finalised at a time when primary education was preparing for changes in the curriculum and testing requirements. Public debates about what is or is not effective teaching tended to take little account of best practice or research. This report does not engage with such debates but – through the case studies – describes what these schools do and believe in, and what works for their children. The high standards they achieve are the ultimate test; the schools stand by their methods.

## 2.3 How do they do it?

49. The third dimension concerns the behaviours of leaders: *how they do it*. How do effective leaders work with colleagues to get the best from them, ensuring consistent approaches and high standards? What skills do they need? Clarity of communication, consultation, determination and leading by example are frequently cited. Again, the strategies change according to where the school is at, often moving from directing to empowering, from assessing to trusting. These leaders know when to take up and when to pass over the reins, without ever completely letting go. They take risks, do not ascribe blame and always look for the positive. Three further characteristics stand out.

50. First, they *lead by example* and respect each individual, but do not shirk difficult conversations or hard decisions. Two primary heads who work closely together as national leaders of education in a federation of their two schools describe each other's leadership styles as follows.

One described the other's "... warmth, which she uses in a clever way. She knows how to bring people with her. And then when there is an urgency to get things done, she becomes much harder-nosed". The first headteacher was described in turn as "... the sort of person everyone respects. She is very inclusive. Good at delegating. She makes people feel valued, and is good at getting the best out of people'. Both headteachers stressed that an essential part of motivating an effective team was ensuring that their staff were working with good team players. Part of their role as heads was to model this practice, be consistent in their behaviours and ensure people knew how they were likely to respond in given situations.

51. Second, *trust and empowerment* are strong characteristics of outstanding leadership commonly cited by staff. In well-led schools, staff feel trusted to lead, innovate, experiment and take risks. They are encouraged to do so and feel empowered. This notion of empowerment extends to all in the school, including pupils. They are encouraged to lead, to learn with and from their peers, and to take responsibility for their

learning – seeking out and rising to new or harder challenges. The case studies provide many illustrations of what outstanding leaders do and how they approach it, seen through the eyes of staff and other stakeholders.

52. Third, outstanding leaders have a propensity for *seizing new opportunities*. They recognise the unparalleled freedoms of primary schools in England, whether maintained schools, academies or free schools, but are also conscious of the local and national policy environments in which they operate. These provide opportunities for many but constraints for some, particularly where local and national policies are in tension. Rather than being dominated by external ideologies, what outstanding leaders do and why they do it are driven by their core educational beliefs, purposes and values. They build organisational capacity, structures and cultures which take account of external policies and opportunities but which are in line with identified school improvement priorities. Schools have become both more self-reliant, being able to shape their destinies, and more interdependent.

## Commentary

53. Headteachers and governors with vision are taking advantage of the opportunities presented, not for the aggrandisement of their own position but for the benefit of children in their schools and elsewhere. Thus the leaders of several of the case study schools have, during the course of this study, become national leaders of education or of governance, or heads of teaching schools. The changing context provides the background to this study, but we start by considering the emergence of outstanding primary leaders.

### 3. Paths to headship

**This section summarises some of the routes to headship reflected in the case studies. Many more opportunities now exist than in the past to prepare for headship and to experience the responsibilities involved, for example as an associate headteacher or head of school, before being ultimately accountable for the school. Other important factors include working with headteachers who are good role models and having effective mentoring in the first headship.**

54. As recognised by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)<sup>13</sup> and national studies,<sup>14</sup> England has promoted leadership development strongly and its standards for headteachers form the basis for similar developments in other administrations including Ontario, Canada and Victoria, Australia. England has a range of national qualifications for leaders at all levels; a huge body of leadership research and collective wisdom; a highly developed reward structure for leadership roles; a wealth of leadership opportunities; avenues for progression beyond the leadership of a single school and – above all – freedom to lead in a highly autonomous school system.

55. We found that there was little in common in the routes to outstanding leadership taken by our case study headteachers. Some have led one school, others many. They varied in the amount of time they had been in headship. They have worked in contrasting settings. But we identified a number of factors that had contributed to their gaining headships and making a success of them.

#### **Teaching commitment and competence**

56. The outstanding leaders described in the case studies are totally committed to the interests of the children they serve. It is no surprise that they still have high credibility as teachers. They are comfortable teaching anywhere in their schools and are admired and respected *as teachers* by children as well as staff. One of the clearest common features of the outstanding headteachers and executive headteachers is their closeness to the classroom. Being an excellent practitioner is a very helpful if not essential prerequisite for excellence as a headteacher. For several, being an expert practitioner contributed to their credibility when they first became a senior leader or deputy headteacher and has carried on into headship as an instructional leader.

#### **Self-belief**

57. The outstanding school leaders appear confident, self-assured and still ambitious in their roles. They have long overcome the barriers that are known to deter some excellent senior leaders from stepping up into headship. Sometimes, the decision is unavoidable as, for example, when a deputy headteacher has to step up when the headteacher is ill, often before they have had much time to reflect on the transition.

One leader's path to headship began in 2000 when she went as deputy head to a primary school in special measures. She wanted more experience, having previously worked in an infant and all-through primary school. After a term as deputy head, the headteacher left on health grounds and the deputy had headship thrust on her. She was appointed acting head for the 18 months it took to bring the school out of special measures. She remained as substantive head for a further 18 months in which time she had led the school to 'good' with outstanding features, as judged by a further inspection.

58. One barrier is not wishing to leave the classroom because of the enjoyment and fulfilment of teaching. The answer to this is to promote the role of headteacher as lead practitioner, pedagogic leader or leader of learning, with opportunities to affect the teaching experienced by many more children. Many of the headteachers in our sample teach whenever they can and in other ways spend a lot of time in classrooms. This gives them an unrivalled knowledge of pupils as well as colleagues and informs their monitoring of progress and discussions with families.

59. Another concern of potential school leaders is the high-stakes accountability of being in charge, sharpened by the inspection system. Again, a culture in which accountability and responsibility go hand-in-hand at whatever level in the school is embedded in these outstanding schools but may need more emphasis to re-professionalise some parts of the system. Much depends on how school leaders handle inspections and the example they set to their colleagues.

### **Apprenticeship or simulation**

60. Research has shown there is nothing like either trying the headship or head of school role under the supervision of an executive headteacher, or having to replace a head in an acting capacity, for removing the fear of doing it. Talent management can make an important contribution as the following example shows.

One leader's headship was an outcome of local authority talent management and succession planning. She had sought or been exposed to the right opportunities, challenges and experience at the right time, and was fully prepared for this, her first substantive headship. Key elements of her professional growth include moving sideways from deputy headship of an infant to deputy headship of a primary school to gain experience of the full age range before applying for headships. She was nominated by the local authority for the Associate Headteacher Programme provided by the National College for Teaching and Leadership and then placed by the local authority as an associate head to lead a school causing concern, under the umbrella of an executive headteacher. Her leadership pathway is a good example of the experiential model of preparing for headship.<sup>15</sup>



61. Not all local authorities have the capacity to manage talent in this way, particularly as more primary schools become academies. There are good examples of school federations and multi-academy trusts providing ideal opportunities for leadership development as ‘head of school’ or ‘associate headteacher’. One example is the First Federation in Devon, where the heads of constituent schools are ‘heads of teaching and learning’, working to the federation executive headteacher.<sup>16</sup> Senior leaders who have become heads of school, with the executive headteacher providing an umbrella (or safety net!), are often converted from being apprehensive about headship to becoming committed to it.

### **Role modelling and mentoring**

62. Working in a school led by an excellent headteacher can have two effects. Either good teachers thrive under that leadership but do not want to leave. Or they admire and learn from their leaders and are impelled to try and do as well in another school. The best leaders play a part in this, by spotting talent, providing opportunities for it to grow and pushing emergent leaders out of the nest when they are ready for another challenge. Earlier in his career, one headteacher in the sample was a beneficiary of such altruism.

His first headteacher took an interest in him, in effect as a personal mentor, gave him early responsibilities and then pushed him on after two years when a contrasting opportunity came up in a different school. He was in his second school in his third year and his third school in his fourth year, gaining different experiences and working for who he believes now were “very idiosyncratic headteachers who were interesting and did a lot for the children in their own way. And I think that helped me enormously. One school was in a White working class estate, one in a leafy suburb, one was a multi-ethnic inner-city school. So to have that experience, to work for three heads in four years really was a great introduction to teaching.” After four years, he had worked in three schools teaching from foundation 1 to year 6. In his fourth year his head pointed him towards a deputy headship in another school. He did not feel he was qualified but put in an application for a big multi-ethnic inner-city school, and was appointed. He insisted on teaching, contrary to the wishes of his new head, because he felt he needed to demonstrate his credibility to the staff. So again he taught in foundation, key stage 1 and key stage 2. This still bears fruit.

### **Internal promotion**

63. Frequently, the deputy headteacher of a primary school is promoted to headship in the same school. When the appointment works well, it can liberate the leader who has harboured ideas and ambitions for the school to continue the school’s development.

One leader joined a case study school as the deputy head. The school, which had recently been amalgamated, was in crisis and had just failed a county inspection. Behaviour was the main problem, with every class having extremely disruptive

children. Standards and expectations were low and achievement was poor. The headteacher at that time focused on addressing the behaviour issues and by the time the deputy took over from her behaviour was much improved. At that point the school also became grant maintained. However, the focus on behaviour had squeezed out attention, time and resources for the curriculum and the new head made this, linked to raising expectations, her priority. It was a long haul. In 2003, the school was described by inspectors as 'a very good school'. It was judged outstanding in 2008. It is now a teaching school of over 900 pupils and the head is executive headteacher.

### **Proactive moves to gain experience: self-development**

64. Several of the headteachers in our study took conscious steps to broaden their experience, sometimes postponing attaining their goal of primary headship. One became a deputy head in an urban school in a city overspill area, a "tough district with very tough children who challenged you a bit". He held another deputy headship, where he was allowed many opportunities, before taking on his first headship.

Early in his career one of the case study headteachers was one of the few teachers in his junior school who actively built a relationship with the feeder infant school because he was curious to know what the children had done previously. He later worked for that infant school head when she led a four-form entry first school. This was organised as three parallel mini-schools of seven classes and he took charge of one of these, effectively becoming head of school as well as being English coordinator. He worked for a strong leader who set high standards. She would collect all the English books in on Friday evening and scrutinise them over the weekend, making her views known on the Monday. Our subject also became a deputy head for two years and learned much about management systems at that school. He did not feel ready for headship so applied for another deputy headship, taking up his first headship two years later. He subsequently led another very successful primary school before becoming a notable system leader.

65. Having always been junior or primary school orientated earlier in her career, becoming deputy head of a primary school, another of our sample of outstanding headteachers sought to gain experience of the early years by taking on the headship of an infant school in a challenging mining village struggling to survive as a community after the pit closed. She then moved to the headship of a city primary school for experience of multi-cultural schools and teaching English as an additional language. The school was "quite a challenge, a cause for concern with the local authority" but she led that school to be judged outstanding with no key issues. She is also now primary executive principal in a chain.

66. For several heads, a career step into local authority work proved unfulfilling and, they felt, deskilling. Their school improvement credibility had derived from being active practitioners. All returned to headship but actively supported other schools.

### **Appetite for challenge**

67. Many of the leaders reflected in the case studies have consciously sought challenging schools, not out of bravado but wanting to make a difference to children whose needs were not being met. One, for example, who applied for her first headship in an inner-city school destined for closure was moved to do so by parents demonstrating in the streets to save their school. The school was in a poor way: in special measures. She considered the job but decided not to apply. The post was not filled and was re-advertised. What happened next is best told in her own words.

“I was walking around the city and saw all these banners saying ‘Save our School’. The community really wanted to keep their school and wanted it to improve. I had a change of heart; I was ready to lead a school but was very naive and did not realise quite how bad things were. The buildings were horrendous; it felt wrong and unjust that they had got into such a terrible state. But it was seeing the parents and children who so passionately wanted all that to improve that moved me. Certainly it made me reassess what I wanted to do in education.”

68. Another was persuaded to take over the executive headship of a school that had regressed to special measures a few years after he had turned it around in an acting headship capacity. A third took on a hugely challenging inner-city school having gained experience of communities rapidly in a variety of schools and through previous work as a youth worker, police officer and reporter.

### **Commitment and drive**

69. Whether they have led their current school for few years or many, these leaders do not rest on their laurels. They are reflective, dynamic, life-long learners who are constantly looking for better ways of doing things, challenging themselves as well as others. Some have accomplished what needed doing in a school and felt it was time to move on and let someone else take the school on the next step of its journey. Others have stayed for a long time with one school, improving it year on year, building a durable relationship with the community and reaching out to support other schools or form federations and multi-academy trusts. For one headteacher, who has worked in three schools serving highly disadvantaged communities after a career in business, her interest in such schools is because she passionately believes that “everybody deserves the best chance in education. Disadvantaged children are in greater need than their middle class peers to be taught by outstanding teachers who can give them the life chances that they would not otherwise have.”

## Commentary

70. There is ongoing concern about the preparation and supply of primary headteachers. All the primary heads featured are doing the job because they want to make a difference. Most began to display this mission well before they became a head. It is clearly shown in leaders who seek experience in challenging schools, leaders who move sideways, or often – in the case of returners to the profession – take a step down to broaden their experience. It is also reflected by those who take on a second deputy headship in a different type of school before going for headship and by others who take on, perhaps as their first headship, the leadership of a school that attracts few applicants.

71. The best primary headteachers are in the key position to encourage, grow and develop others to become headteachers. Ideally, preparation for headship includes acting up for the headteacher, undertaking a placement or a leadership internship or project within another school, and undertaking leadership training and development. Feasibility of making such provision is enhanced if, for example:

- the school increases capacity by taking on income-generating partnership and outreach work which allows the appointment of extra staff to protect the curriculum
- the school works in partnership with one or more others to broaden the experience of potential headteachers through reciprocal arrangements such as exchanges or internships
- the headteacher takes responsibility for a second school through an executive headship enabling a potential headteacher to become 'head of school'
- the headteacher spends a period away from the school, perhaps through secondment, allowing other leaders in the school to take over.

72. The expectation that they do this is not matched by incentives. Indeed, there are many barriers. One is limited capacity in the average primary school of seven classes. The deputy headteacher, if there is one, assistant headteachers and other teachers with significant responsibilities are often pivotal to the success of the school. A second constraint can be the reluctance of some governing bodies to allow their successful headteacher to take on an executive headship, fearing a negative impact on the school. A third can be the desire of a school to retain its best staff and a fourth is the reluctance of many deputy and assistant headteachers to take on headship in an era of high accountability. There is a case for considering whether more incentives might be introduced to generate high-potential headteacher candidates, such as increasing the leadership salary scale differentials between headteachers and deputy headteachers of similar-sized schools.

## 4. Leadership at all levels

**The evidence shows that outstanding headteachers distribute leadership to colleagues who earn their trust and confidence. In many schools, pupils are also encouraged to lead, cooperate and be good team players. Leadership has a consistent focus on learning, the aim being an embedded culture of the school as a learning organisation.**

73. All the headteachers in this study set out clear and high expectations of all and left no stone unturned in ensuring that every part of the school was moving in the right direction. They have identified the effective leaders and required everyone – whatever their role and whether staff or pupils – to take responsibility for their work, both teaching and learning, and to be accountable for what they do in the school. In many schools this approach required a substantial change of culture.

### Opening up teaching

74. The process normally starts by opening up the classroom to other professional eyes. At one school, for example, the new headteacher's initial approach of observing lessons and monitoring frequently and rigorously was initially uncomfortable for staff unused to being observed but eventually empowering as they began to take responsibility in their stride, knowing they were trusted to take initiative and innovate. The following happened at another school:

One of the most important early steps was “making people feel accountable for what was going on in their classrooms at every level”. This was a real challenge as the culture amongst some staff then was “but we’ve done it like this for years”. Lesson observations were a key area to develop. The headteacher announced at a very early staff meeting that her approach during her first term would be to give staff notice that she was coming in to observe them. After that, the observations would be unannounced. This set the tone and gave an explicit indication of what the headteacher expected and what she would be doing to monitor practice: “I feel passionately that the children should have the very best every day, and I need to know that the ‘bread and butter’ lessons are high quality”, she said.

75. Since those early days, the headteacher has built up the capacity of her staff to undertake such observations. Subject leaders observe lessons to review the quality of learning in their subject and the implementation of that aspect of the curriculum. To reduce anxiety, these monitoring visits by the subject leaders are called ‘drop-ins’ instead of observations; they serve the same purpose. For each subject area, there is a clear schedule of monitoring across the terms, designed to provide a mix of evidence. For example, in term 1 a subject leader might undertake a set of drop-ins; in term 2, they would carry out a ‘climate walk’ to look at the profile of their subject across the school, including examples of display work and the standard of work and quality of marking in pupils’ books; and in term 3 they would gather pupil perception information with groups of

pupils or one-to-one interviews. This type of activity equips subject leaders to take responsibility for their subjects throughout the school and prepares them for the changes and progression in leadership roles that are common in primary schools.

### **Leadership teams and the growth of leaders**

76. One headteacher believes that it is crucial to have excellent teachers as members of the leadership team. The headteacher and her deputy have sufficient in-depth knowledge to be able to tell the story of each individual child. They know each child so well that if a member of staff new to the school expresses concern about a child not making progress they can say: "Well actually we know exactly their barriers, their strengths, what they could be capable of achieving and their family circumstances."

77. Her senior leaders, a large group, all understand their key roles thoroughly and each is familiar with everybody else's job. The school's systems are so established and consistently applied that staff no longer have to focus on them but can concentrate instead on powerful and innovative teaching. The leadership team illustrated how members draw on individual strengths and expertise to create a common approach that benefits from their collective knowledge. They explained:

"We found that we were all good at certain aspects of 'assessment for learning' but that nobody knew what it was in its entirety. So we decided to combine all of our skills and make sure that not only were we responsible for the learning but that the children were responsible for their individual learning and that every member of staff, including learning support assistants, was responsible for moving those children on. That was through something as simple as children evaluating their own learning through to really intense individualised marking. We focused heavily on making marking purposeful."

78. The school quickly embedded a range of strategies for the children to share their knowledge. Examples include:

- 'talking partners', encouraging children to find solutions in pairs or groups things and actively participate in learning, without diminishing the central role of the teacher
- consistent features of all classrooms, which include 'working walls' devoted to the current topic or curriculum area, a display focused on 'Every time we write', displays of success criteria and targets, and a mathematics display. As one teacher explained: "There are certain things that you will see in every classroom from reception to year 6 providing consistency for the children and for us."

79. The school discusses levels and targets with pupils, especially in years 5 and 6, where children are very aware of them. They reflect on them and become more involved in setting their own standards. Younger children are also aiming for high standards of work. Thus in every classroom there is a high level writing display that shows children the

‘absolute best’ of what is expected of them. A feature of this display is some of the best writing produced by the year above, chosen by the pupils. This is labelled to show the features that represent target levels, such as level 5 or 6, in the year 6 class. The headteacher said: “It will really pinpoint what is good about that level and how to achieve that level. So in some classrooms it might be the language of a high-level sentence, for example.”

80. At one school, as in others, leadership potential is identified early and a teacher could be assigned a leadership responsibility as early as their second year. Middle leaders have the opportunity to participate in development programmes. The senior leadership group has all come from within the school. The work that the executive head has undertaken in supporting other schools has helped to create space for the other senior leaders to develop into their roles. It has also had the benefit of providing staff from the school with the experience of work with other schools as they support the executive head’s improvement interventions. This is how management operates:

The senior leadership group meets every Monday morning when its agenda might include looking at implementation of the school’s improvement plan, reviewing staff structures, sharing information on learning walks and data analysis and identifying which staff need courses or further development opportunities. From time to time the senior leadership group will have a session off-site to consider more strategic issues such as roles and responsibilities, a review of the school improvement plan, the application to become a teaching school or the implications of being involved in opening a new school. On Tuesday afternoons after school the wider management group (i.e. including staff with teaching and learning responsibility allowances) meets, when the emphasis is on year group leaders around the table feeding back what they are doing with their teams to improve teaching and learning.

81. Leadership is broadly distributed at this school. In addition to the executive headteacher, who has overall responsibility for standards and school effectiveness, the senior leadership group comprises an associate head, who acts as head of school and leads on teaching and learning and the curriculum, and three deputy and three assistant heads. The responsibilities of the three deputies cover, respectively:

- behaviour, safety, inclusion and special educational needs
- achievement and learning, and English as an additional language/ethnicity aspects of inclusion
- social, moral, spiritual and cultural issues, early years foundation stage and key stage transition leader. This deputy is also supporting the executive headteacher in his other school.

82. The three assistant heads each have responsibilities for particular aspects of the curriculum along with a focus on 'Future teaching'. Eight other teachers have teaching and learning responsibilities for leading year groups and for leading on issues such as extended schools, pupil voice and action research.

83. In contrast, although another much smaller school has a deputy headteacher and other key leaders such as the special educational needs coordinator, the whole staff is drawn into debate and decision-making. It is a good example of open leadership and close teamwork with the staff being a single team. The model works well for them.

84. On becoming executive head of a school in special measures, one headteacher quickly established a wider team which included a head of school, three assistant heads (non-class-based) and a part-time early years coordinator. The leadership team was now a strong and high profile group. The head of school role in particular was focused on ensuring effective teaching and learning at the school, as well as carrying out the performance appraisals of staff and overseeing the budget. This school came out of special measures only nine months after the executive head took over and was judged good with outstanding capacity for sustained improvement: an exceptional rate of progress. Ofsted wrote:

"Underpinning improvements is the good leadership and management of the executive headteacher and his senior team. The resources, expertise and experience available from the partner school have been wisely utilised. The headteacher provides a very clear direction. He has set high expectations and, along with the senior leaders, has worked tirelessly and to good effect to improve the school. The determined drive to raise achievement has yielded impressive improvements in a very short space of time. The school's outstanding capacity is underpinned by a shared and challenging culture of accountability which has, during the past few months, delivered rapid progress."

### **Empowerment of staff, harnessing potential**

85. Senior staff at one school talked of always having autonomy to take decisions, for example deploying additional staff where they might be needed to address a school improvement need. Senior staff agreed that the focus was always on the children and their progress and that when staff had ideas there was lots of support to implement them, for example introducing play leaders in the playground to improve behaviour. Staff said: "There is definitely an open door and all views are welcomed and encouraged; people feel listened to." Ofsted in 2012 agreed:

"Leaders and managers at all levels, including governors, are passionately committed to their school. They are knowledgeable about its strengths and clear about priorities for improvement, never hesitating to share their vision for the future. Succession planning is supported through leadership opportunities across



the federation. Leaders have become very effective in sharing their expertise, consistently raising the quality of teaching and learning, in turn improving levels of achievement for all groups of pupils. As a result, senior leaders have demonstrated relentless determination and secure ability in the capacity to improve.”

86. Some larger schools in our sample have allocated significant training budgets of around £40,000 a year. Each uses this to support a rich programme of in-service training (INSET) days, attendance at external conferences and courses, and sessions run in-school by leading national and international experts. At one, staff are encouraged to continue their own learning with newly qualified teachers (NQTs) being given books that they are expected to read, and small groups of staff participate in action research. Staff are also encouraged to develop their interests: “There is freedom to explore” and “You can go off and develop something” were two of the comments made by members of staff. As a two-day Inclusion Quality Mark accreditation visit to the school in June 2013 reported:

“Staff work closely together within a culture of high expectations, mutual respect and trust. They really appreciate the career development opportunities they are given through training and feel they can go to any member of staff for advice and support, irrespective of role or seniority.”

Inclusion Quality Mark report, 12 June 2013

87. The school encourages teachers to develop what it terms ‘professional flexibility’ and to use their judgement as to the balance of lesson content over a day or a week. They can also use their judgement to adapt the curriculum to use and reflect on significant news and events. The development of staff is all brought together in the school’s approach to performance management. Each member of staff is given three individual targets for the year: one relating to pupil progress; one to their personal progress; and one to wider school development. Development opportunities are provided to support staff in meeting their targets. Staff record their progress through teaching and learning logs and this, plus pupil tracking data, the feedback from learning walks and lesson observations, feeds into their overall assessment for the year.

### **Empowering pupils**

88. In the outstanding schools, pupils know that they are there to learn and to help others learn. Instilling such a learning culture encourages pupils to take responsibility, not only for their behaviour, but taking on harder learning challenges without fear of failure. This is particularly striking at one school, where pupils by year 4 are confident in seeking more challenging work on their own initiative, or something easier if they have not yet mastered a concept (for example, in mathematics). Pupils also have wide responsibilities in the school.

89. The maturity of pupils at many of these schools is also striking. They are confident in class in discussion, debate and responding to questions. They are used to reviewing both their own progress and that of their peers. One school promotes pupils' roles in leading learning through, for example:

- a group of 21 'digital leaders' who help other pupils and support teachers in using technology in the classroom. This role is particularly significant as the school does not use information and communication technology suites but embeds technology into everyday learning in the classroom through iPads, tablets and other smart devices. The pupils have their own digital leaders' club
- writing mentors who once a week will review pupil progression and the quality of teacher feedback from reception to year 6
- a learning council that develops and oversees the implementation of rights and responsibilities of all the pupils, in accordance with the United Nations Charter for the Rights of the Child
- an eco-council that has been monitoring air pollution
- reading champions and buddy readers.

90. Developing pupil responsibility is very important in one school that blends traditional and modern methods. Alongside the school council there is a house system, house points and a head boy and girl. Specific projects generate responsibility. Pupils were given control of the £60,000 allocated to develop toilets across the school, including researching and advising on how to incorporate safe locks on cubicle doors. Ofsted noted that:

"The headteacher loans each class £25 for setting up an enterprise to generate funds. Pupils prepare a business plan, advertising literature and keep accounts. Scrutiny of photographs and accounts indicate well-organised and very profitable ventures where pupils use their skills to good effect. Many older pupils have a leadership role in the school, such as 'problem solvers' and house captains."

## Commentary

91. The case studies show repeatedly that the purposeful learning climate generated by excellent leadership can be enhanced by giving rein to both staff and pupils to show what they can do. All of these schools have built a culture in which it is no longer risky to take risks or quirky to try something new. Pupils as well as staff are shown how to take real responsibilities and trusted to do so. Such approaches do not result in deterioration of behaviour or lowering of standards. On the contrary, such leaders raise expectations to the point of perfectionism, fuel motivation, encourage aspiration, build confidence and multiply the efficacy of the school many times through everyone becoming a learner and a teacher.

92. Schools can only develop such an innovative and aspirational culture if, first, they have spent time embedding the basic immutable foundations on which the school can grow and flourish. For one, there are ‘five pillars of performance’:

- establishing clear boundaries
- teaching basic skills effectively
- assessing progress
- developing staff
- clear accountabilities and a strong work ethic.

93. We noted that one of the most telling aspects of these outstanding schools was the esteem in which they were held by parents. The headteachers were loved, revered and respected to varying degrees by parents. Communities which once were indifferent to the school are now strongly defensive of it. Parents have ready access to classrooms. They help in the schools and volunteer in droves to come on out-of-school visits. They are engaged in supporting their children’s reading and learning at home and the schools tend to be oversubscribed. Primary schools in challenging and disadvantaged communities can apply a huge force for good, provided they are effective, genuinely focused on their pupils’ needs and welcoming to parents. They provide unrivalled opportunities for children and often a lifeline for communities. Their importance to community well-being and regeneration cannot be over-emphasised.

## 5. Transformational leadership

This section shows different facets of leadership depending on the effectiveness of the school initially. The evidence suggests that the task of the school leader may be to *rescue* an inadequate school, *reinforce* one that requires improvement, *refine* one that is moving from good to outstanding, *renew* one that aims to remain outstanding or improve still further and *replicate* best practice in other schools in the system leader's sphere of influence.

94. In this section we consider how schools that were underperforming have been transformed by the leaders in our study and how, once schools became good then outstanding, the drive for improvement has not ceased although the journey has changed. The focus of leadership naturally changes as a school improves. But different phases are identifiable in turning schools around and moving them on.

School category	Demands on leadership
Seriously underperforming or 'inadequate' school	The need is for <b>rescue</b> or recovery: rapid control, arrest of decline, assessment of priorities, firm action, critical decisions, modelling what is needed.
School that requires improvement to be judged 'good'	Such a school requires <b>reinforcement</b> : building capacity, harnessing good practice and improving that which is not, developing and empowering staff, ensuring consistency, raising aspirations, designing and implementing a strategy for creating a school that is good or better.
'Good' to 'outstanding'	The task involves <b>refinement</b> : ensuring that all teaching and learning is good and that an increasingly high proportion is outstanding, refining monitoring and evaluation, ensuring that the needs of every pupil are met, growing leaders, reducing achievement gaps and maximising progress and outcomes.
Sustaining excellence	This requires attention to <b>renewal</b> : not simply sustaining outstanding practice but building on it, innovating, fine tuning and spreading the school's influence more widely.

95. In the next section, we shall consider system leadership activities of our outstanding leaders, which include an element of **replication**.

### 5.1 School rescue

96. The challenges for schools that are inadequate often revolve around such symptoms as:

- low standards
- inconsistency or inadequacy in the quality of teaching, learning and assessment
- low staff morale and often high turnover
- a neglected physical environment
- children pushing the boundaries causing substantial behavioural issues
- poor resource management and budgeting
- poor attendance.

97. When taking on a sorely neglected school, one new head saw the imperative of demonstrating that change was possible. She and the newly appointed site manager spent the summer holidays refurbishing the entrance and the school hall; the entrance because it was the first aspect that pupils and parents would see and the hall because that was where she would hold the first assembly.

98. The school's mission statement, driven by the headteacher, was drawn up consultatively and finalised in a day's workshop involving pupils, staff, governors and parents. Quality of teaching was top of the list of ongoing leadership drives. The head recalls: "Having the HMI monitoring visits was one of the most helpful things because it really helped us focus on priorities." Two staff impeded the transformation that was reshaping the school and had to go.

99. The school came out of special measures quickly but remained quite vulnerable despite being judged 'good' when inspected in 2002. Two thirds of the staff that were in the school then remain there today; their practice (and their job satisfaction) was transformed as the school became good, then outstanding. It has sustained this quality for the last two inspections and the head is now leading the academies trust of 10 schools that has evolved from this one-time rescued school. Rescue priorities for two other schools included:

A school just out of special measures when the headteacher was appointed	A school that had regressed from 'good'
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• improving the environment</li> <li>• a focus on the teaching of reading</li> <li>• a purge of misbehaviour</li> <li>• 'keeping only the right staff on the bus'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• changing the learning environment, one class at a time</li> <li>• eliminating debt and aligning planning with the budget cycle</li> <li>• restructuring, which resulted in 11 fewer posts</li> <li>• instituting systems and procedures for 'absolutely everything'</li> <li>• working with the community</li> </ul>

100. Some of the issues are common to other inadequate schools. In one, for example, the rescue phase focused on transforming the conditions for learning by:

- i. *Building a shared vision* – through in-depth conversations with staff, parents and children.
- ii. *Aiming for high standards* – through modelling the quality of teaching and standards of work expected, and inspiring staff to do likewise.
- iii. *Reshaping the teaching and learning environment* – through a three-year plan to reshape classrooms, leading staff and children to decorate classrooms and transforming displays throughout the school.
- iv. *Establishing a pupil behaviour policy* – introducing a red-amber-green system focused on promoting positive behaviour; insisting on consistent practice by all staff; appointing a behaviour mentor and involving parents much more.
- v. *Appointing, developing and empowering teachers* – bringing in staff that share the same vision; restructuring leadership responsibilities; basing continuing professional development on talent management and succession planning; coaching each other and videoing each other's lessons.

101. Nowhere is the rescue phase treated with more urgency than by federations or multi-academy trusts that sponsor inadequate schools and expect to turn them around quickly after often years of poor performance. One multi-academy federation, for example, uses its own school improvement model for transforming under-performing primary schools. The model focuses entirely on teaching and learning.

- i. First the sitting headteacher (principal) and any deputy or assistant headteachers are given *four weeks* to show what change they can make to the school. The primary director is clear about the changes he expects to see in classes and in children's books, for example. No principal or vice principal achieved the required changes set in 2012–13, and they resigned.
- ii. It is not difficult to recruit a principal to a federation primary academy. Posts are advertised and people are approached. Typically the field is reduced to six and each applicant is visited in their own school before being interviewed by a panel that includes the chief executive of the federation.
- iii. Prospective heads are concerned about two issues: will the federation want to run the school instead of them and what support will they have? They are reassured on both counts. The model is focused on outcomes. Principals have the resources and the power to run their own schools.

- iv. Once appointed, the principal will receive a set-up grant for the school straight away, together with: an allocation of support for information technology, finance and human resources; an allocation of advisory teacher days; and access to support for middle leadership. They will also get a business manager for two days a week, since the federation has found that “the budgets of inadequate schools are usually in a mess”.
- v. The focus on teaching is relentless. Teachers with several years’ experience that are still teaching unsatisfactory lessons have to improve rapidly. The federation has its own bespoke ‘requiring improvement’ to ‘good’ (‘3 to 2’) programme which gives them weekly support in the classroom over six weeks by advisory teachers. Teachers with several years’ experience that are still teaching unsatisfactory lessons have to improve rapidly or face pre-capability steps.

102. There is also an ‘ambassador programme’ for very good and consistently good teachers who can become leaders of learning. This programme amounts to six hour-and-a-half twilight sessions working in peer pairs with videoed teaching, supported by sessions and resources on leadership and what makes a great leader of learning. These programmes are very popular and often draw out capable but hitherto ‘reserved’ staff from these poor schools that have frequently been dominated by inadequate teachers.

103. Monitoring of and by the schools is rigorous. Schools are expected to assess pupils every six weeks and report to parents every six weeks. The advisory team meets weekly, but undertakes a six-weekly scrutiny of each school’s pupil-level data. They write a commentary for the principal on the basis of these data, which are then discussed with the principal. In this way, no child in any of the schools can slip through the net and make insufficient progress undetected. Performance management is focused on the progress of key named children. Where intervention is used, it must be a tried and tested approach.

## **5.2 School reinforcement: securing ‘good’**

104. A school aiming to be good or better needs to focus on ensuring that teaching and learning are consistently effective, with consequential gains in pupils’ progress and achievements. This often necessitates raising staff expectations and skills through a corporate drive to build staff capacity, and may require structural change.

105. A sense of *how* to effect the desired changes is shown by the example of a headteacher who took on a school that had slipped back from the ‘good’ rating it had earned in earlier years.

- She found out where the strengths and weaknesses of the school lay, by observing and interviewing everyone within the first three weeks “to know what you’re feeling, what your strengths and weaknesses are and what your practice is like”.
- She monitored the quality of teaching daily, which staff were unused to, discussing the lessons and modelling teaching where necessary. She has improved the quality of teaching and learning and brought in a stringent management system through a process that was initially uncomfortable for staff but never confrontational. As one said: “She’s inspirational really ... she has respect for everyone and she’s fair. Because of this, people go out of their way to do what she asks. There’s a lot of give and take, which leads to good morale in school, and makes good relationships.”
- She established a new culture through a leadership approach that took a close interest in what the staff and children were doing. Lesson observations and monitoring are all unannounced. As the headteacher says: “I want to see what the children are getting every day. I want to know my children are getting good or better teaching all the time.” Planning support for pupils is also vital. Although the school has only 15 pupils eligible for pupil premium, they make as much progress as other pupils and their achievement is outstanding.
- She began an ongoing programme to improve the school environment, which involved altering the accommodation, using space in better ways and enriching learning resources.
- She made the most of personnel changes, whether of teaching or non-teaching staff, so as to change the dynamics of the school: what others have termed “getting the right people on the bus”.

106. It is clear that *how* this headteacher tackled changing the culture to one of high accountability and a collegiate approach to school improvement was as important as *what* she did. Underpinning all the visible monitoring was scrupulous analysis of formative assessment data and evidence.

### 5.3 Refinement: from good to outstanding

107. As schools gather momentum and the staff gain confidence, it is crucial that other leaders in the school rise to the challenge of ensuring that work in their areas of responsibility is as good as it can possibly be. This is about building leadership capacity and instilling confidence in staff, supporting and coaching them and providing opportunities for development. There is a common regard for high quality: in preparation, children’s work, marking and feedback, the classroom environment and – central to everything – making learning count for every pupil.



108. Leading by example is one of the most powerful levers of the transforming headteacher. The refinement phase in one school involved deepening and embedding creative and personalised learning. This had four main elements:

- i. *Establishing data-driven, evidence-based teaching and learning* – involving systematic tracking of each child's progress, termly pupil progress meetings, teacher forecasts with 'expected' and 'aspirational' levels, consistent marking and feedback, and guidance for children on the next steps to improve their learning.
- ii. *Learning with fun and creativity* – with teachers encouraged to do something different each year in their curriculum areas in order to stimulate pupils' interest in their learning; holding termly events such as 'Inspiration Day' and 'Viking Day' to create 'real life' experiences for children.
- iii. *'Extended family'* – for staff and children, the school is an 'extended family'; school improvement is a whole team effort; every child and member of staff feels cared for in what is an inspirational place; the school gives a second chance to many children from other schools who come with severe behaviour problems – as one child said: "If you are struggling, teachers will help you straight away."
- iv. *Engaging community* – emphasis is placed on making school accessible, creating a warm and unthreatening environment to engage parents in their own children's learning.

## The importance of curriculum

109. The outstanding schools all cover the national curriculum through thematic or topic-based approaches, normally cross-curricular with a strong emphasis on reading, writing, communication and numeracy at every opportunity. Communication, language and literacy, English, mathematics and physical education are timetabled as subjects or areas of learning with science and creative arts being covered either discretely or within the thematic curriculum. Curriculum and lesson planning is invariably rigorous, with well-defined learning objectives for both the class and individual children. Assessment for learning, constructive marking and reciprocal feedback are well embedded, and regular reviews of the progress of each class and each child are standard practice, with frequent feedback to the parents. In some schools, pupils are involved in self-assessment and make presentations at these feedback meetings.

110. Creating a vibrant learning environment, carefully planned to support learning, is a priority for outstanding leaders. This was the scene at one school, where pupils were

genuinely enthused about their learning, saying the best things about the school were “it’s fun”, “they make learning really interesting”, “my friends”, and “our exciting lessons – we really enjoy them”. At this school:

Display is carefully used to showcase examples of pupils’ work and their extended projects (for example, a scale model of a Roman amphitheatre constructed on a CAD/CAM machine). Art work from older ex-pupils now on art courses at secondary schools is designed to raise aspirations. The learning environments are vibrant and lively, with extensive use of working walls and exemplar marked work. Corridor displays are used imaginatively to raise esteem, such as golden leaves on a tree board naming those children with excellent attendance. On one classroom door, pupils had recorded their ideas on possible future careers, including one that read “We are the future”. The library has a central space in the school and £3,000 is spent on books annually. The school has adopted four approaches that are seen regularly around the school and in the school’s literature: Every Child a Reader, Every Child a Writer, Every Child Numerate and Every Child ICT Literate.

111. Features of teaching and learning that are fuelled by a rich, well-planned curriculum in these schools with outstanding leaders include:

- the challenge and pace of lessons
- rigorous but engaging teaching of core knowledge and skills which builds proficiency and understanding
- imaginative stimuli, often presented as challenges, to launch new topics
- the development of children’s ability to learn for themselves, work cooperatively with others – for example through learning partners and teams – show what they understand and where they have difficulty, and contribute to the learning of others, as when supporting the learning of younger children
- well-organised and engaging classrooms with active use of display space and some consistent features throughout the school
- effective strategies for matching challenges to individual readiness without diminishing expectations
- discriminating adoption of proven research, carefully chosen resources and new approaches
- teaching that fires the interest and imagination of children.

112. The old adage that ***a good curriculum, well taught, dispels most behaviour and attendance problems*** has much going for it. For many of the children in these schools, school is the best place they want to be in. Learning is fun and gives them confidence and a sense of achievement. The schools take account of context and children’s needs when shaping their curricula. For example:

One academy realised that many pupils came from homes where reading and cultural experiences were often lacking and so a curriculum that was rich in developing the love of reading was needed. The curriculum is centred on developing independent learners using the Building Learning Power (BLP)<sup>17</sup> and Philosophy for Children (P4C)<sup>18</sup> models. The 'Learning Challenge' curriculum structure which the school is now using is constantly evolving in the light of research and practice. Each challenge is framed as a question: "Would it be good if dinosaurs had not died out?", "Was it better to be a child in 1940 than 2010?", "What inspired Georgia O'Keefe?" or "What's on the menu at a scientific tea party?" Each year, every year group will undertake 10 to 14 learning challenges. The learning challenges will vary in length from three weeks to half a term. The entry point into a challenge is a 'wow' factor that might, for example, take the form of visits from birds of prey or a mystery tent to explore in the playground. A series of questions provide the framework for the challenge, with the children's thoughts and further questions displayed on a 'Wonderwall'.

113. The school is passionate about maintaining high standards within the context of its skill-based curriculum. It is not a question of creativity or standards, but both. The school's 'non-negotiables' provide the minimum expectation children are expected to reach. The challenges will include many assignments that foster literacy and numeracy. But the school does not try and force everything into the straightjacket of a learning challenge and will run free-standing phonics and numeracy sessions alongside the learning challenge work. It is left to each teacher to decide how best to achieve the appropriate balance and mix. Every child has an individual learning log which they will use for research or creative work at home that contributes to the learning challenge.

114. The operation of the curriculum is monitored through learning walks, lesson observations, looking at books and wall displays and through the termly pupil-tracking sessions. The lesson observations take place in the context of the school having defined its approach to 'outstanding' learning and teaching.

115. One of the important challenges for the school is to understand what outstanding might look like in five years' time. As one headteacher said: "We need to future proof ourselves against policy changes and changes to the inspection framework". What next after outstanding?

## **5.4 Renewal: beyond outstanding**

116. Many of these outstanding primary schools have become teaching schools and national support schools. Such a step can stretch capacity and can be dangerous unless the school is fully prepared for such commitments and has made it a priority to consolidate their outstanding practice. Sustaining outstanding quality is only assured if

the school continues to challenge itself and develop. For example, one school's strategies for sustaining excellence included the following.

*Pace and urgency.* The school works to the motto 'every second counts', which was designed to stress the need constantly to focus on how to make learning as effective as possible.

*Expectations.* Bottom-line expectations have promoted a new way of thinking. The behaviour policy focused on rewards rather than sanctions. The school adopted another motto – 'from first class to world class' – to offer a sense of the new level of ambition.

*Looking beyond the school.* The school needed to expand its horizons so as to: challenge current practice; allow staff to share in and learn from good practice elsewhere; and make its contribution to other schools in challenging circumstances.

*Identifying staff to lead.* A core of three or four staff were identified to act as beacons of good practice and leaders of teams. The headteacher was looking for staff "who will not be tired by change, who will be engaged and interested in learning; I want people who are intellectually hungry. We want staff here who will love it and share the challenge."

*Managing staffing changes.* There were staff who saw the direction of travel and did not want to go with it; they were supported to leave. The headteacher's strong instincts as a firm and compassionate leader are apparent in explaining that he felt that "it was important to allow people to go with dignity and with their head held high".

*Training and development.* Continuing professional development is a central plank of the strategy in moving the school forward. Every staff meeting is a professional development meeting, led by different staff. Identifying the right opportunities for staff, motivating them about external training and whole school development have all been important. Two key foci have been the science of teaching and leadership development.

*Empowering staff and delegating authority.* Once the headteacher had identified some of his future leaders and navigated the early turbulence, he was in a position to distribute leadership and place authority in the hands of others. The headteacher talks with enthusiasm about building leadership potential, supporting the future leaders and thinking carefully about how staff work together in developing initiatives. His view is that you need to offer people leadership opportunities.

*Communication of the vision.* Frequent communication of the messages and the vision are crucial to be successful. “We engage staff through questions and not answers, we aim to be enquiry-led”. This approach resulted in the idea of ‘link learning’, the school’s cross-curricular work.

*Positive morale.* The headteacher and the senior team have maintained a cheerful and positive staff room. Staff support each other and have social events. They recognise that they have been handpicked, and this creates confidence. Senior leaders inspire student teachers and make them want to work here.

*Monitoring pupil progress.* The introduction of pupil progress meetings was very powerful as a way of reviewing improvements. They used termly average point score data – “data is about the children: it describes what they can do, and raises questions”, says the headteacher – ensuring accountability, and considering support for individual pupils that might be necessary through additional interventions.

*Re-organising teaching and learning.* The school had recruited additional staff to work with year 5/year 6 classes to take smaller groups. For example, teaching assistants have been working with smaller groups at level 5, with teachers working with pupils at level 4 or below. Support groups have also been set up to work with pupils working at level 6 in maths, and extra teaching assistants have been appointed to “to push them on”.

117. Moderation of standards across the school has been a key influence: it has provided a chance to celebrate good examples; and also deliver a consistent message about expectations. Ofsted’s verdict on teaching and learning is glowing:

“The outstanding quality of teaching and excellent use of assessment to support learning is the key reason why pupils of all abilities achieve their potential. Teachers really make ‘every second count’ – one of the school’s mottos – through lessons, group work and homework. All activities are taught with pace and flair. They have very high expectations of pupils to tackle all their work with persistence and independence. Relationships are excellent. Teachers make very clear the purpose of lessons and how pupils can reach the highest possible level. They do this in a highly motivating way that holds pupils’ attention, enthuses them and deepens their learning. Highly-skilled teaching assistants are extremely well deployed to ensure all pupils, particularly those at risk of falling behind, clearly articulate their understanding of their own learning and make the maximum effort to improve their work. The quality of teaching is consistently high throughout the school. Pupils’ progress is regularly and thoroughly assessed and analysed in depth, both by teachers and pupils.”

118. The essence of remaining outstanding is captured by one very experienced headteacher, national leader of education and teaching school leader.

“At the beginning of my career, someone said ‘always do something different’. What we do every year is to try something different. Try a new plan. We look at other schools, look what other people are doing, and that’s the great joy of working nationally with other schools: you pick up ideas from all over the place.”

119. Our findings on school improvement correlate closely with the earlier Ofsted study *Twenty outstanding primary schools: excelling against the odds* (2009) (page 25), which listed the following principles and priorities which recur again and again in schools moving from good or worse to outstanding.

- a. Restore order and calm so that teaching and learning can take place.**
- b. Ensure that high expectations are set and that everyone – pupils, parents, staff and governors – is clear what they are.**
- c. Get the pupils and parents involved, engaged and committed so that they cannot later complain that they “did not know”.**
- d. Lead by example; demonstrate the behaviours you expect of others and show that you are prepared to do anything that might be asked of them.**
- e. Set and demonstrate high standards for teaching and learning.**
- f. Look early on at the curriculum, the school day and pupils’ experiences of the school.**
- g. Monitor and evaluate every aspect of the school’s performance.**
- h. Above all, gauge the ability of the staff to adopt consistent approaches in: teaching and learning, in applying policies – especially concerning behaviour – and in routines and basic practices.**

120. Five years on, a greater emphasis is detectable on:

- i. the quality of the curriculum and the learning environment;**
- j. all aspects of assessment for learning, especially in the setting of learning objectives, marking and feedback; and**

#### **k. regular reviews of the progress of individual pupils.**

121. It is salutary, though, that Her Majesty's Chief Inspector's 2012/13 Annual Report still points to factors which erode the learning culture of many underperforming schools: insufficiently high expectations, lack of consistency in the quality of teaching within schools and poor behaviour. These remain significant barriers to school and system improvement in England.

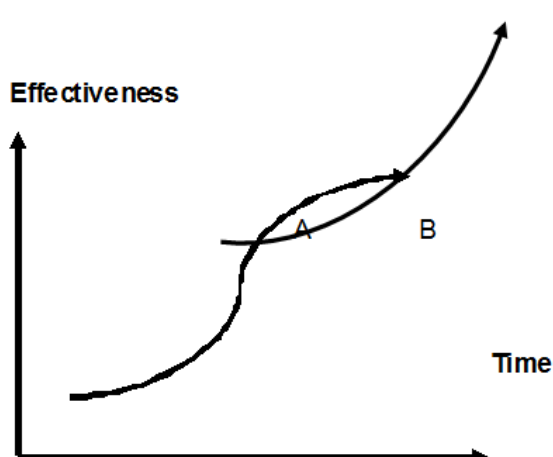
### **5.5 A leadership model for sustained improvement**

122. The examples of leadership illustrated in 5.1 to 5.4 – and from all the case studies – fit a model of improvement described by successive sigmoid (or S-shaped) curves. The sigmoid curve describes the rise and fall or, more accurately, the changes that can occur in an organisation from the first steps of development and learning, which are followed by a period of growth or improvement, before reaching a plateau and the beginnings of decline. It charts the trajectory of every successful human system.

123. All schools go through cycles as organisations, in addition to the many cycles that take place within them: changes of leadership, staff, year groups or other factors. Several of the schools visited had been in an Ofsted category, either inadequate or requiring improvement, when the current headteacher took over. These are the schools that needed transformation or, as we have termed it, *rescue*. Some leaders are very good at this role, leading a school out of trouble and creating a school that Ofsted judges as good. For them the path is clear, although the challenges may be daunting.

124. Some case study headteachers took on schools previously judged as good to find they no longer met this description. The schools had peaked, in other words, and were on declining trajectories, whether through complacency, tired leadership, significant staff changes or other factors. Handy<sup>19</sup> has argued that the way for an organisation to respond to success and the inevitable need to change is to start on another sigmoid curve or path for change: a new life cycle. Timing is all-important, as illustrated in Figure 4.

**Figure 4. The secret of constant improvement**



The secret of constant improvement is to start the new growth curve at A before the current one peters out.

Many organisations, schools among them, leave change until they face decline (point B). At this point, it may be too late for the current leadership to do much about it.

125. The difficulty in applying the pre-emptive approach is that to begin new improvement strategies when everything is going in the right direction and the school is succeeding (point A) is counter-intuitive. It is natural to consider that changing things when they are going well would be foolish: "If it isn't broken, don't fix it!" But the wise move is to start the next cycle of improvement while the school is successful. Often it takes new leadership to do this, because the people who have led the first curve are not necessarily the ones to lead the second. As Handy says, their job is to keep the first curve going long enough to support the early stages of the second curve. But the second curve is likely to involve a new culture, a new strategy and new people.

126. More commonly, real change tends to happen when the need for it is readily apparent; when disaster looks the school in the face (point B). At this point, change takes a great effort. Leaders may be discredited and lack the influence they may once have had. Resources are depleted and energies are low. Staff absence, sickness or redundancy force the issue and the answer, as is shown time and again with underperforming schools, is to bring in new leadership at the top. Many of the case study headteachers first joined their schools at the point where they had declined or were beginning to decline (point B). The problem of addressing denial – or complacency – in a good school that has declined can be as challenging as when a school has been judged inadequate.

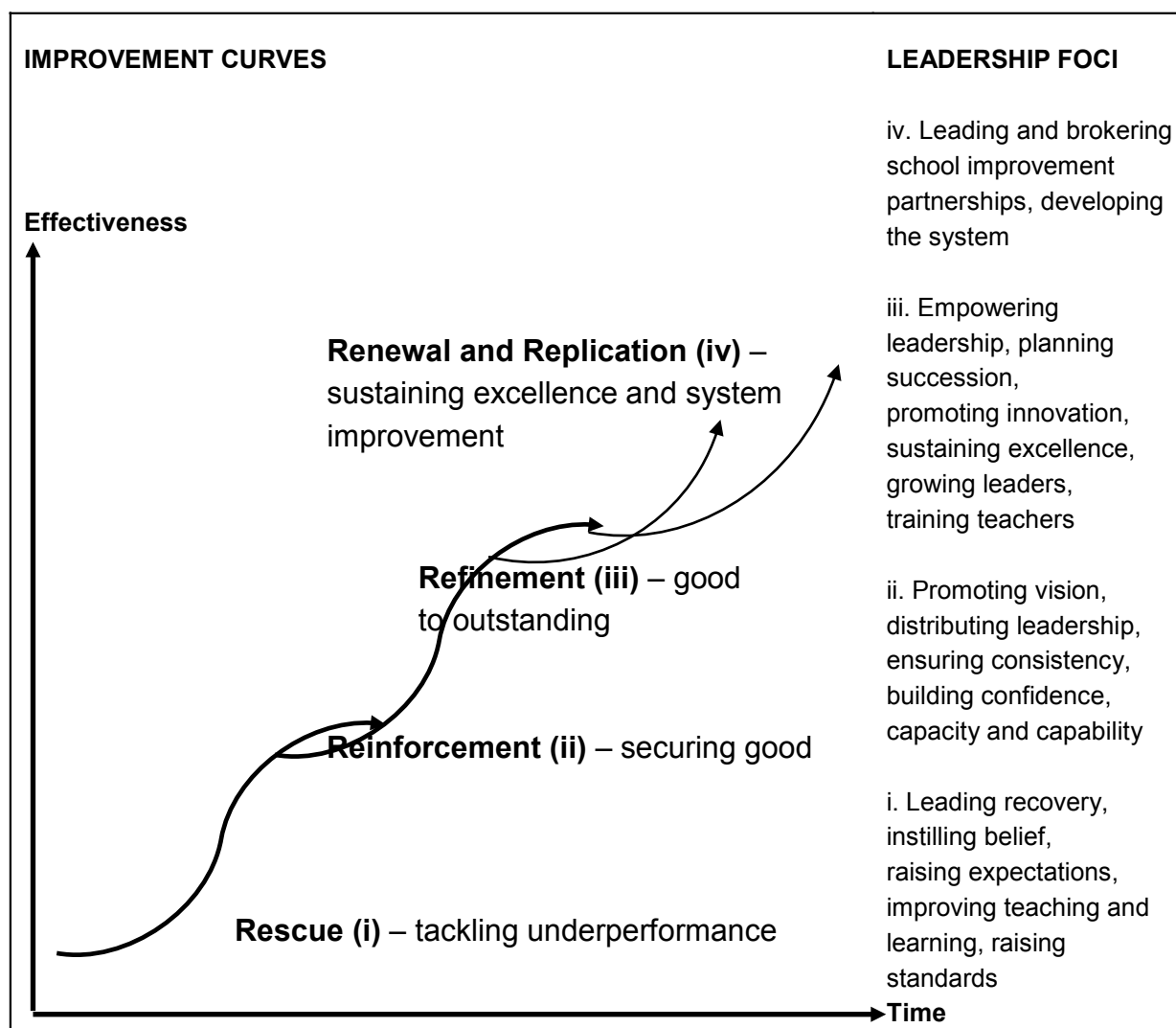
127. The leaders of the case study schools have also shown that they can take the next step, beyond good, and continue to improve the school until it becomes outstanding. Often this has meant a new strategy; a change of gear. Evidence from the staff of case study schools showed that in several instances the headteacher's leadership approach changed after the school was well on the road to outstanding, becoming less directive and more catalytic, energising staff to take ownership of change and improvement. This points to the tailoring of leadership approaches and styles according to the needs of the



school. This also indicates the ability of outstanding leaders *progressively* to build and shape the culture of their schools through selecting and prioritising appropriate actions and strategies at appropriate times so that optimal conditions and structures for teaching and learning are developed during a given phase of school improvement. They form a foundation upon which further actions and development can be built. It is through 'layering'<sup>20</sup> their leadership strategies over time that these outstanding leaders are able to develop, broaden and deepen collective capacity in their schools and enable more innovations and changes to be implemented and enacted for sustained improvement. The key to success lies in their ability to identify and diagnose problems as well as strengths in an appropriate, responsive and immediate manner and continue to build tomorrow's success on today's progress and achievements. As the headteacher of one school says: "In this school aspirations for learning and achievement have no limit. Even though we are outstanding, we never stop improving."

128. As we saw in Section 3, several of the leaders in our sample had led other schools out of trouble, before relinquishing the school and moving on to do the same thing again. They became experts in the rescue and reinforcement phases of school improvement. Subsequently all have moved on to refinement and in many cases, as system leaders, to reproduction and regeneration. These overlapping improvement curves are depicted in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Phases of school improvement leadership: a sigmoidal model



129. A few of the headteachers have been at their schools for a long time – 15 to 20 years or more. Their schools have gone from strength to strength or continued to excel. How do they fit with the sigmoid curve model in which every growth curve must ultimately turn downward? What varies is the length and duration of each part of the curve. Are these long-standing and highly successful headteachers on a curve with a hugely extended growth sector or have they consciously instituted organisational or cultural change while the school was doing well?

130. Case study examples of initiating new growth curves include:

- deliberately doing something new or differently each year
- internal reorganisation with changes in leadership responsibilities
- exchanging teachers from one key stage to another

- new appointments to senior leadership which bring new ideas and challenge
- sharing specialist expertise beyond the school (specialist and local leader of education work)
- partnering or sponsoring another school
- becoming a national leader of education or governance and a national support school
- making a strong commitment to training new teachers
- engaging in a teaching school alliance
- taking on an executive headship role and creating a head of school
- training and practising as an inspector
- re-shaping or strengthening governance
- requiring every member of staff to undertake a visit to a colleague in another school, which is then reciprocated, and feed back what they have learned
- inspection or peer evaluation of the school.

131. It is immediately apparent that increased autonomy and the growth of system leadership stemming from the enabling features of national policies have provided a range of opportunities for schools to change gear, embrace new challenges or reinvent themselves while continuing to raise standards. The value of these opportunities in developing leaders is well understood.<sup>21</sup> A more immediate and direct benefit reported by schools which, for example, support other schools, take an active part in initial teacher education or promote inter-school teacher partnerships, is that such engagement results in teachers reflecting more on their own practice through having to demonstrate and explain it to others. This can drive improved practice.

## Commentary

132. The nature of organisational growth or improvement cycles, which also applies to many public policies, is helpful in explaining why some schools fail to sustain excellence. Experience shows that it is difficult to predict such slippage. Could more be done by school boards, trusts and local authorities to identify early indicators of a loss of momentum? Given the crucial role of school leaders in sustaining high performance or improvement, there is a case for the periodic review of the efficacy of leadership that takes a longer view than annual appraisal. Many public service leadership appointments are now for a renewable fixed term. There may be a case for a similar approach to school headteacher and principal posts, for which there are several international precedents.

## 6. System leadership and new aggregations of schools

**This section cites the case study subjects to illustrate the rapid evolution of the most successful primary schools into system-leading roles, and gives examples of more established multi-academy organisations that are rescuing and improving primary schools causing concern.**

133. Geoff Southworth asserted in 2005 that “if we believe that a public education system is worth having and that this should be a high-quality system then (quoting Fullan):

‘Improving the overall system will not happen just by endorsing the vision of a strong public school system; principals in particular must be cognisant that changing their schools and the system is a simultaneous proposition.’<sup>22</sup>

In other words, leading tomorrow’s schools involves three things:

- i. leading the school you are appointed to and ensuring it is a high performing and improving school
- ii. being prepared to accept external support and challenge from a leader or leaders in other schools as well as from other agents (e.g. the local authority, Ofsted, the government)
- iii. becoming a consultant leader to other schools for a period of time.”<sup>23</sup>

134. Four serious challenges for the primary education sector in England are: ensuring a supply of high-quality primary teachers and school leaders in all areas of the country, succession planning in schools and groups of schools, the continuing development and improvement of the profession for school leadership, and the new national curriculum and accountability measures. Half the case studies were chosen so as to include examples of schools and partnerships of schools that are facing up to these challenges by taking advantage of a wider range of structural opportunities than have been available previously.

135. On visiting the outstanding ‘stand-alone’ primary schools – **Booth Wood** in Loughborough, **Dearham** near Maryport in Cumbria, **Dedham** near Colchester, **Newstead** in Stoke on Trent, **Prestolee** near Bolton, **St Peters CE** in Bristol, **Wroxham** in Potters Bar, **Ash Grove** in Macclesfield, **John Donne** in Peckham and **Taylor Road** in Leicester – it turned out that far from being virtuous and self-contained islands, each and every one was sharing its expertise with one or more other schools. Most had recently become academies and applied for designation as national support schools and/or were leading teaching school alliances.

136. We illustrate below a range of structural arrangements through which primary schools can secure succession, support other schools and contribute to improving provision for children beyond their own. There is no shortage of vision, drive, courage and moral purpose in the leadership of the case study schools. They show how schools can meet the challenges to the profession of the 2010 White Paper, *The importance of teaching*.

### **Building leadership capacity and succession planning through joint headship**

137. Joint or shared headships can involve role sharing or job sharing. There are many in-line pairings, such as a school which has an executive headteacher and a head of school. In one rather different example, where two headteachers worked effectively in a job share, the arrangement worked well.

138. **John Donne Primary School** in Peckham was a large and challenging primary school causing concern when Southwark local authority asked two members of its school improvement team to rescue it. The pair – one an experienced headteacher, the other an experienced deputy – had worked very successfully in tandem to support other schools in the local authority which Ofsted had judged inadequate. With a reduction in the school improvement service, the two were appointed to a single full-time equivalent job-share headship post in the school with the local authority buying back another full-time equivalent to continue supporting other schools. The school was judged outstanding by autumn 2011, with inspectors noting not only the quality of leadership in communicating high expectations to the staff but in supporting aspiring headteachers in the authority. The school is also a centre of excellence in the early years foundation stage and a national support school with two national leaders of education.

### **Small federations, usually of two schools**

139. Federation often is the chosen structural solution where a school causing concern is being supported extensively by a more effective school. The partnership evolves through the federation of the two schools led by an executive headteacher and a federation board of governors. The arrangement has a number of advantages, for example allowing for two heads of school to be identified, cross-school planning and teaching, richer professional development and other leadership opportunities. All of these are apparent at **Vauxhall Primary School**, now an outstanding school, which federated with the school that was supporting it out of an inadequate category.

140. Federation can also be a solution where a school that cannot recruit a headteacher federates with another school and the two are led by a shared executive head.<sup>24</sup> In one of our case studies, the federation involves an infant and a junior school which share a site and have headteachers that already work very closely together. The headteachers of Colmore infant and junior schools, now the **Colmore Federation**, are both national leaders of education. They have worked both separately and together in

supporting a number of Birmingham schools; they share a campus and an educational mission, and they provide for the same families.

141. Throughout their time at the schools, the two headteachers have wanted to ensure there was complete continuity across the two separate schools to aid learners. This has extended to classroom decor and the organisation of the classrooms. This has been explicitly to avoid the separateness of some of the infant and junior schools that they have worked with. They avoided amalgamation because, having modelled the finances for the single primary school, it would have resulted in less money being available to be spent on the children.

142. **Ash Grove Primary and Nursery School** is an example of a small primary school in East Cheshire which transformed from threat of closure to outstanding and is now supporting a school in an Ofsted category in a neighbouring town. The deputy headteacher of Ash Green is leading the partner school and the headteacher has become executive headteacher of both schools. Ash Green has used the opportunity to build capacity. Its numbers are increasing. Additional classrooms are planned. Its exceptional commitment to initial teacher training, school-to-school support and the other required strands of work have enabled it to become designated as a teaching school, with a neighbouring outstanding Roman Catholic secondary school as a key strategic partner.

143. This study of outstanding primary leadership would not be complete without exploring the challenges of remaining outstanding. In 2009, Ofsted published a review of *Twenty outstanding primary schools: excelling against the odds*. We have tracked the progress of the 16 schools that continue to provide education to year 7 (three of the 20 original schools were infant schools and one primary school has closed) and contacted all the current headteachers to build up a picture of how they have fared since 2009. The case study, ***Twenty outstanding primary schools – five years on***, gives an encouraging picture of the sustained quality of such schools and the factors that contribute. A picture emerges of schools whose passion for what they do is undimmed; schools that never stand still; schools where there is an absolute commitment to finding better ways of teaching and more efficacious learning, and schools that continually learn from elsewhere – not least through the school partnerships they form. In some examples there has been a change of headship, which – with good succession planning – can minimise the risk of regression.

### **School improvement partnerships and small multi-academy trusts**

144. The headteacher of ***St Peter's CE Primary School, Bristol***, was appointed from outside the school to amalgamate St Peter's Junior School with the neighbouring infant school. The subsequent success and increased size of the amalgamated school is now allowing it to play a strong and supportive role in a wider partnership of primary schools.

145. It is perhaps less easy to create a new shared culture when amalgamating two schools separated by a mile or so in which there are very different ways of going about things. In the case of South Farnham Junior School merging with the infant school to become **South Farnham School**, the head of the junior school first became executive head of the two separate schools, which then amalgamated. He emphasised the fresh start by exchanging most of the staff so that key stage 2 staff worked in foundation and key stage 1 and vice versa. The head's attitude to risk is that "the greater risk is not doing it!" This large primary school is a teaching and national support school and has recently begun to sponsor some of the schools it has been supporting.

146. These examples illustrate an emerging pattern in which a successful and outward-looking primary school becomes a partner of another school as the first step along a road which can involve amalgamation, federation or academy sponsorship before emerging as a multi-academy trust. This is clearly shown in the case of **West Thornton Primary Academy, Croydon**. In November 2007 the school was judged 'good with a number of outstanding features'. The head became a local leader of education and supported the improvement of a number of other schools as part of the London Challenge programme. The head is now a national leader of education and West Thornton is a national support school.

147. In 2011 the school converted to being an academy. Around the same time, and following discussion with the local authority, the headteacher became executive head of Spring Park Primary School in Shirley – a struggling school that was around a 20-minute drive from West Thornton. Spring Park at its own request has now joined West Thornton as 'Forest Academy' in a multi-academy trust named the 'Synaptic Trust' – reflecting West Thornton's focus on inquiry and learning through making connections. West Thornton has subsequently become a teaching school and is discussing with the London Borough of Croydon the possible opening of another school nearby to help cope with the increase in pupil numbers.

148. Although the Synaptic Trust has been formed and looks set to grow to incorporate a third school, the executive headteacher's ambition is not to start building up an academy chain. Rather than become a chief executive officer he wants to retain direct engagement with teaching and learning. "I like to do school improvement myself" is his view. West Thornton hosts the Outstanding Teacher Programme. The executive headteacher's vision is to build on this and the School Direct programme and to work with other schools through a teaching school alliance to recruit, employ and grow teachers in a way that reflects the West Thornton vision. His vision is to "build a community of schools run by people with the same philosophy".

### **Primary academies sponsoring secondary free schools**

149. A growing number of primary schools are concerned about the challenge, expectations and continuity of provision when their children move on to year 7 in

secondary schools. Where primary children mainly pass on to a neighbourhood secondary school, there are opportunities to forge good two-way links between schools. But in many urban areas, children from a primary school may disperse to one of several secondary schools. The research looked at two primary sponsorships of secondary free schools, in Edmonton and Slough, both of which are at an early stage of development.

### **Larger federations and multi-academy trusts**

150. The **White Horse Federation, Swindon**, is formed from a pair of federations based on the hub primary schools of Moredon and Drove. Moredon Primary School formed one of the country's early primary federations, between Moredon and Rodbourne Cheney primary schools, later federating with Nyland Special School. In doing so, the executive headteacher brought two schools out of Ofsted categories and led two schools to outstanding. Drove Primary School has improved from serious weaknesses to outstanding and entered a federation with Mountford Manor Primary School. The two outstanding leaders have now joined forces to form a seven-school multi-academy trust, the White Horse Federation, which has a brace of teaching schools and is providing school improvement support to schools in Swindon and Gloucestershire.

151. There is evidence that the anticipated advantages of the larger federation have been realised. Partner schools have improved and staff at the two teaching schools considered there were significant benefits in terms of working across a larger group of schools and having access to both more opportunities and more colleagues. Indeed moving to a seven-school federation was seen as less of a change than moving to a two- or three-school one. They cited a number of examples of the benefits, and the case study illustrates the enhanced opportunities for children and staff: leadership development and talent management, and administrative systems and support. The federation does not aim to create a homogenous brand. It is deliberately growing gradually. Each school retains its distinct ethos and character, so there have been no changes in uniform and for pupils and parents it should be imperceptible that they have joined the White Horse Federation apart from the addition of the logo.

152. The **L.E.A.D Academy Trust** is a growing partnership of 10 primary academies which originated from the outstanding Huntingdon Primary School in Nottingham. Huntingdon is also a national support school and a teaching school. The trust utilises the strengths of each member school to the mutual benefit of all. Within the trust there are national and local leaders of education. Three of the headteachers are trained Ofsted inspectors. The trust has a directory of other professionals with a broad range of expertise, including specialist leaders of education.

153. The trust aims to ensure the leadership that will provide the highest quality education to enable every pupil to realise their full potential. Its member academies also realise the need for children to be motivated if they are to succeed in life and are committed to providing a stimulating curriculum and environment that will prepare them



for their futures with confidence and determination. The initials L.E.A.D. stand for Lead, Empower, Achieve and Drive.

154. There is high demand from other schools to join the trust but the chief executive and board are cautious about unplanned growth. They have always been interested in the urban context, because of the intensity and immediacy of some of the challenges. There has been dialogue with groups of schools in at least two other cities that are interested in joining the trust. The trust does not aspire to becoming an empire; it is concerned with quality not size. Nevertheless, there are advantages to further growth: economies of scale, shared posts and the ability to pool expertise such as business management.

155. In 2011, **Huntingdon Primary Academy** took another major step forward by becoming a teaching school. It is now the hub of an alliance of over 20 schools and other organisations in what is known as the **L.E.A.D. Urban Teaching School Alliance**. The alliance recruited to its first School Direct programme for training teachers in 2013, working in partnership with the University of Nottingham. The trust has also been licensed by the National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL) to provide for the range of leadership qualifications awarded by the College. In terms of professional development, six teachers have been accredited to facilitate the Improving Teacher and Outstanding Teacher Programmes. The trust also holds an NCTL Leadership Development Licence. The trust aims to build its national and international credentials for expertise in urban primary education. Strategically, the next steps are likely to involve partnerships with schools in another British city and urban schools in another country.

156. Both the **Harris Federation** and **Greenwood Academies Trust** have appointed teams of lead teachers to work with the increasing number of primary schools overseen by the two organisations, led by directors or executive principals. The **Harris** case study focuses on the leadership journey of one of the country's pre-eminent primary system leaders, **Sir Robin Boshier**, who recently joined Ofsted having been headteacher of Fairlawn Primary School, a director of London Challenge and primary executive director in the Harris Federation. The focus of support for schools by both organisations is on establishing effective leadership and ensuring that all teaching is at least good. The pace is fierce because, as one director said: "Children only get one chance and an Ofsted visit is usually on the near horizon".

157. The **Greenwood Academies Trust** has taken on 15 primary schools across the east Midlands from Skegness to Derby, from Northampton to Nottingham, all of which were in Ofsted categories of concern. The founder hub school in this case is Nottingham Academy, a 3–18 school with outstanding primary provision. The primary work of the trust is led by two executive primary principals, one of whom had brought her previous school, Jessie Boot Primary, into amalgamation with Greenwood Dale secondary academy to form the all-through school. She and the then headteacher of Greenwood

Dale believed all-through education would be of advantage to the vulnerable children and families of the Nottingham Mapperley area. The other executive primary principal oversees trust primary and secondary academies in Lincolnshire, especially Skegness. The Carmel Education Trust in the north east, which was also visited in the course of this study, is another example of a secondary teaching school in the early stages of supporting primary and secondary schools, with diocesan approval.

## Commentary

158. The success that several of the headteachers are making of the leadership of more than one school endorses the findings of the authors of this study in several publications on system leadership that such arrangements can have substantial advantages. It is no exaggeration to say that this is a necessary requisite for a self-improving primary school system. The impact of system leadership on sponsored or partnered schools is described in the relevant case studies.

159. The advantages of an increasing number of primary schools becoming federations, academy trusts or part of other organisations such as all-through schools include the following:

- The more multi-school entities there are, the fewer the number of outstanding leaders needed.
- The emergence of executive headships of more than one school permits the appointment of heads of school: new headteachers who can operate under an umbrella of experience and over a safety net of support. This type of headship can prove attractive to potentially good prospective headteachers who lack the confidence to go for fully exposed headship.
- As the size of a school group grows, opportunities arise for acting headships within the group. The sphere of responsibility of executive headteachers can remain manageable by appointing more of them, leading clusters of schools within the parent organisation under a chief executive officer.
- In multi-school organisations from a pair of schools upwards, the opportunities for extending the professional experience of staff and for growing leaders expand exponentially.
- The risks of appointing unsuccessful headteachers are diminished by removing the ultimate responsibility from individual governing bodies and requiring board level approval.

160. We note that in one of the case studies, what began as an umbrella trust of academies, linked by a partnership agreement, rapidly transformed into a multi-academy trust in which the chief executive and board have ultimate oversight of the performance and improvement of the schools in the trust. There are few, if any, examples of informal primary school partnerships where the partnership is effective in taking collective

responsibility for all member schools and challenging as well as arresting any indications of underperformance. Some teaching school alliances have the potential to provide a solution, although this will require transparent and honest sharing of in-school data, and sufficient peer-to-peer challenge and support to replace the executive management levers that are available to formal federations, trusts and chains. The teaching school strand that encompasses 'support for other schools' does not *automatically* imbue teaching schools with executive powers or enough responsibility for other schools.

161. The majority of primary schools are free-standing local authority maintained or voluntary aided or controlled schools, albeit with a slowly increasing proportion of academies. While many share curriculum interests and professional development activities through networks, the filling of vacant headships can still be something of a lottery, reliant on the sufficiency of good applicants and the ability of voluntary governing bodies to make the right choices.

162. The paramount issue is whether and how the pace of formation of multi-school federations and academy trusts based on outstanding primary schools might be accelerated. One approach would be to incentivise all primary schools to be part of a formal partnership of schools serving a minimum of 1,000 pupils, overseen by a partnership board and having an outstanding headteacher as executive headteacher or chief executive. Another would be for outstanding inspection judgements to be earned by criteria which include the support given to other schools, as has been suggested by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector. Such strategies would reduce the number of outstanding headteachers needed, in effect, from over 16,000 to 4,000.

163. Incentivisation, though, carries risks if leaders take on responsibility for more than one school for the 'wrong' reasons. Being an effective system leader certainly requires a range of enhanced skills such as those concerned with, for example:

- setting direction and staying focused
- making decisions and leading by example
- team building within and across schools
- managing the organisation
- managing and developing people
- growing leaders across the organisation
- distributing responsibility and ensuring accountability
- assuring quality, etc.

164. The effective leaders of multi-school organisations know they are no longer the source of all the necessary expertise. They ensure that they bring specialist skills, from company secretary to personnel management, accountancy to architecture, to bear on the needs of the organisation. These areas of expertise are procured through appointments to the staff, consultancy or governance.

165. But the strongest incentive for the outstanding system leaders in this study is intrinsic. All are driven by wanting to make a difference to the lives of as many children as possible. The bedrock is moral purpose. The growth of their multi-school domains is measured, so as not to put at risk the gains already made. Their leaders reflect all the attributes in the model of primary leadership discussed in Section 2. They are driven by values and a clear and simple vision; they are courageous, tenacious and pre-disposed to action in the context of measured growth. In the most effective organisations, governors and board members share these values and this vision. Where these attributes are lacking, the enterprise is likely to fail. Great leaders will compete with and challenge other providers who are failing their pupils and families. Great leaders also acquire and develop great 'followers', who are then entrusted with progressively greater responsibilities, adding capacity and sustainability to the organisation. This is crucial, as many of the first generation of school system leaders approach retirement. The case studies give practical examples of system leadership working in this way.

## 7. Leadership by governing bodies

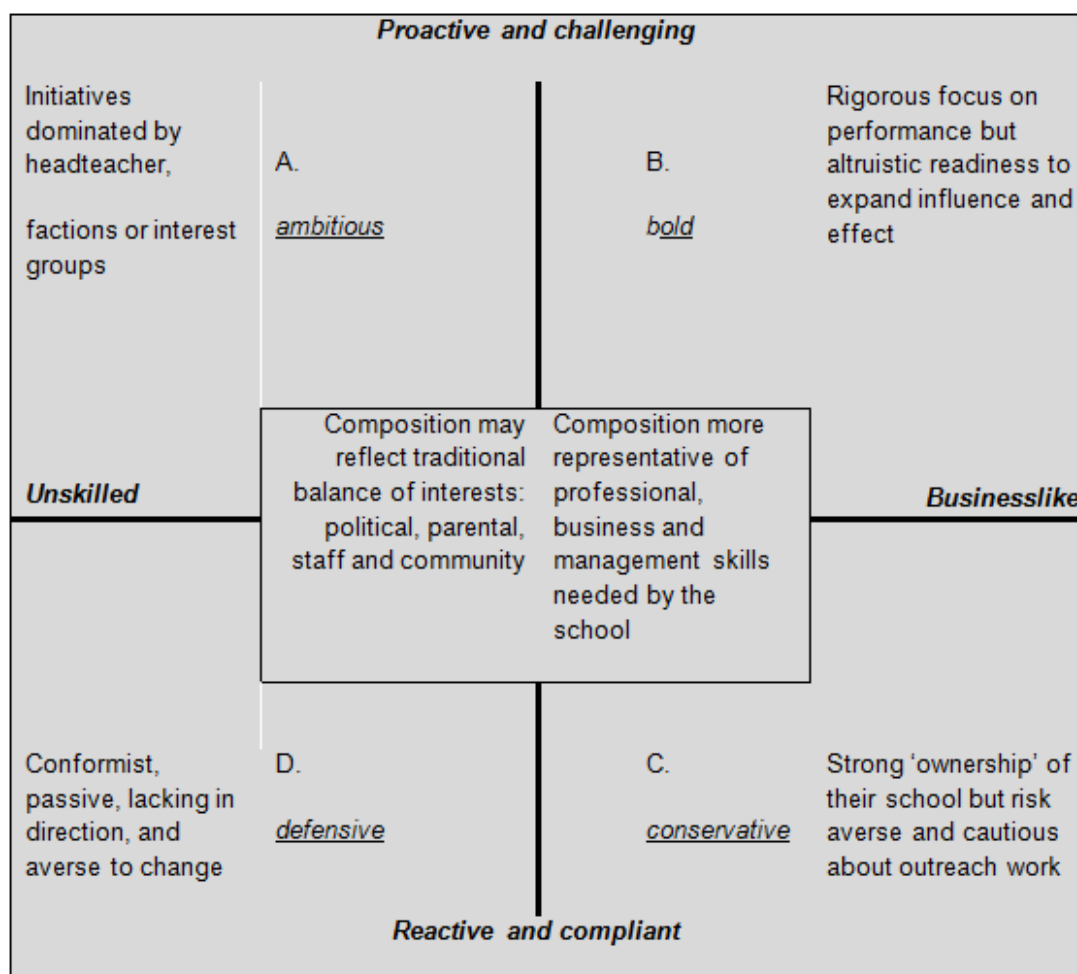
**The quality of governance in each of the outstanding case study schools was praised by inspectors. All the governing bodies were effective in their core functions related to strategic direction, accountability and financial oversight.\* While a high-calibre governing body can act as a well-informed board of directors, the evidence suggests that the relationship between the headteacher and the chair makes an important contribution to the culture of the school. There is increasing evidence of governing bodies recognising the benefits that accrue to outstanding schools of even the most unequal of school support partnerships. Governors in a number of case study schools had taken an objective look at the value for money of local authority services when considering academy status. In a few cases, the freedom of action of governors was constrained when the chair or another prominent governor was active in local politics. The study also offers a typography of governing bodies. There is some evidence that converter academies scale up the professional calibre of their governing bodies.**

166. The functions and horizons of school governance have broadened in step with the diversification of the school system. Like schools, there is a huge difference between the most and least effective governing bodies. The improvement of several of the formerly weak schools in the case studies, i.e. schools that have become 'outstanding' from an 'inadequate' or 'requires improvement' starting point, has been accompanied by significant changes to their governing bodies, particularly a change of chair. Just as a weak headteacher is a major obstacle to school improvement, a poor chair is a barrier to improved governance.<sup>25</sup>

167. Governing bodies in both maintained schools and academies in our sample are becoming more 'professional' in composition through the appointment or cooption of governors who, though they may be parents, are attracted for their high-level skills in, for example, accountancy, law and human resource management. This trend is most pronounced in the governance of academies and the boards of multi-academy trusts. The range of governance past and present from our case study schools suggests a classification related to degree of professionalisation and proactivity (Figure 6).

168. Schools that become 'outstanding' from 'inadequate' or 'requires improvement' frequently have appointed a different chair and several new governors since the time of the earlier judgement. Often there is also a new headteacher, frequently appointed after an interregnum, generally with significant local authority influence unless the school is an academy.

Figure 6. A typography of governing bodies



169. The two fundamental challenges for governing bodies are, firstly, ensuring that they appoint a headteacher who is going to be effective and, secondly, having the strength to do something about it if they are not. One of our headteachers led an outstanding primary school which went into an Ofsted category after his departure owing to the inappropriate appointment of someone with limited primary and management experience. It took years for a subsequent headteacher to lead the school back first to good and then outstanding. Weak chairs can be blind to the inadequacies of the school, even to the extent of one appointing a new headteacher and then briefing against them. Where governance is inept (quadrant D in Figure 6), the school has a problem – especially with a reforming headteacher – until the chair changes. In one case:

The new headteacher initially felt unsupported by governors, some of whom were convinced that there was nothing wrong with the school. They believed she had got her priorities wrong and they could not understand why she was changing it: a case of governors in denial perhaps. This was very difficult but the local authority was helpful in dealing with the politics, reconstituting the governing body and including specific governors who would then stand for chair. A new chair was voted in her second year. Governance has improved impressively and the

remaining former members have now realised that change was needed and have seen the light. The headteacher's tenacity and resilience have paid off. She was appointed to make the school outstanding and has done that and installed it in the top 2% for its results.

170. The inspection report is highly complimentary about the governance of the school, which bodes well for the future of the academies trust.

"The governing body has an excellent overview of the school's strengths and areas for improvement. Its members receive regular and detailed information from all leaders. They also visit classrooms or work as reading volunteers so that they see the school in action. Governors challenge and hold the leadership team to account for the quality of all aspects of the school's work. Governors are fully aware of how the performance management of staff and salary progression are linked to improved outcomes in pupils' achievement. They check thoroughly how effectively the school uses its money, including that provided through the pupil premium. Their overview of data enables them to assess the impact this funding has had. Governors undertake training to ensure they keep their knowledge up to date and fulfil their statutory duties, for example in relation to safeguarding."

171. Ofsted, 2012The excerpt above exemplifies many of the attributes of effective governing bodies that we encountered in our case study schools. Ofsted's 2011 report on effective governance (*School governance: learning from the best*)<sup>26</sup> makes similar points. Outstanding governors:

- know their schools well, and have specific areas of focus often linked to their skills and experience
- ensure an appropriate balance between their strategic role and the operational role of the head and avoid getting drawn into parochial issues
- use the school's data and other information to ask the right questions about pupil performance, progress and well-being
- manage the business through an effective structure of working groups, committees and main meetings
- maintain effective relationships with the head and senior team through trust, openness and transparency on the basis of a shared vision and accountability for improvement
- take responsibility for tough decisions, and back the head when necessary.

172. The following example shows the value of an experienced chair. As recounted by the headteacher:

The governors have played a big part in the improvement of the school. Not only did they give their new head full backing and help get the community on board, but

they were led – and still are – by a very experienced chair. She was a former head and had worked in the local authority, which gave her the background needed to support and challenge the school in their drive for improvement. The headteacher explains: “She [the chair of governors] has the background and vision to see the bigger picture. She has conveyed that to the governors. Even now she’s on the phone every day; she’s emailing; she’s challenging; she’s asking me about capacity, and she has transmitted her keen involvement to the other governors.”

173. However some governors have difficulty in separating their responsibility for the school from associations with other interests. One tension, occurring more than once in the case studies, has been where chairs or members with particular affiliations or viewpoints take a stance which may not be in the best interest of the school. This can happen for example in decisions relating to academy conversion. Where the chair is a member of an authority opposed to academies, it is difficult to take a different view. One principled chair supported the school to academy status under intense conflict of interest, but resigned from the governing body when conversion was assured.

174. Some of the case study school governing bodies, typically in group B (Figure 6), had analysed the costs and benefits of becoming an academy or remaining with the local authority before making their decision. One, which became an academy, continues to subscribe to some aspects of the local authority’s provision, such as a programme for newly qualified teachers, and also responds when the local authority asks them to support the improvement of other schools.

175. Ambitious governing bodies (‘C’, Figure 6) are committed to their schools and high standards. Frequently they become the mirror for the headteacher’s ambitions which, in the case of outstanding schools, are likely to involve the headteacher playing a wider role which takes them beyond the school. This is a sensitive issue for primary schools, where the headteacher is a visible figurehead for parents and the community. Many governing bodies in our sample admit that they agree to the headteacher becoming a national or local leader, supporting another school or taking on some other system-leading role, because they do not want to lose the head and feel these extra challenges will keep them at the school longer.

176. For some governing bodies, however, taking additional responsibility through executive headship or federation is a step too far, although they recognise the benefits that accrue to their own school from school-to-school support. One head, an active national leader of education, makes sure that he is always at his home school to greet children and parents at the beginning of the school day and back there by the end. Another otherwise exemplary governing body is so protective of their newly outstanding school that they are not keen that their headteacher should do more to help other schools as a local or national leader of education. As they build capacity for supporting others, they may yet emulate another one-form entry, system-leading primary school:



The chair of governors strongly supported the school's designation as a national support school. A city councillor, he was committed to children having the best possible education and the other governors followed suit. For both governors and parents, levels of trust and confidence in the school had grown enormously and they could understand why it was important for the school to share what it had learned with other schools so as to benefit more children. The governors knew both that they could not hold their outstanding leaders and teachers back and that such 'outreach' work provided enhanced professional development for staff. Commissioned outreach work also allows the school to build extra capacity and resilience. The governors and parents are proud that their school has earned not only a regional but a growing national reputation for its excellence. Despite this support, everyone understands that the school will not allow its outreach commitments to work to the detriment of children in the school. There have been occasions when the school has had to decline requests for help if to agree to them would have put the school under pressure.

177. Governors of outstanding schools often need to be convinced that supporting other schools is the right way to go. For one school, a catalyst was when the school's then school improvement partner said to them that unless they considered further challenges and work outside the school they would lose their headteacher. At that time, an important role was played by the chair of governors to support the headteacher in changing the perceptions of other governors about working outside the school. Since then, governors have seen the strong impact from this work, on both outcomes for their children and staff development, and are excited by the designation of the school as a teaching school. The nine members of the governing body all have specific tasks. The governing body reviews progress through having link governors who visit and subsequently report to full governing body meetings. The chair said they were not inclined to expand the school, but it is being considered. Their key priority is to maintain their outstanding status, and to begin liaising with governors of the schools in their teaching school alliance.

178. The National College for Teaching and Leadership has recently introduced a new designation of national leader of governance (NLG). The aim is to mirror the success of the national leader of education by creating a cadre of outstanding chairs of governing bodies who are able to work outside their own schools supporting the improvement of other schools. Our case study sample included one chair who was acting as an NLG. She has been deployed to support another chair of governors and also undertaken reviews of governance in schools deemed to 'require improvement' by Ofsted. This has worked particularly well when her own school was working with the school and governance had been identified as an area for improvement. Most often, the NLG noted that the key issue for the supported governing body was a lack of clarity about what they should be doing.

179. Governing bodies of many of the outstanding schools are committed to their own development. In one example:

The chair has undertaken the National College training for chairs. The governing body has recently been successful in gaining Governor Mark accreditation, enabling them to reflect on their own practice during the process. The Governor Mark team noted in their assessment feedback: “There are excellent relationships between the governors and the headteacher and staff. The governing body brings constructive challenge to the school, for example in asking for a change in style and content of the headteacher’s reports which have moved from a narrative style to a more hard-nosed, data-driven approach.”

180. Governing bodies in group ‘B’ (Figure 6) unequivocally have the interests of the school and community at heart, even if it means giving up their sovereignty or their involvement. One example involved the proposal to merge a successful primary school with an 11–18 school to provide all-through 3–18 education across a very disadvantaged city area.

The governors of the primary school voted for the amalgamation, being more concerned about the future of their children than the loss of their sovereignty. They took the view that “Our children need outstanding schools; they will not move on in their lives otherwise because of the nature of the area. It won’t happen for them outside school so it has got to happen for them inside the school. Education doesn’t happen outside, it happens inside. We have to explain to parents what we are striving for and make sure that they also have high expectations ...”

181. If governing bodies of type ‘B’ feel their school would be better served in a different way, they support the change. Examples from our case studies show schools that have joined multi-academy trusts or federations – and schools that have amalgamated – where governors have been convinced that there will be demonstrable benefits to the children in those schools.

182. The best governing bodies get to know the school as well as they can so as to better understand and support it, subject to the availability and commitments of individual governors. Typically in our case study sample, their governors have wide experience; they are linked with aspects of the school’s work which they support and monitor, they see the school in action from time to time, they ask challenging but relevant questions and they forge productive links with parents.

### **New dimensions of governance: trust boards**

183. The facility for schools to federate and academies to form multi-academy trusts has extended the horizons of governance to membership of boards overseeing from two

to many schools. Such boards in the sample tend to operate on very business-like lines, as is appropriate to charitable companies. This is illustrated through the organisation of the trust board of one growing, cross-phase group of academies.

The trust board is chaired by a respected member of the local community and includes academic and business leaders, the chief executive and academy headteachers and representatives from the individual school governing bodies. Organisationally, a key player is the part-time company secretary, who has a background as a very experienced administrator outside education and acts as clerk to the board. He has developed the committee structure, registered the charitable companies, developed the company calendar and organised training for board members and governors. The trust has also appointed a paid director of finance and operations. The various board members, governors and senior employees are a close-knit group, who share good knowledge of the local area and wide experience in schools, school governance and local government.

184. Some federation trust boards have adapted themselves to become more streamlined and utilise a range of skills needed to manage a multi-million pound organisation. One of our case studies had recently revised governance arrangements across the multi-school federation:

For each school, there are local governing bodies (LGBs). Chairs of the LGBs come together as a group and also elect a single representative who is co-opted on to the executive board of directors. The purpose is to maintain lines of communication between the LGBs and the overarching governance, as well as having clear lines between the executive board and LGBs in terms of accountability and devolved responsibilities.

One innovation that has been used with the LGBs is to have pupil governors from year 5/year 6 to come to the first half hour of the meeting and report on challenges that they have been set, e.g. “what makes you enjoy learning?” When pupils asked for more dictionaries, they had to put together a business plan about how they would raise the money.

There are currently 11 directors of the federation, with spaces to allow capacity to bring on individuals for specific projects. For example, a member of a local solicitors’ firm that had been supporting the conversion to academy status had come on to the board for 12 months.

The directors will have portfolios and link to an area of work or particular staff, and reports are brought to the board meeting. Moving to having increased specialist skills, the current directors have a range of human resources, legal, finance and other business backgrounds, as well as including education professionals.

## **Support and challenge for highly capable headteachers**

185. Unless a governing body is knowledgeable and confident, it can be difficult to hold a very experienced headteacher to account. For example, the friendship between a long-standing and highly regarded headteacher and his equally respected chair of governors does not cloud their respective roles in one case studied. The governors are very involved with the school; indeed, new governors are asked whether they will be able to see the school at work regularly during the school day. It is clear that they subscribe to the headteacher's vision as an education expert and are immensely supportive of the school.

In terms of challenge, the governors question the detail of his plans and proposals, checking that different interests have been taken into account. There is a strong spirit of openness between the headteacher and governors, particularly the chair, and ongoing dialogue about issues and developments. While the governors are party to the school's strategies and support the idea of action, even if it involves some risk, it is clear that they can and do moderate some of the headteacher's ideas. As he admits, in the chair's presence, "sometimes I will come up with an idea which gets thrashed around and I also know when to withdraw it because I get the quizzical look that suggests I am entering the realms of fantasy! We have never had any rows!"

186. The governors have taken school amalgamation in their stride, visiting both sites regularly and coping with the fact that events such as fêtes and shows have doubled. They have always been keen to help other schools, although the school was sometimes discouraged from this in the past. They are realistic about this. As the chair says: "You always have to watch the ship you are running to make sure that it doesn't run aground. It's quite a balancing act but we've always got a very strong team so that there are always sufficient people here to run the show before we start to look out and help other people."

187. It is clear that a respectful and business-like relationship exists between the headteacher and chair of governors, in relation to school matters, that over-rides their evident friendship. In terms of succession planning, the governors have faith in the strength of the school management team and the rigour of their appointment process: "We are always looking for people who will be able manage well and work well with other people." The governors can watch the teachers at any time and the school receives their reports. This process is courteous but the governors follow through tenaciously. This governing body appears to have achieved an ideal balance between challenge and support and is a model for others.

## Commentary

188. The nature of school governance and expectations of what governors can accomplish have changed greatly in recent years. While there are many skilled, committed and effective governing bodies, this is by no means a universal state of affairs. The governing bodies in our sample clearly challenged as well as supported the school, discussed and agreed priorities with the senior leadership, had high expectations for the school, monitored performance and finances, authentically appraised the headteacher and made wise staffing decisions and appointments. Governance is neither for the faint hearted nor the self-important. The quality and skills of the governing board are crucial to the school's success.

189. Strategies in recent years have shown the efficacy of interim executive boards in supporting school rescue. Although many governing bodies and academy and multi-academy trust boards are of high calibre, not all get the important decisions right all the time. Having over 16,000 governing bodies and expecting them all to be highly effective is as wishful as having that many effective school leaders. One solution to this is the progressive aggregation of groups of schools into federations or multi-academy trusts with high-level governing boards that take the major decisions with the option of advisory committees or local governing bodies with a narrower range of powers for individual schools. Indeed, Ofsted's 2011 report, *Leadership of more than one school*,<sup>27</sup> found that one major advantage of federation governance was the improvement in the governance of weaker schools as a result of having shared arrangements.

190. An important issue concerns how best to move towards trust or federation boards as more schools form structural partnerships or clusters and how best to promote and support the 'non-executive director' role of trust board members, providing appropriate development opportunities. What is gained, of course, in the professionalisation of governing bodies at a multi-school level risks detaching governance too much from the individual schools and their ability to represent the communities directly served by those schools. Some trusts, as we have seen, retain local 'governing bodies' to serve these interests.

191. The majority of case studies provided illustrations of how these outstanding schools tended to flourish more when free of local political influence, of whatever leaning, whether through the local education authority or council nominees on governing bodies. Examples of both scenarios are described in the case studies. The exceptions are pragmatic, for example in those rarer cases where a recent capital programme has been funded by the local authority in contrast to those schools that no longer see local authority services as providing value for money. Partisan positions taken on some governing bodies do not always reflect the interests of the school and the children it serves.

192. Issues prompted by the case studies that relate to governance through multi-academy trust boards and in some cases governance more generally include:

- the need for greater clarity on governance accountabilities and responsibilities at a trust level in relation to individual governing bodies
- the use of data dashboards at trust level to track performance of all individual schools
- the sharing of thinking and decisions between trust and local boards
- the importance of getting directors with the right skills given the fiduciary responsibilities of trust directors
- the importance of ongoing training for all governors and board members.

## Annex 1. Strategies of outstanding leadership

CASE STUDY	ILLUSTRATIVE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES
<b>Ash Grove Primary and Nursery School</b>	<b>Becoming outstanding</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monitoring and performance management</li> <li>• Modelling to improve the quality of teaching</li> <li>• A relentless focus on the teaching of basic skills</li> <li>• High expectations</li> <li>• Phonics from age three</li> <li>• Speech and language therapy</li> <li>• Language development and educational enrichment</li> <li>• Planning and assessment</li> </ul>
<b>Booth Wood Primary School</b>	<b>Transforming internal conditions for learning</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building shared vision and high standards</li> <li>• Developing and empowering teachers</li> </ul> <b>Embedding creative and personalised learning</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Data-driven, evidence-based teaching and learning</li> <li>• Learning with fun and creativity</li> <li>• School as an 'extended family'</li> <li>• Engaging community</li> </ul>
<b>The Colmore Federation</b>	<b>Strategies across two schools</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensuring a consistent focus on learning</li> <li>• Leading a focus on pupil-level progress</li> <li>• A broad curriculum with wide-ranging opportunities for pupils</li> <li>• Leading change related to school growth</li> <li>• Empowering pupils to take ownership of their own learning</li> <li>• Learning from others</li> </ul>
<b>Dearham Primary School</b>	<b>Setting a new course</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establishing a new culture</li> <li>• Finding out where the strengths and weaknesses lay</li> <li>• Improving the school environment</li> <li>• Making the most of personnel changes</li> <li>• Monitoring and feedback at all levels</li> </ul>
<b>Dedham Church of England Voluntary Controlled Primary</b>	<b>Good to outstanding</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assessment for learning</li> </ul>

CASE STUDY	ILLUSTRATIVE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES
<b>School</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lesson observations and monitoring</li> <li>• Planning the support for pupils</li> <li>• Empowering pupils and promoting pupil responsibility</li> </ul>
<b>Greenwood Academies Trust</b>	<b>Primary system leadership</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The role of a multi-academy trust</li> <li>• Primary executive principals and teacher consultants</li> <li>• School reviews</li> <li>• Sharing and networking</li> <li>• Strategic vision for 3–18 provision</li> </ul>
<b>John Donne Primary School</b>	<b>Notable features</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professional learning</li> <li>• ‘Fabulous phonics’</li> <li>• International links</li> <li>• Supporting other schools</li> </ul>
<b>L.E.A.D. Academy Trust</b>	<b>Core principles</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leading</li> <li>• Empowering</li> <li>• Achieving</li> <li>• Driving</li> </ul>
<b>Newstead Primary School</b>	<b>Becoming outstanding</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Restructuring to eliminate debt</li> <li>• Aligning planning with the budget cycle</li> <li>• Changing the learning environment, a class at a time</li> <li>• Systems and procedures for everything</li> <li>• Working with the parent community</li> </ul>
<b>Prestolee Primary School</b>	<b>Early actions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pace and urgency</li> <li>• High expectations</li> <li>• Leadership and staffing; training and development</li> </ul> <b>Becoming outstanding</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Empowering staff and delegating authority</li> <li>• Communicating the vision</li> <li>• Positive morale</li> <li>• Monitoring and reviewing pupil progress</li> </ul>



<b>CASE STUDY</b>	<b>ILLUSTRATIVE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reorganising teaching and learning</li> </ul>
<b>St Peter's CE Primary School</b>	<b>Secrets of success</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An achievement culture</li> <li>• Assessment for learning</li> <li>• Quality first teaching</li> <li>• Parental involvement</li> <li>• Narrowing the attainment gap</li> <li>• Consistent features in all classrooms</li> </ul>
<b>Sir Robin Bosher (Ex-Fairlawn School and Harris Federation)</b>	<b>From leading schools to leading systems</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Progress to headship</li> <li>• Leading outstanding schools</li> <li>• Leading primary school improvement in London</li> <li>• Turning around inadequate academies</li> </ul>
<b>South Farnham School</b>	<b>Big strategies</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attitude to risk</li> <li>• Managing for consistency</li> <li>• Structure and creativity</li> <li>• Support and intervention</li> <li>• Providing opportunities for staff</li> <li>• Succession planning and knowledge management</li> </ul>
<b>Taylor Road Primary School</b>	<b>Sustaining excellence</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quality assurance</li> <li>• Pupils' feedback to staff</li> <li>• Academic coaching</li> <li>• Consistency</li> <li>• Working with parents</li> <li>• Continuous improvement</li> </ul>
<b>Vauxhall Primary School</b>	<b>Good to outstanding</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quality of teaching</li> <li>• Embedding systems and processes</li> <li>• Opportunities for children</li> <li>• Planning</li> <li>• Staff professional development</li> </ul>

CASE STUDY	ILLUSTRATIVE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES
<b>West Thornton Primary Academy</b>	<b>Five strands of leadership</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A clear vision</li> <li>• A phased approach to development</li> <li>• An understanding of context</li> <li>• Combining creativity and freedom with structure and rigour</li> <li>• Empowering the whole school community</li> </ul>
<b>White Horse Federation</b>	<b>Maintaining excellence in a federation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talent spotting</li> <li>• Relentless professional development and training</li> <li>• Six-weekly pupil progress review meetings</li> <li>• Effective use of pupil premium and out of class learning</li> <li>• Clear vision and expectations</li> <li>• Peer observation and review</li> <li>• A culture of consistent change</li> </ul>
<b>Wroxham Primary School</b>	<b>Culture for learning</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listening, dialogue and questioning</li> <li>• Feedback at all levels</li> <li>• Assessment</li> <li>• Learning review meetings</li> <li>• Risk-taking</li> </ul>
<b>‘Twenty outstanding primary schools’ – five years on</b>	<b>Strategies for sustaining excellence in 20 outstanding primary schools</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Passion for excellence</li> <li>• Innovation</li> <li>• Constant focus on the quality of teaching and learning</li> <li>• Leadership at all levels</li> <li>• Relationship with parents and the community</li> <li>• Professional learning and development</li> <li>• Succession planning</li> <li>• Partnership and federation</li> <li>• System leadership</li> <li>• Minimising staff turbulence</li> </ul>

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- <sup>15</sup> See reference 7.
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- <sup>17</sup> Building Learning Power provides a framework that supports children to develop the habits, attitudes and skills that will enable them to become confident, creative and independent learners – see [http://www.buildinglearningpower.co.uk/what\\_it\\_is.html](http://www.buildinglearningpower.co.uk/what_it_is.html).
- <sup>18</sup> P4C is designed to develop children's thinking and reasoning skills and to enhance their self-esteem – see <http://www.philosophyforchildren.co.uk/index.php/225>.
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Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at:

[college.evaluation@education.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:college.evaluation@education.gsi.gov.uk) or [www.education.gov.uk/contactus](http://www.education.gov.uk/contactus)

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