School Partnerships in Action
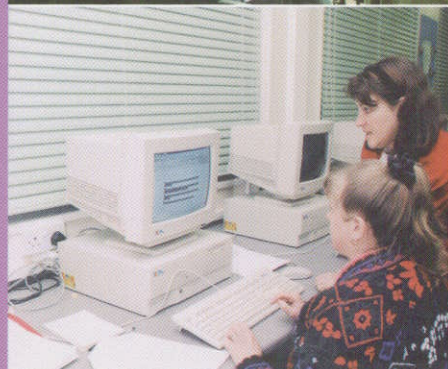
A Case Study of West Sussex Specialist Schools

School Partnerships in Action:
A Case Study of
West Sussex Specialist Schools

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RESEARCH SUMMARY

Introduction

This summary sets out the key findings of an NFER project investigating Specialist School partnerships, through a case study of the Specialist Schools in West Sussex. The research was funded by the Local Government Association Educational Research Programme and the Technology Colleges Trust, with support from West Sussex Local Education Authority (Advisory and Inspection Service). The overall aim of the case study was to:

provide initial illuminative evidence on the development and outcomes to date of Specialist School partnerships, the processes by which they work and the strategic coordinating roles of the LEA, the TCT and other bodies in ensuring that they are effective.

This study also allowed consideration of broader issues relating to the benefits and challenges of a school partnership approach and addressed the question of whether or not this type of network could be transferred to other educational contexts.

The Research Study

The study made use of both secondary and primary data sources. Documentary information, such as literature on Specialist Schools and key LEA and school documentation was collected and analysed. The predominant methodology, however, consisted of the use of detailed semi-structured interviews with individuals who participated in the Specialist Schools network in one form or another.

The following people were interviewed (between May and July 2002):
- ◆ six LEA advisers and a representative of the Education Business Partnership
- ◆ ten Specialist School headteachers
- ◆ 13 Specialist School Heads of Department or teachers
- ◆ six groups of pupils
- ◆ nine collaborative school headteachers
- ◆ three key individuals at the Technology Colleges Trust.

Key Findings:

The West Sussex Specialist Schools Network

The Specialist Schools network consisted of all the Specialist Schools in West Sussex, along with aspiring Specialist Schools and the LEA. It was primarily set up to provide a more strategic approach to working with Specialist Schools in the locality. The network provided both a source of support and a mechanism by which schools could share ideas and disseminate good practice. In addition, the network aimed to encourage collaboration and partnership working between schools, both Specialist and non-Specialist. The LEA was described (by schools and LEA advisers) as having a coordinating and supportive role within the Specialist Schools network. Schools emphasised that the network was a partnership between themselves and the LEA, rather than being led by the LEA.

Partnerships

Specialist Schools are required to submit a community plan as part of their development plans when bidding for Specialist status. This element of their work includes developing links with other schools and the wider community (for example, local businesses and adult learners). The research indicated that whilst there was evidence of a variety of partnerships, the majority of collaborative work was between Specialist Schools themselves and with local primary schools. Links with non-secondary schools, further and higher education institutions and the wider community were less common.

Benefits of the Specialist Schools Network

There was a consensus amongst schools and LEA advisers that the creation of a Specialist Schools network in West Sussex had been beneficial. As well as helping schools to build closer relationships with one another, the network was seen to be a source of mutual support and an opportunity for reflection. Schools also felt that they had benefited from sharing ideas with teachers in other schools and disseminating good practice. Another benefit of the network reported by interviewees was the empowerment of schools and the opportunity to work in partnership with the LEA.

Benefits of Partnerships

Partnerships between schools were felt to be beneficial for both teachers and pupils. Primary partner schools, for example, were thought to have mainly benefited from access to physical resources and teachers and the partnerships were seen as helping primary pupils with their transition to secondary school. Working with a Specialist School also gave partner schools the opportunity for staff training and for the exchange of ideas and good practice.

School partnerships were perceived to be a two-way process, from which both the Specialist and partner schools could benefit. There was some suggestion from the primary partner schools, however, that they did not gain as much. The Specialist Schools acknowledged that through sharing ideas and expertise with teachers in primary schools they had gained an insight into how primary schools work and a greater understanding of the academic abilities of primary pupils. There were mixed views as to whether pupils in Specialist Schools had benefited directly from the partnerships. However, where Specialist Schools were involved in joint activities with other secondary schools, students were thought to have benefited both academically and socially.

Challenges in being part of the Specialist Schools Network

Three main challenges of being part of a Specialist Schools network were identified. Firstly, interviewees mentioned the pressure schools face, with regard to time, therefore making it difficult to participate in network activities. Secondly, there was some conflict between schools balancing their own school agenda and a network or LEA agenda. Schools felt that it was important not to let the network detract from their own school vision. The final challenge identified was ensuring that all the relevant stakeholders were involved in the network, thus ensuring that participants had some ownership of the process, whilst keeping in mind the needs of non-Specialist schools in the locality.

Challenges of Partnerships

In general, the benefits of partnership working were seen to outweigh any difficulties that could arise. However, some respondents did highlight the challenges faced in developing partnerships with non-Specialist secondary schools. These challenges tended to arise from perceived competition amongst schools and difficulties establishing a common agenda between the Specialist School and the partner school. Schools stressed a number of factors that could facilitate the development of effective school partnerships, including the establishment of non-hierarchical partnerships and the negotiation of what each partner would like to gain from the relationship.

Transferability

The research explored the possibility of the mechanisms and structures that constitute the West Sussex Specialist Schools network being transferred to other educational areas and contexts. The LEA advisers and school staff interviewed stressed that there were important historical, organisational and geographical characteristics within the county that had supported the development of networks. For example, there was a history of collaboration

and good working relations between the LEA and schools. The county also had a history of encouraging and carrying out research and evaluation activities. Interviewees felt that, in principle, the Specialist Schools network could be transferred to other areas, but that for the network to work, there should be good relations between the LEA and headteachers, an appropriate level of support from the advisory service and an appropriately-sized geographical area.

LEA and school staff were also asked about the extent to which schools with different characteristics could successfully share good practice. There was a feeling that there were certain generic benefits arising from networking, but that for good practice to be shared effectively, the school partnerships had to be two-way and mutually beneficial.

Conclusions

Many current policy initiatives emphasise the need for schools to learn from each other. At a national level, school partnerships and networks are clearly going to be an important part of educational policy and practice over the next few years. The research process reported upon here was a useful opportunity to collect evidence relating to the operation of partnerships in one case-study LEA, which had already established and was further developing a coherent and proactive approach to partnership working.

The evaluation showed that the partnership approach is generally working well in West Sussex. The interviewees who assisted with this case study had much to say about the networking approach and there was a consensus that the West Sussex Specialist Schools partnerships had brought numerous benefits for the institutions and individuals involved. There was also recognition that partnership working will always bring a number of challenges, especially given that it will be taking place in a variety of different geographical and policy contexts. Indeed, the greatest challenges may well be those of coordinating a range of different networks and finding the time to put in the appropriate levels of planning and forethought that are requirements for successful partnership working.

The findings of the case study, as would be expected in an evaluation of this type, also suggest that there are a number of issues, relevant to schools, LEAs and national organisations, that need to be considered in respect to the implementation and further development of partnership approaches. Some of the major issues identified are summarised below:

Issues for schools

- ◆ managing the extra workload and dealing with the additional time demands that arise from partnership working

- ◆ achieving a balance between the school's own interests and those of partner institutions

- ◆ giving thought to the most appropriate (institutional) types of partnership and formats of partnership working.

Issues for LEAs

- ◆ considering how best to set up a mutually-beneficial network in a way that involves and is supported by all parties

- ◆ achieving a balance between intervention and support, between LEA needs (or the LEA agenda) and the requirements of individual schools

- ◆ considering how best to develop the partnership approach in a way that will benefit all schools and learners in an LEA, not just the schools participating in a particular initiative.

National Issues

- ◆ (on the part of the DfES and the TCT) considering whether further specific and general guidance for schools is needed, and what form this should take, as partnership approaches develop further

- ◆ dealing with any overlap or duplication that may occur of regional/ LEA advisory, training or support roles

- ◆ exploring the means for encouraging the further development of wider community partnerships, from both school and community angles.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

The present Government, as part of its school improvement agenda and promotion of diversity in the secondary sector, has a strong commitment to increase the number of Specialist Schools to 1,500 by 2005. Such schools are expected to share their expertise, effective practices and resources with other schools in their areas in order to help these partner schools raise their standards and student performance. LEAs are encouraged (although at present there is no statutory guidance) to help foster and support the development of effective partnerships between (Specialist and other) schools. In addition, Specialist Schools have to promote the notion of lifelong learning for all and contribute to the provision of such learning within the wider community.

West Sussex LEA is one authority that has especially sought to foster and support partnerships between (Specialist and other) schools. The case study presented here has examined the development and outcomes to date of the Specialist School partnership strategy in West Sussex and identified the challenges faced and the successes achieved. It highlights the lessons learned and the successful aspects of the strategy that could be transferred to other authorities and schools. It is also hoped that this project will help to inform further research into the contribution of school partnerships to sharing good practice and raising standards in schools.

The Government's White Paper[1] published in September 2001, along with subsequent policy statements, reaffirmed official plans to enhance the diversity of secondary education by:

♦ increasing the number of Specialist Schools to 1,500 by 2005[2]

♦ adding four new specialisms (business and enterprise, engineering, science, mathematics and computing) to the four original specialisms (technology, languages, sports, arts)

♦ introducing Advanced (Specialist) Colleges.

The Specialist Schools programme helps schools, in partnership with private sector sponsors and additional Government funding, to build upon their strengths and to establish distinctive identities through their particular specialisms. Schools receive an initial capital grant of £100,000 to add towards £50,000 they have to raise through sponsorship. There is then an annual grant of £123 per pupil. As well as meeting their own performance

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[1] Department for Education and Skills (2001). *Achieving Success*. London: DfES.

[2] A further statement by the Secretary of State for Education in July 2002 indicated that the number of Specialist Schools will be taken to at least 2,000 by 2006. DfES (2002).
The Standards Site, Specialist Schools: http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/specialistschools

targets, Specialist Schools must act as a resource for neighbouring schools and the local community (a minimum of one third of a school's annual grant must be spent on the community aspect of their plan). Specialist status is granted for four years at which point schools must then bid for redesignation subject to satisfactory performance. At the time of writing there are 992 Specialist Schools (DfES, 2002).[3] Schools are also able to apply to the Technology Colleges Trust Affiliation Network without having Specialist status.

Local Education Authorities are encouraged to support Specialist Schools (when applying for Specialist status and thereafter) and the development of school partnerships. Whilst no statutory guidance exists to determine LEAs' exact role here, these obligations are seen as part of their overall management responsibility for local school systems and as part of their school improvement remit. LEAs, represented by Partnership Boards, do, however, have more specific responsibilities within Excellence in Cities areas.

From the above, it is clear that LEAs need to take account of the growing Specialist Schools programme within their strategic planning, including their Educational Development Plans (EDPs) and in their school improvement strategies. Anecdotal evidence from some parts of the country has identified certain frictions arising either from the particular strategies undertaken by some authorities in their support for schools applying for this status, or from difficulties arising where an LEA has not yet addressed this issue in any strategic way. It is also the case that the OFSTED report on Specialist Schools[4] considered that:

> *With few exceptions – notably among the sports colleges – the community dimension was the weakest element of Specialist Schools' work. Most schools have found their community role challenging to define and pursue. There were good examples of support for other schools, required under the scheme, in about half of the technology, language and arts colleges visited. In the remainder, objectives were vague and support did not focus sharply enough on learning outcomes. Where implementation had resulted in limited benefits, the resourcing and management of the activities was often inadequate.*

This underlines the importance of the support, planning and coordinating functions to be exercised by LEAs with regard to helping Specialist Schools collaborate effectively with other institutions (though it should be noted that not all Specialist Schools seek or express a need for LEA support). Some authorities, such as West Sussex, have already developed innovative partnership models for undertaking such planning and support. While these LEAs have developed informal links with the Technology Colleges Trust (TCT), the managing agency for the Specialist Schools initiative, more strategic links at national and local levels remain underdeveloped.

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[3]   DfES (2002). *Specialist Schools Programme.*
      DfES Website: http://www.dfes.gov.ac.uk/a-z/SPECIALIST_SCHOOLS_PROGRAMME.html
[4]   OFSTED (2001). *Specialist Schools: an Evaluation of Progress.* London: OFSTED.

School partnerships and networks are being encouraged via a range of policies, including the Specialist and Beacon Schools programmes, which include school 'twinning' arrangements, and the identification of LEA Diversity Pathfinders. However, despite considerable interest being shown in the development and operation of local school partnerships, and the benefits that are felt to accrue from these, there is surprisingly little good empirical evidence on different models of partnership working. There is a particular need to examine how the new networks and collaborations between Specialist and other schools are developing and being supported, and the issues that are being raised for local education systems. This report, therefore, aims to contribute towards these aims.

1.2   Aims and Objectives

The overall aim of this detailed case study in one LEA is to provide initial illuminative evidence on the development and outcomes to date of Specialist School partnerships, the processes by which they work and the strategic coordinating roles of the LEA, the TCT and other bodies in ensuring that they are effective.

The more specific objectives of the study have been to:

◆ explore the roles and interactions of different parties in the schools, LEA, TCT, and other organisations in establishing the Specialist School partnership model in West Sussex and the strategic and operational planning that has been a part of this

◆ examine the basis, nature and goals of the Specialist School partnerships in West Sussex

◆ investigate the operation and interactions of the partnerships and the challenges faced

◆ assess the nature and extent of the new learning experiences for students and professional development opportunities for teachers generated through the partnerships

◆ identify the lessons learnt and examples of effective practice that could be transferred to other LEAs and schools. These would especially relate to:

•   helping Specialist Schools to become more effective as networked centres of excellence and innovation

•   showing other schools how to enter into effective partnerships with Specialist institutions

•   indicating the best ways that LEAs and the TCT can support the development of effective school partnerships.

The project was funded as part of the Local Government Association's Educational Research programme and by the Technology Colleges Trust, with support from West Sussex LEA, who made advisers available, provided documentation about the network and its associated projects, and assisted

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with accessing the schools. An Advisory Committee involving representatives from these three organisations, along with the NFER research team, oversaw the project. The evaluation was carried out in the period March to August 2002, with the majority of fieldwork visits to schools and the LEA taking place in June and July.

1.3 Structure of the Report

The methods used to address the aims outlined above are presented in the following chapter. Chapter 2 also provides background and contextual information relating to the Specialist Schools in West Sussex and the LEA in general. Chapters 3 and 4, respectively, provide details of the Specialist Schools network and the partnerships (and the nature of those partnerships) formed with other educational institutions (including further and higher education) and the wider community (for example, business and adult learners). Chapters 5 and 6 draw upon the respondents' views to take stock of the perceived benefits and challenges of being part of the Specialist Schools network and of working in partnership, whilst in Chapter 7, the potential transferability of this type of network to other contexts is explored. The chapter on transferability is particularly pertinent at a time when school networks are becoming increasingly important within a range of Government policies. Finally, the concluding chapter pulls out the main messages from the case study and a number of key points are made with a view to informing future developments in terms of setting up and operating this type of network in other areas.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

2.1 Research Methods

In terms of methodology, the project adopted a whole-LEA case-study approach. This facilitated a detailed study at a local level that would also allow consideration of broader issues relating to the benefits and challenges of a school networking approach, and the potential transferability of such an approach.

The methodology made use of both secondary and primary data sources. Documentary information was collected and analysed, but the predominant methodology consisted of the use of detailed semi-structured interviews with various individuals who participated in the network in one form or another. Further details of these aspects of the research design are as follows.

Documentary analysis was carried out in relation to:

(a) **The literature on Specialist Schools.** Including the key guidance, research, policy and practice literature on Specialist Schools.[5]

(b) **The literature on school partnerships in general.** This consisted of a preliminary analysis of the existing general literature on school partnerships and their place in recent policy documents.

(c) **Key LEA and school documentation.** Including the LEA Education Development Plan and Strategy for the Development of Specialist Schools, the OFSTED Inspection Report on the LEA, minutes of key meetings and documentation relating to subject-based meetings, such as Language Link.

(d) **Publicly-available school and pupil performance data.** Background data relating to the Specialist Schools were compiled (see Appendix A: Background Information on Schools).

Two members of the research team also attended a headteachers'/LEA advisers' network meeting (at the Professional Development Centre in Worthing, May 2002) with the purposes of: (a) seeing how the network operated; (b) finding out more about particular projects and partnerships; and (c) making contact with headteachers prior to the fieldwork stage of the research.

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[5] Members of the research team had previously been involved in a national evaluation of high performing Specialist Schools. This had been carried out for the Technology Colleges Trust in the period April 2001– January 2002 and resulted in the publication of a report (Rudd, et al., 2002) entitled *High Performing Specialist Schools: What Makes the Difference?*

Interviews were carried out with the key participants in the network. The following people were interviewed (mainly face-to-face and all between May and July 2002):

(a) **LEA Advisers.** Six LEA advisers, all closely involved with the network and/or with the Specialist Schools themselves, were interviewed, along with a representative of the Education Business Partnership.

(b) **Specialist School Headteachers.** Detailed interviews were carried out with ten Specialist School headteachers. These (or sometimes their deputies) were the people, along with the LEA advisers, who made up the Specialist Schools forum.

(c) **Specialist School Heads of Department or Teachers.** Where possible, further interviews were carried out with heads of department or classroom teachers, in order to obtain a view of how inter-school projects or partnerships were happening 'on the ground'. Thirteen such interviews took place.

(d) **Pupil Groups.** Where possible, discussions were carried out with small groups of pupils in order to ascertain a pupil perspective on experiences of Specialist School partnership activities. These occurred in six of the schools.

(e) **Collaborative School Headteachers.** It was important that the views of 'recipient' school staff should be taken into account, so nine collaborative school headteachers were interviewed by telephone.

(f) **Key personnel at the Technology Colleges Trust.** In addition three key individuals at the Technology Colleges Trust were interviewed (in August 2002), so that the research team could put the evaluation in the context of the latest policy developments in this area.

Detailed semi-structured interview schedules (see Appendix B for copies of the schedules), adapted according to the roles and experience of the various respondents, were used. The areas covered in these schedules included viewpoints relating to:

♦ the characteristics of secondary schools in this LEA area and of the LEA in general

♦ the extent to which these conditions or characteristics have helped or hindered the operation of a Specialist Schools network

♦ perceptions of the LEA role in supporting Specialist Schools

♦ details of how school partnerships and collaborations have operated in practice

♦ views on how students have benefited from this network/these partnerships

♦ views on how the network has assisted lifelong learning in the wider community

♦ views on how the partnerships/networks have contributed to the professional development of teachers

♦ perceptions on the main successes, to date, of the Specialist Schools network and on the general advantages, for schools and for LEAs, of networking

♦ perceptions on the main issues and challenges faced as the Specialist Schools network has been developed

♦ opinions on the ease with which the Specialist Schools network, as operated in West Sussex, could be transferred to other LEAs.

It can be seen that the operation of a network such as this, inevitably, takes place at different levels and the methodology adopted had to take account of this. An LEA adviser would have one perspective on the network, possibly a strategic view, whilst a headteacher might have another perspective, possibly based more on the perceived benefits for his or her institution. A teacher might have a different perspective, based more on subject or departmental interests, and a pupil yet another viewpoint, based upon practical experiences of working on a new project or with pupils from another school.

These perspectives may not necessarily be contradictory and indeed they may overlap – or simply reflect the different ways in which the various stakeholders may come into contact with and experience the network and its partnerships. The significant overlaps and differences in perspective are highlighted in those chapters that report upon the data collected during the course of these interviews.

2.2 Background: The LEA Context

Indicators of pupil performance suggest that levels of pupil achievement in West Sussex are, on the whole, higher than the national averages. For example, in 2001, the LEA proportion of pupils obtaining five GCSEs at grades A*–C was 55 per cent, compared with a national average of 50 per cent. All of the schools featured in this evaluation had proportions of pupils achieving five A*–C grades that were higher than the national average and very close to, or (in the majority of cases) above, the LEA average.

Many LEA and school-based interviewees indicated that they felt West Sussex schools were 'good to very good'. The socio-economic context varied from one part of the county to another; there were some areas with low levels of deprivation, but also some pockets of high deprivation, for example, in the coastal towns. In contrast to other areas, West Sussex LEA had low numbers of schools in special measures. At the time of writing, only one secondary school in the county was in special measures.

The main similarity across all the schools was that they generally had a comprehensive intake, but beyond this there were some important differences. As one of the LEA interviewees indicated, 'It's impossible to generalise. The schools are all comprehensives, but there the similarity

ends'. There are some 11-plus schools, for example on the South coast and in Crawley, and some 13-plus schools. Many of the schools, but not all, have sixth forms.

There was a general view, as succeeding chapters will show, that levels of co-operation, both between schools and between schools and the LEA, were very good. This was not a county that had experienced serious tensions or fierce competition between schools in recent years. There was a long history of collaboration and co-operation, mentioned by many of the interviewees, in West Sussex.

The LEA recently (June 2001) received a very positive OFSTED report which stated that *'This is a very good LEA with considerable strengths and no aspect of support that is unsatisfactory overall'* (OFSTED, 2001, paragraph 12). One of the areas of strength identified was the school improvement strategy:

> *The school improvement strategy is well planned, creative and responsive to the needs and ambitions of the schools. The programmes are extensive, often innovative and well planned, based on a rigorous analysis of the performance and needs of schools. The quality and effectiveness of the work is outstanding and has the capacity to sustain and develop schools at all levels of effectiveness. Such a comprehensive school development programme has been a feature of West Sussex's provision for a number of years* (paragraph 7).

Although the Specialist Schools network was not fully in operation at the time OFSTED visited the county, the inspectors did feel able to say that:

> *Partnership is good. Overall this is an outward looking LEA which seeks to share ideas and form networks for the benefit of the education system. There are very good links with businesses, the dioceses and institutions of higher education. The work of the education business partnership, for instance, is effectively managed within the education department and facilitates an extensive number of profitable and imaginative links with the business community* (paragraph 112).

It was in this context that the Specialist Schools network was being developed. With a strong background in effective school improvement programmes and strategic management, the LEA was supporting, but not imposing itself upon, the Specialist Schools that already existed in the county (and those which wished to seek Specialist status in the future).

The LEA strategy in relation to Specialist Schools has been outlined in its Education Development Plan (EDP) and in a more recent document (dated February 2002) setting out a *Revised Strategy for the Development of Specialist Schools*. A key feature of the revised strategy is the target to achieve a total of 20 Specialist Schools in West Sussex by 2005 as a waystage towards supporting any secondary school to attain Specialist status if they

wish to do so.[6] The LEA feels that this target will only be met if they work in partnership with schools to adopt a strategic approach to new applications.

The strategy document expresses the view that, through sharing good practice and enhanced resources, Specialist Schools will contribute significantly to raised expectations for all West Sussex schools and so make an important contribution to the achievement of LEA performance targets and EDP objectives. Through this strategy the LEA will support:

♦ aspiring Specialist Schools

♦ existing Specialist Schools

♦ other schools

♦ the wider community.

The LEA will provide support for the work of existing Specialist Schools, according to this document, by:

♦ taking an LEA-wide perspective and linking Specialist School objectives to those contained in the Education Development Plan

♦ providing a strategic link to other national priorities and initiatives (e.g. educational inclusion, Beacon Schools)

♦ enhancing links with relevant national agencies (e.g. Department for Education and Skills, Technology Colleges Trust)

♦ facilitating access to relevant research and expertise in higher education institutions

♦ enhancing education-business partnerships

♦ assisting schools to access and use a wide range of performance data to support effective school improvement

♦ offering specialist INSET, advice and consultancy

♦ assisting with dissemination, including through the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) networks

♦ offering training for school-based trainers and disseminators

♦ offering support for monitoring progress towards the achievement of targets and for evaluating the impact of dissemination of best practice.

The evaluation of West Sussex as a case study of the ways in which a local education authority can support a network of schools provided a unique opportunity to make an assessment of how far these strategies and goals had been achieved. The following chapters, making use of the in-depth viewpoints of the relevant LEA and school personnel, set out the details of how the network and the school partnerships have been operating in practice. They also address questions relating to the perceived successes and challenges of this initiative and the potential for transferring the network to other educational and geographical contexts.

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[6]   In addition to schools which have Specialist status there are a number of secondary schools in West Sussex that are affiliated to the Technology Colleges Trust Affiliation Network. At the time of the research, according to information supplied by the TCT, there were a further seven affiliated schools (see Appendix A).

3. SPECIALIST SCHOOLS NETWORK

This chapter describes the Specialist Schools network that has been established in West Sussex. It considers why the network was established, who is involved and the overall aims. The role of the LEA in the network is also described, whilst the final section of this chapter looks at teachers' awareness of the network.

3.1 What is the Specialist Schools Network?

Prior to the Specialist Schools network being established in West Sussex in 1999 some of the first schools in the area to be designated with Specialist School status were already working together with schools with the same specialism. As noted in Chapter 1, as more and more schools applied for Specialist School status, it was felt that the LEA needed to have a more strategic approach. One school described the problems that can arise if there is not a local approach to Specialist School applications. This school reported that they had applied for Specialist School status a few years previously, but found out that another school in the area was also applying for designation in the same specialism. This created a difficult situation because neither school was aware that the other was bidding and it resulted in only one school being successful in their application. It was felt that in order to avoid this situation occurring again, the LEA needed to have a strategic view of which schools were bidding for Specialist School status. In order to achieve this strategic approach, the Specialist Schools network was established. As one LEA adviser described: *'we were expecting more and more of them* [Specialist Schools]...*we were driven by this as well as by the need for collaboration'*.

The West Sussex Specialist Schools network involves all the Specialist Schools in West Sussex, aspiring Specialist Schools and the LEA (see Appendix C). The network is **coordinated** by a **headship group**, which consists of:

♦ Headteachers of existing Specialist Schools

♦ Headteachers of aspiring Specialist schools

♦ Senior LEA Adviser (Research, Development and Dissemination)

♦ Members of the LEA Specialist School support team (Advisers with responsibility for a particular area of curriculum specialism, and the Education Business Partnership (EBP) Manager).

This group meets once a term to discuss ideas, share problems, and disseminate good practice. They also have an annual seminar at which representatives from the Technology Colleges Trust, and the DfES Specialist Schools team are invited to attend in order to keep the schools up-to-date

with national thinking. Practitioners from other LEAs are also invited to attend in order to disseminate best practice. The attendance of the LEA advisers at the headship group meetings is funded by the LEA's Advisory and Inspection Service (AIS).

As well as the headship group, the network is also made up of **subject level groups**. These groups were already in existence before the overall Specialist Schools network was established and in fact formed the basis out of which the network arose. The subject groups are specific to the schools' specialism and usually involve the heads of the Specialist department. An LEA adviser with responsibility for the particular curriculum specialism is also involved. At present, as most of the Specialist Schools in West Sussex are either Language or Technology Colleges, the subject level groups are focused on languages and technology. As the number of Specialist Schools increases, and the range of specialisms increases, it is expected that the subject level groups will extend to include these different specialist areas.

The language group, known as the 'Language Link' group, involves the headteachers of the three Language Colleges in West Sussex, the Modern Languages Adviser, and the adviser responsible for Education-Business Partnerships. Representatives from three companies in West Sussex are also involved. The main aim of the Language Link is to improve examination results in languages and improve pupils' knowledge of language in the workplace, by developing activities and sharing ideas.

The 'Technology Link' group is modelled on the Language Link group, but has a strong emphasis on ICT. It involves the five Technology Colleges in West Sussex, along with the LEA adviser with responsibility for technology, the EBP manager and some local businesses.

3.2 Aims of the Specialist Schools Network

Although the Specialist Schools network was primarily set up to provide a more strategic way of working with Specialist Schools, as indicated by both the headteachers and LEA advisers interviewed, it has a broad range of aims. The main aims of the network mentioned by both the LEA advisers and the Specialist Schools were:

♦ Ensuring that Specialist Schools are meeting their annual **targets**. These targets, which support the Specialist School aims, relate to objectives such as raising standards of achievement, extending the range of opportunities available to students, and benefiting other schools in the area.

♦ Encouraging **collaboration** between schools (both Specialist and non-specialist schools).

♦ **Sharing ideas and disseminating good practice**. As one headteacher indicated, the network aims to '*encourage dialogue between Specialist Schools*', and to '*make sure that the expertise in Specialist Schools is shared as widely as possible with other schools in the county*'.

♦ **Providing mutual support** and reassurance. One headteacher commented that the aim of the network was '*to share the issues and pitfalls regarding being a Specialist School and provide reassurance to each other*'.

♦ **Raising standards**. As highlighted by a LEA adviser, one of the main aims was to achieve '*higher standards within the Specialist Schools themselves, along with higher standards in their partner schools*'.

♦ **Supporting aspiring Specialist Schools**, through providing opportunities for aspiring schools to talk to existing Specialist Schools. It was hoped that the network would '*bring coherence to those other schools aspiring to Specialist School status*'.

The Specialist Schools network also contributes to the West Sussex Education Development Plan, by providing opportunities for the LEA to meet their dissemination targets and contribute to the school improvement agenda.

3.3 Role of the LEA in the Specialist Schools Network

The LEA was considered by schools and LEA advisers to have a **coordinating** role within the Specialist Schools network. The LEA '*acts as a broker to bring schools together*' and enables schools to meet. It also facilitates and organises the headship group meetings. As a result of this coordinating role, the LEA appears to be in a good position to oversee partnerships between schools and to put particular schools in contact with one another. Indeed, one LEA adviser said that, '*very often I suggest exchanges of expertise...I put people in contact with each other...we facilitate communication...we have facilitator, communication and broker roles*'. The LEA plays less of a role, however, in facilitating or developing Specialist Schools' partnerships with non-specialist schools and the wider community. This was highlighted by one headteacher who emphasised that he would like the LEA to play a greater role in '*raising the importance of partnerships*' in the network, and in brokering school and community partnerships.

The LEA was also described by the Specialist Schools as having a **supportive** role in the network. They felt that the network was a partnership between the schools and the LEA, rather than being led by the LEA. As one Specialist School headteacher reported, '*the LEA is not seeking to impose itself...they recognise that enabling support is best*'. This was echoed by one LEA adviser who described the LEA role as '*a steady, guiding hand*'. The LEA was also seen to have an important role in encouraging and supporting schools to disseminate good practice both within and outside the network.

The Specialist Schools were generally satisfied with the role of the LEA in the network, although one school felt that the LEA did not necessarily have

to be involved because this particular school had already developed their own partnerships with other schools. There was also some tension from schools regarding the funding of LEA advisers attendance at the subject group meetings, which were previously funded by the LEA's Advisory and Inspection Service. The responsibility for funding has now been transferred to the schools; some of which are reluctant to pay for adviser time.

Five out of the eight current Specialist Schools in West Sussex reported that the LEA had little involvement in their **Specialist School applications** (other than being very supportive of their applications). The LEA is now, however, taking a much more strategic and involved approach in applications, and is playing a greater role in supporting aspiring schools through the network. This strategy was needed because of the recent developments in national policy concerning the expansion of the Specialist Schools programme. The LEA felt that in order to ensure an appropriate geographical spread of the various specialisms across West Sussex they needed to become more involved. In accordance with this new approach, meetings have taken place involving all the aspiring Specialist Schools in West Sussex. Each of these meetings was chaired by the headteacher of one of the existing Specialist Schools. The aspiring Specialist Schools discussed what specialism each of them would like to apply for, and they looked at the geographical spread of specialisms in the area. They then agreed which schools should be prioritised for LEA support when bidding for Specialist School status. This strategy has reduced the feeling that aspiring schools are competing against one another to gain Specialist status first, and allows schools to bid for designation when they are ready.

3.4 Awareness of the Specialist Schools Network

This section discusses the extent to which teachers in Specialist Schools were aware of the network, and the extent to which discussions at the network level were disseminated to teaching staff.

The Specialist Schools network mainly involved the headteachers of Specialist Schools (through the headship group) and the heads of the specialist areas (through the subject groups). In order for the network to be most effective, one LEA adviser stressed the importance of teachers being informed about the network, commenting 'although the initiative is driven from the top [LEA and headteacher level], it should be fully understood by the people doing the work'. However, the extent to which information from the network (both at the headship and the subject group level) was disseminated to other staff in the school, and indeed, the extent to which teachers were aware of the network, varied.

As mentioned above, the Specialist Schools network mainly involves the headteacher (or in some cases, the deputy headteacher) and the head of the specialist department. Although issues arising from the headship meetings were discussed between the headteacher and the deputy headteacher, and in some cases, the head of the specialist department, information was not

generally disseminated below this level. Some of the schools stated that teachers in the specialist department were informed about discussions at the network level when necessary, either formally through meetings or bulletins, or informally, through discussions in the staff room. In other schools, however, not only were some teachers in the specialist departments not informed about discussions at the headship level, they were not even aware that the headship group existed. One Language College interviewee explained the reason for this; they felt that the network '*is another thing for the language department to think about...they are already under pressure as they are the specialist department*'. They, therefore, only disseminate information from the network to specific, senior teachers in the specialist department.

One deputy headteacher emphasised the importance of teachers being informed about the network, and he described how he achieved this by acting as a link between the network and the specialist department in the school: '*I must listen, ask questions, and go back again...I need to be open minded...I need to help change the thinking*'. He emphasised that such a link was crucial if the goals of the network were to be taken up and supported by the teaching staff.

3.5 Conclusion

The Specialist Schools network was primarily set up to provide a more strategic approach to working with Specialist Schools. It was also a means of support for both existing Specialist Schools and aspiring Specialist Schools, and an opportunity for schools to share ideas and disseminate good practice. In addition, the network aimed to encourage collaboration and partnership working between schools, both Specialist and non-Specialist. The next chapter will discuss the extent and nature of the partnerships that Specialist Schools have developed with other schools, as well as their partnerships with further and higher education institutions and the wider community.

4. PARTNERSHIPS

This chapter considers the partnerships, and the nature of such partnerships, that have developed between Specialist Schools and non-Specialist Schools, further or higher education institutions and the wider community (for example, business and adult learners).[7]

4.1 School Partnerships

This section considers the ways in which Specialist Schools work together, along with the extent to which they work with non-Specialist secondary schools and primary schools in their local area.

As noted in Chapter 2, with the exception of one school, those schools currently designated as Specialist have language and technology status. The subject level groups of the network are therefore the language and the technology link groups. The language link group has been well established since 1997, has received national attention and provides an excellent example of how schools with the same specialism can work together to develop and promote activities in their locality. The stakeholders include three Specialist Schools (one of which is designated from September 2002), three local employers and the LEA. The aim of the initiative was: '*through active collaboration between schools, business partners and the LEA to enhance the quality of foreign language learning in West Sussex*' for pupils and students in schools and colleges, employees in local business and local adult learners.[8] With regard to the first target group, that is students, an annual event entitled 'Languages and the World of Work' has taken place for all Year 9 pupils in West Sussex since 1998 at a host language college. Students attended a series of workshops, which illustrated the value of languages and the world of work and schools were encouraged to replicate activities from the workshops within their own communities. Copies of the published workshop activities were distributed to all West Sussex secondary schools. Guidance has also been published on the West Sussex Grid for Learning and INSET sessions on vocational qualifications have been held at the host school.

The early years of language learning have also been a consideration for the language link group. One Language College has been responsible for the establishment of a primary language programme which links into Year 7 French schemes of work in three secondary schools in the town. French was taught in fifteen local primary schools by a primary French coordinator

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[7] Specialist Schools are required to submit a community dimension as part of their development plans when bidding for Specialist status (in the early stages of the Specialist Schools programme schools were not required to submit this element, which was introduced in 1998).

[8] FELTHAM, A. and MORRISON, J. (2002). *Language Link: 1997-2002.* West Sussex LEA.

employed by the Language College. Most classes received 45 minutes per week and the main focus was on oral and aural skills as well as promoting positive attitudes to language learning and building pupils' confidence. INSET sessions have also been held by the Language College to provide initial training, advice and an opportunity to meet other primary teachers who currently teach or are interested in teaching French in the future.

In addition to motivating pupils, as they begin their language learning and make key stage 4 option choices, the language link group is also concerned with encouraging students to continue studying languages in the sixth form. The group was currently developing a website to stimulate interest amongst students doing work experience. Ex-pupils from Sussex schools who have gone on to use their languages in their working lives would describe their jobs, emphasising the importance of languages to a range of companies.

Whilst an event such as the 'World of Work' provides the opportunity for Specialist and non-Specialist secondary schools to come together, it was evident from the interviewees that the majority of Specialist School partnership working with other schools originated from Specialist Schools working with primary schools (mainly their feeder primary schools). Interviewees made reference to the difficulties of working with non-Specialist secondary schools, who were described as '*jealously guarding their processes*' (this is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6). One of the Specialist Schools did comment, however, that the network has made this process easier, for example, in organising a maths week to include all local secondary schools. It is important to note that the language colleges do have strong links with international secondary level institutions.

The forms of support Specialist Schools provided to their primary partners, as identified by interviewees, were as follows:

♦ Resources (for example, schemes of work and lesson plans)

♦ Teaching (which involved sending their own teachers or employing a teacher for the primary school)

♦ Access to the schools' facilities (for example, science laboratories to conduct experiments)

♦ INSET sessions.

There were examples of the Specialist Schools and their primary partner schools organising events. For example, 'Technology Challenge', which involved one of the Specialist Schools providing their primary partners with kit cars to build, along with technical support. This resulted in a race between all of the schools. Members of staff in the Specialist School said that the event had helped them to develop their relationship with their family of schools:

> *They saw us as non-threatening...we got very positive feedback.
> This year we are going to have a mini-challenge for Year 5
> children. Teams will consist of five or six kids, a teacher, one of
> our staff and a visiting engineer. The two-way relationships
> developed help us to avoid the danger of being patronising.*

The concept of a partnership being 'two-way' was seen as important by all concerned and further instances of Specialist Schools working with their primary partners to develop collaborative projects were evident. One of the Specialist Schools had worked closely with a primary school to design and deliver an initiative for all the local primary schools. This particular initiative was called the 'Youth University' (YU); an out-of-hours learning initiative for pupils aged 8 to 13 to demonstrate that learning can be fun. Approximately 150 pupils attended to take part in a five-week course (available in a range of subjects including ICT, Design and Technology, sport and arts). At the end of the course there was a graduation ceremony and a celebration of achievement. At this ceremony, the children were also given a card that enables them to go into the Specialist School on a Saturday and access their computers. Local middle and primary schools nominated those pupils to attend the Youth University who do not have access to computers at home, are socially disadvantaged, or disaffected. Many mentally and physically disabled students also attended from local special schools and were given study buddies to help them with their work. Older pupils from the Specialist School also attended the YU as part of their community service and YU tutors were recruited from local middle schools, further education and from the Specialist School itself. This school had also worked with their family of schools and the LEA to develop a project to improve attendance. Attendance is colour coded; green represents satisfactory (93% and above), amber implied there is cause for concern (83-93%), and red represented unsatisfactory (less than 83%). Students who had 100% attendance, or those who had improved from red to green were given a scholarship to the Youth University.

4.2 Further and Higher Education Partnerships

All of the Specialist Schools said that they had some form of link with a further or higher education institution, although it is important to stress that these links were not necessarily linked to the their Specialist status or from being part of the Specialist School network. Those schools without sixth form provision were more likely to have contact with, or hoped to develop a link with, a local further education provider. As one headteacher noted, this contact *provides continuity for the students*. In another school, staff mentioned students from the local sixth form college coming into the school to coach pupils, whilst one headteacher was considering linking with a sixth form college in order to extend the range of subjects available at GCSE level to his students. With regard to links made with HEIs, this was generally due to teacher training placements being provided by the schools for local universities. One headteacher commented:

> *Yes there are links and we would like to develop them, we'd like to be a training school to help fashion the teacher of tomorrow. I've learnt a lot about lesson quality. We're a reflective establishment.*

In some of the schools these links were more developed, for example, pupils attending lectures, video conferencing links and putting together joint proposals to become Networked Learning Communities.

4.3 Wider Community Partnerships

In terms of links with the wider community, Specialist Schools are in a unique position with regard to links they have with business due to the sponsorship element of their bid. There was evidence of businesses contributing to, or providing school activities. For example, in one Language College there were strong links with British Airways and this had led to the development of a Flag Award Scheme, which involves students visiting the training centre at Heathrow and taking part in activities. In one area the local Education Business Partnership had worked in conjunction with a Specialist School to produce a resource for all local Year 6 children. Schools also noted that they had links with local businesses to provide their students with work experience. These types of activities with local businesses are incorporated into the school plan. In this way the plan records what the business community does for the school. As part of their community plan, however, schools are required to demonstrate what they do for the local community (including businesses). In this respect there were instances of Specialist Schools meeting the training needs of local business. For example, a Language College was providing training for employees of a local company, whilst another intended to work with the local training board to run courses for business on how to greet foreign visitors. Generally, however, there was room to develop links with the local business community. Interviews with TCT personnel indicated that, nationally, school links with business were *overall patchy*, dependent on the companies available in a given locality and the extent to which businesses were motivated to work with schools.

With regard to the contribution Specialist Schools made towards lifelong learning in the local community, this generally came through the provision of extensive adult training programmes and access to school facilities. For example, a Sports College described how it opened its facilities to the community every evening and all weekend for adult and community groups. The headteacher of this school noted that this provision was established prior to Specialist status, but that Specialist status had secured the continuation of this service. Similarly, a Language College opened a facility at the school in the evenings to support local language learners of all abilities over the age of 18. This access centre provided multi-media computer workstations, foreign language videos, language programmes and tutorial support from a qualified language teacher. Some of the schools also noted that that their students have to take part in working with the community. For example, in one of the schools all Year 10 students take part in a Community Action week whereby they are assigned a placement, for example, in a local nursery. Another school had innovatively combined their work with their partner schools and the wider community in the form of a mobile learning centre named the 'Technobus'; a double decker bus fitted with laptops with Internet access, an interactive whiteboard and a

seminar room. The bus came into existence due to the fact that access to learning in a rural area could be difficult due to public transport issues and the travel costs involved. The bus is parked in a primary school in the day where teachers and pupils can access the facilities and from 4:30 to 8:30pm it is open to the community.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the partnerships that Specialist Schools had developed with other Specialist Schools, non-Specialist Schools, further and higher education institutions and the wider community. The chapter has shown that partnerships were formed predominantly with primary schools, although there were instances of specialist schools working with non-Specialist secondary schools. Further and higher education partnerships and links with the wider community (e.g. local business and adult learners) were less common. Chapter 5 will discuss the benefits of working in partnership with other schools, as well as the benefits of being part of the Specialist Schools network.

5. BENEFITS

This chapter discusses the benefits identified by interviewees of being part of the West Sussex Specialist Schools network and of working in partnership with other schools and the wider community. The first section considers the benefits of being part of the network, whilst the second examines the benefits of school and community partnerships.

5.1 Benefits of the Specialist Schools Network

There was strong consensus among the school staff and the LEA advisers interviewed that the creation of a Specialist Schools network had been beneficial. This section discusses the range of benefits mentioned by interviewees.

The schools welcomed the opportunities the Specialist Schools network gave them to meet with other Specialist School staff. Such contact provided both mutual **support** and reassurance. Teachers recognised that their school had benefited from being able to share their problems with other Specialist Schools, particularly those with the same specialism who were facing similar challenges. The subject level groups were seen as particularly beneficial: as one head of technology commented; '*it's very supportive, people of the same level meeting together...you can bare your soul to other Heads of Faculty...it's very good...a problem shared is a problem halved*'. As well as being a supportive environment for existing Specialist Schools, the network was also considered to be a means of support and consultation for new or aspiring Specialist Schools. One headteacher of a school that has been designated Specialist status from September 2002, described the network as a '*lifeline*', and was grateful for the support received from other Specialist Schools when applying for this status.

The network was also seen as a forum for **reflection**, as it allowed Specialist Schools to compare themselves with each other and therefore reflect on their own practice. As one school indicated, '*it makes you question and evaluate your own way of thinking*'. Similarly, another school emphasised that the network was for '*opening up the wider world that's out there...it is a stimulus for wider thinking...the network has helped people to see that there are other possibilities, other ways of doing things*'. One school felt that this opportunity to compare themselves with other schools and reflect on their own practice had been reassuring and had boosted their confidence.

The Specialist Schools also reported that they had benefited from the opportunity to **share ideas and expertise with teachers in other schools**, and to **learn from each other**. The network was described by one

headteacher as '*a group of like-minded colleagues*' and she commented that '*we bounce ideas off each other*'. Although schools welcomed the opportunity to discuss generic issues about being a Specialist School, and to learn from schools with different specialisms, they were especially positive about the subject level meetings, as these facilitated the sharing of more specific ideas and expertise. Several teachers felt that sharing ideas and expertise with other teachers had benefited their **professional development**. For example, one headteacher stated that this had been motivational and had encouraged him to consider new and ambitious plans for his school. Another headteacher, who said that his school had '*unquestionably*' benefited from being part of the network reported that his '*thinking has been enriched*'. A few schools highlighted that the opportunities for discussion and the sharing of ideas had not existed before the network was set up (although as noted in Chapter 3, some schools were already working together prior to the network). One school, for example, described how the network had '*provided a forum for discussing issues, sharing problems – a forum which wouldn't otherwise have existed*'. This was echoed by another headteacher: '*in many LEAs, Specialist Schools are no more likely to talk to each other after becoming a Specialist School than before, whereas here* [in West Sussex] *they do*'.

Another benefit of the Specialist Schools network as mentioned by schools was the opportunity for **disseminating good practice**. As highlighted by one headteacher, '*the network is an ideal way of disseminating what schools are doing*'. A few interviewees indicated that the network helped the schools disseminate good practice more widely than they would otherwise have done. One LEA adviser emphasised that this dissemination not only helped the Specialist Schools involved in the network, but also the collaborative schools that they are partnered with.

In a few cases, schools reported that the Specialist Schools network had a wider **impact on teaching and learning**. As well as providing opportunities for teachers to share ideas and discuss different teaching and learning styles, the network also gave schools the opportunity to share or develop new resources. One headteacher reported that the effects of being part of the network had worked their way down the school from the Senior Management Team, to heads of department, to teaching staff and to students. The network had also encouraged staff to work together. More often, however, schools were less certain of the impact of the network on teaching and learning.

Another benefit of the network reported by interviewees was the **empowerment of schools**. One LEA adviser felt that the network provided an opportunity for schools to work in partnership with the LEA and that this direct involvement in LEA work '*gives them* [schools] *authority, a leadership role within the LEA...it's good for their confidence*'. This was echoed by the headteacher of a Technology College: '*by belonging to a network, I feel we've had the opportunity to influence policy...there has been an element of empowerment*'.

In general, schools felt that the network had helped them to build **closer relationships with other schools**, which had encouraged collaboration and fostered more effective partnerships amongst Specialist Schools. One LEA adviser acknowledged that the network had been successful because, '*the Specialist Schools initiative could have been divisive...we've avoided that*'.

5.2 Benefits of Partnerships

This section discusses the benefits of Specialist Schools' partnerships with non-Specialist schools. Section 5.2.1 examines the benefits of these partnerships for the partner schools, from both the Specialist Schools' and the partner schools' perspectives. Section 5.2.2 describes how Specialist Schools have benefited from linking with non-Specialist schools, again from both the Specialist Schools' and the partner schools' points of view.

As noted in Chapter 4, Specialist School links with the local community were less developed than those with other schools. Furthermore, even where community links did exist, interviewees gave little indication as to the benefits of these links. In addition, Specialist School partnerships with non-Specialist secondary schools were limited and this section, therefore, focuses mainly on the benefits of working in partnership with primary schools.

5.2.1 Benefits of Partnerships for Partner Schools

The following section describes the perceived benefits of Specialist School partnerships for the primary partner schools, from both the partner school and the Specialist School perspective.

As described in Chapter 4, the majority of Specialist Schools provided resources and equipment to their partner schools, either through providing funding for new resources, or by allowing partner schools to access the facilities/resources in the Specialist School. This **access to physical resources** was seen as the main benefit to partner schools, as it gave schools a greater resource base and contributed to improving teaching and learning. As described by a headteacher of a primary partner school: '*the benefits have been vast, in every direction...financial benefits and access to ICT facilities*'.

In some cases, the primary partner schools also benefited from access to **Specialist teachers** (see Chapter 4). The Specialist Schools generally felt that their partner schools gained a great deal from this specialist teaching, in terms of curriculum enrichment, teaching and learning, and staff development. For example, one Sports College that had provided their partner primary schools with specialist PE teachers felt that this had a range of benefits for the partner schools, including increasing teacher knowledge, improving the profile of PE in the school, and thereby increasing student participation and improving standards in PE.

The Specialist School partnerships were also thought to have benefited teachers' **professional development**. The joint activities organised between some Specialist Schools and their partner schools were particularly beneficial because they enabled teachers to visit other schools and network with other teachers, and in some cases, access new resources. The Specialist School partnerships also gave partner schools opportunities for staff training and for exchanging ideas and good practice with other teachers, which often resulted in new teaching ideas and new schemes of work.

A few Specialist Schools indicated that the partnerships gave their partner schools **access to a wider network**. These schools reported that, based on their experience of applying for Specialist School status, they had provided partner schools with advice about making links with other schools and about making contacts with businesses and industry.

Both the Specialist and the partner schools recognised that the Specialist School partnerships had considerable **benefits for pupils**. As well as pupils benefiting from having experience of different teachers in the school, with different teaching styles, the partnerships also helped pupils with their transition to secondary school. One Specialist School headteacher reported that joint activities with partner schools give primary pupils '*insights into secondary school life*' and help prepare them for the secondary school regime and higher levels of study. These partnerships also mean that pupils are familiar with the secondary school and possibly some of the teachers. As described by one partner primary school headteacher, this gave them a sense of continuity and helped make their transition to secondary school smoother.

Despite the Specialist Schools reporting a range of benefits to the partner schools it should be noted that half of the partner school headteachers interviewed felt that they had not benefited significantly from being linked to a Specialist School. Most of the partner schools acknowledged that they had benefited in terms of resources, however, not all felt that they had benefited in terms of curriculum enrichment, staff development or teaching and learning. For example, one partner school headteacher emphasised that their curriculum was already rich, therefore, the Specialist School could not enrich it any further. Furthermore, he stated that his school's '*teachers are very good so there was little impact there*'. Another partner school headteacher who also felt that the partnership had been of little benefit argued that partnerships may be more beneficial and effective for those schools that are in need of more support.

The partner schools emphasised that the **partnerships** were **not one-sided** and that they contributed to the partnerships as much as the Specialist Schools. Many of the Specialist Schools also acknowledged that, '*it is a two-way process...both our school and the partner schools benefit*'. The benefits of school partnerships to Specialist Schools are discussed in detail below.

5.2.2 Benefits of Partnerships for Specialist Schools

The following section describes the perceived benefits of Specialist School partnerships for the Specialist Schools themselves, from both the Specialist School and the primary partner school perspectives. It should be noted that in some cases, schools were already working with their primary feeder schools before their Specialist status and the existence of the Specialist Schools network.

As mentioned above, the Specialist Schools emphasised that school partnerships are a **two-way process** and that they also benefit from partnerships with primary schools. One headteacher, for example, stated that: '*we learn as much from them* [the partner schools] *as they learn from us*'. This was echoed by some of the partner schools, one of whom emphasised: '*the boot is on the other foot...they are learning a lot from us*'.

Teachers in the Specialist Schools felt that they had benefited considerably in terms of **professional development**. The partnerships with other schools created opportunities for them (for example, lesson observation in other schools), which had not necessarily been available to them before. These new networking opportunities encouraged teachers to share ideas with teachers in other schools, reflect on their own teaching practice and develop new teaching strategies. One teacher felt that partnerships with other schools were particularly beneficial for her school because they have a fairly stable teaching force. She felt that it was important for the school to see what other teachers are doing and to get new teaching ideas from other schools.

The Specialist Schools acknowledged that through sharing ideas and expertise with teachers in primary schools, they had **learnt how primary schools work**, and had gained a greater insight into how primary school children learn. One headteacher, for example, stated: '*we learnt a lot about the way younger children think...we learnt about the difficulties our primary colleagues face...it has made us reflect...that is so very important*'.

The work with primary partner schools enabled Specialist Schools to gain a **greater understanding of the academic abilities of primary pupils**. The partnerships give Specialist Schools an opportunity to learn '*what primary school children are able to achieve*', and in some cases, to know the academic standards of individual pupils before they entered the Specialist School. This meant that the school was able to plan the curriculum for Year 7 in advance and focus it at the appropriate standard for the children, which may '*improve the continuity and progression*' of pupils' learning.

Specialist Schools which had provided specialist teaching in their feeder primary schools felt that this had helped to **raise standards of pupil performance** in their own schools. These Specialist Schools had, therefore, benefited from having new Year 7 pupils with a higher level of academic achievement and a more consistent level of knowledge. For example, one Language College which had provided each of their feeder primary schools with a Specialist French teacher, emphasised that the pupils entering the

school in Year 7 now have a better understanding of French and are all at a more standardised level. As a result, the pupils progress quicker and the school has now been able to introduce pupils to a second language in Year 7. As well as the Specialist Schools benefiting from the primary partnerships, one Specialist School headteacher suggested that other secondary schools in the area also have benefited. This is due to the fact that some of the pupils who had benefited from additional resources or specialist teaching provided through the partnerships may go on to schools other than the Specialist School.

Specialist Schools also felt that they benefited from primary **pupils** being **familiar with the school** and some of the teachers. As pupils were more comfortable with their new school environment, their transition into the school was easier. As one primary partner headteacher highlighted, *'they* [the Specialist School] *benefit hugely in that the children are not worried about going to secondary school...which creates a happier environment'*.

It was suggested that the Specialist Schools might have gained from working with local primary schools from a **community standing** point of view, as their links with primary schools *'improve the image of the school in the town'*. One primary school headteacher indicated that improving the transition of pupils into the Specialist School *'has an impact on parents' attitudes to the* [Specialist] *school'*. Furthermore, one school reported that this improvement in the school's reputation had contributed to the recruitment of pupils.

There were mixed views as to whether pupils in Specialist Schools had benefited from the partnerships. Schools which focused on primary, rather than secondary school partnerships, commented that their pupils were not sufficiently involved in partnership activities for them to have benefited directly. Other schools, however, felt that these partnerships had been of considerable benefit to their students, as they had given them access to a wider range of teaching approaches, and enriched their learning experiences. As one headteacher described, *'the net result* [of the school partnerships] *is that pupils' experience has been palpably enriched'*.

The joint activities with students from other secondary schools (such as the 'World of Work day', described in Chapter 4) were considered to have both **academic and social benefits** for students in Specialist Schools. Students benefited academically from experiencing new learning opportunities, developing new skills and sharing their ideas with students in other schools. Working with students from other schools was also thought to have contributed to improving Specialist School students' motivation and possibly raising their standards of performance. One student from a Language College, for example, highlighted that through working with other young people, *'you can gain different perspectives...there are differences in the way they are taught in different schools, so it can help you understand things better and remember them more long term'*. This view was echoed by another student who stated that *'people from different schools learn different things so you can learn new things from them'*. Specialist School

students were also thought to have gained socially from working with young people in other schools, as this had improved their communication skills and increased their confidence. As one student emphasised, '*you can learn how to work in a group of people you don't know...you get more people skills*'.

In contrast, some students felt that although working with students from other schools had social benefits, there had been **little direct impact on their learning**: '*it doesn't really help your learning unless it is directly related to what you are doing in your syllabus*'. Most of the students also highlighted that work with other schools was rarely followed up in the classroom, therefore, the impact on their learning was limited. Students from one Language College felt that linking with foreign schools, and working with young people from different cultures was more beneficial than linking with local schools, because international partnerships were more directly related to their learning and enabled them to practice and improve their language skills.

5.3 Conclusion

There was consensus amongst school staff and LEA advisers interviewed that the creation of a Specialist Schools network in West Sussex had been beneficial. As well as helping schools to build closer relationships with one another, the network was seen to be a source of mutual support and an opportunity for reflection. Schools also felt that they had benefited from sharing ideas with teachers in other schools and disseminating good practice.

Partnerships between schools were also considered to be beneficial for both teachers and pupils, particularly those between Specialist Schools and primary partner schools. The school partnerships were perceived to be a two-way process, from which both the Specialist Schools and the partner schools could benefit. There was some suggestion from the partner schools, however, that they did not gain as much from the partnerships as the Specialist Schools. Chapter 6 will discuss not only the challenges faced in working in partnership with other schools, but also the challenges that schools experienced in being part of the Specialist Schools network.

6. CHALLENGES

This chapter will consider the challenges identified by interviewees in being part of a Specialist School network and working in partnership with other schools and the wider community. The first section will discuss the challenges faced in being part of the network, whilst the second section will focus on the challenges of fulfilling the community aspect of the Specialist Schools programme.

6.1 Specialist Schools Network

The challenges of being part of a Specialist Schools network were essentially threefold. First, there was the issue of the lack of time and pressure that schools face, which made it difficult to participate in network activities. Second, the issue of a school agenda in contrast to a network/LEA agenda and third the importance of gaining the involvement of all the relevant stakeholders.

The lack of time and pressure faced by schools was a concern for both LEA advisers and school staff. For example, one LEA member of staff emphasised:

> One of the challenges, and it's going to be an increasing challenge, is that there's so much going on in secondaries, pressure to network, etc...there is pressure on heads and this is getting to be a real concern. How do we manage the pressure?

Similarly, a teacher stressed the need for the network to be a supportive organisation that does not overburden schools, whilst another said that attending meetings did take up a lot of time. In agreement with this latter point, a headteacher highlighted the need for schools to explore ways of working together other than face-to-face contact. He suggested, for example, the Internet as an alternative medium. One LEA adviser said that at subject level meetings there was never full attendance by school staff because of other demands: the meetings therefore were not as dynamic as they could be.

Keeping to a school's own agenda was also seen as a challenge to being part of the network. One LEA adviser emphasised that schools were facing recruitment and retention issues, therefore detracting from the extent to which they could contribute to the network. For other interviewees, it was not only a case of having to deal with any immediate issues that the school might be facing, but keeping clearly in mind their own school vision. For example, one headteacher stressed 'not letting the network detract from your own school agenda' as one particular challenge. For another

headteacher there were actually '*some tensions between having an LEA strategy and having a school strategy*'. Examples of such tensions were evident in the data. Dissemination and the sharing of good practice were part of the West Sussex LEA Education Development Plan and the strategic plan for the development of West Sussex Specialist Schools. One head of department commented, however, that he felt under pressure from the LEA to develop resources at a point at which he could not accommodate such developmental work. In another school, one headteacher said that having developed resources, the LEA passed them on to other schools free of charge, whilst the school themselves could consider marketing the resources for financial purposes. For one LEA adviser it was not so much an issue of a LEA versus a school agenda, but inter-school relations. He commented:

> *This is not a natural network. Groups of schools need a common cause, a shared interest. Schools have come in at different times; the shared agenda is tenuous.*

The final challenge emphasised, particularly by LEA personnel, was '*making sure everybody is on board*' [the network], whilst keeping in mind the needs of non-Specialist schools and '*making sure people are not disadvantaged because they are not involved*' [in the network]. The balancing act was ensuring that the network '*hangs together*', whilst not being seen as an exclusive club.

6.2 Partnerships with the Wider Community

LEA advisers did not generally comment on the challenges faced by schools with regard to working in partnership with the wider community. As noted in Chapter 3 the LEA role in this element of the Specialist Schools programme was minimal.

Overwhelmingly, the major challenge identified by headteachers and school staff was the issue of forming partnerships with non-Specialist secondary schools. Chapter 4 showed that in most instances schools were partnered with their primary feeder schools, as opposed to fellow secondary schools. The main reason given for this situation, as identified by the interviewees, was that the '*government has created a competitive environment through the creation of league tables*'. As a result, interviewees felt that secondary schools had the perception that Specialist Schools were attempting to '*poach*' their students. For example, one headteacher discussed how the school was able to work with two other secondary schools not in the immediate area, but that these relationships could not occur with more local non-Specialist secondary institutions. There was also a sense that fellow secondary schools could be resentful of a school's Specialist status, for example, due to the extra funding it brings. However, as noted in Chapter 1, Specialist School funding is tied to a school's development plan, a third of which must benefit the local community, including schools.

More specifically, the challenges of working with non-Specialist secondary schools and also primary schools were identified as follows:

♦ Approaching the notion of partnership working in a manner that is **not over authoritative, arrogant** or **patronising**. Demonstrating sensitivity and emphasising the equality and non-hierarchical aspect of the relationship was seen as key. For example, one of the schools noted that they had received some hostility from their primary links at first, '*teachers thought they were being watched*'; however, '*after a few visits the teachers were more relaxed and they realised that we are all working as a team*'. In contrast, a partner school described how their relationship with their Specialist School had not developed so well. The headteacher felt '*done to*', rather than being in a true partnership. Other collaborative schools, however, were more positive. One primary school stressed that their Specialist School listened to their views. The liaison team was described as '*brilliant*' and '*very keen to get into the mind set of a primary school*', whilst in another school the headteacher stressed that their Specialist School did not '*rough ride over them*'.

♦ Establishing a **common agenda**. For example, one teacher highlighted, '*other schools have different agendas and it is hard to establish what they can get out of being linked to a Specialist School*'. This teacher stressed the need for negotiation between schools and discovering what each partner would like to get out of the relationship.

♦ **Mediating the aims of the Specialist School programme** and fostering an understanding of the programme not only amongst schools, but also the business and wider community. One school interviewee commented, '*it's up to us to explain our position, but the LEA could play a role, a brokering role* [in fostering relations with non-Specialist secondary schools]'. One headteacher implied that if there was a promotion of the Specialist programme nationally, the wider community (that is business and local people) might more fully understand the community dimension of their work and therefore support the fulfilment of this aspect of their status.

Actually establishing good partnerships with other schools was identified as the greatest challenge in working with the wider community; however, schools did raise other issues. One school emphasised the difficulty of involving business in their school activities (despite having successfully forged several business links). A member of the local Education Business Partnership also reiterated this point, commenting that a major obstacle to schools forming partnerships with local businesses is that the majority of companies in West Sussex are small to medium enterprises. It is therefore difficult for these companies to give a significant amount of support or financial assistance.

Further issues were raised with regard to the delivery of community programmes. For example, one school highlighted that an ICT programme

for the community is run out of school hours, therefore creating a further burden on staff, whilst one headteacher stressed that running a learning resource centre for adult learners is not economically viable when the numbers participating are low.

From the collaborative schools' perspective the challenges associated with being in partnership with a Specialist School were negligible. Time, however, was one factor noted. For example, one headteacher said that they would like to work more with their Specialist School, but that the Specialist School did not have enough time to do so. Another headteacher commented that their Specialist School partner had provided them with resources, but were unable to provide the amount of expert time needed to ensure the primary school was using the resources to maximum capacity. This headteacher also stressed the importance of follow-up work when engaging in school partnerships. An event or resource in isolation she felt was a '*wasted opportunity*', further stressing the '*need for continuity for real curriculum development*'.

Finally, one further challenge highlighted by Specialist Schools in forming partnerships with the wider community was reaching a balance in terms of schools' commitments:

> *Our challenge has been finding a balance between fulfilling our community responsibilities and our primary objective of educating children, e.g. next Thursday I'm out at a competition at another school, but this clashes with helping Year 10 with their coursework. This is a national difficulty at a personal level.*

6.3 Conclusion

Three main challenges of being part of a Specialist Schools network were identified. Firstly, interviewees mentioned the issue of time pressures that schools face, which made it difficult to participate in network activities. Secondly, there was the conflict between schools keeping their own agenda and following a network or LEA agenda. The final challenge identified was ensuring that all the relevant stakeholders are involved in the network. Schools also highlighted the challenges faced in developing partnerships with non-Specialist secondary schools. These difficulties tended to arise from perceived competition amongst schools. The next chapter will explore some of the ways in which schools can address these challenges and can plan for and support effective partnerships. Chapter 7 will also consider the extent to which the West Sussex Specialist Schools network could be replicated in other educational areas.

7. TRANSFERABILITY

7.1 From a Local Case Study to the National Context

This evaluation represents a case study of how a network of schools has been operating in one LEA area. Previous chapters have covered the advantages of this network, whether and how the network has manifested itself in school and community partnerships and the issues arising from such networking.

The findings from this evaluation (summarised in the next chapter) will hopefully be of interest to the various stakeholders. These include the Local Government Association (representing Local Education Authorities), the Technology Colleges Trust, West Sussex LEA and, of course, schools themselves.

In addition, because of the drive towards the use of school partnerships in a range of national policies, including but also going beyond the Specialist Schools programme, the findings should also be of interest at a broader, national level: indeed, this was why the West Sussex Specialist Schools network was chosen as a case study. The experiences of this LEA and these participating schools may well be useful for other (present and future) participants in networks in a national context.

However, the relevance of these experiences depends at least in part upon how easily the structures, processes and networks in use in West Sussex could be transferred to other geographical areas and to other institutional and educational contexts. This chapter deals with this question by looking in some detail at the issue of transferability. Against a background where networks are clearly becoming more and more important as a means of schools supporting each other and transferring good practice, it is pertinent to ask whether or not the mechanisms and structures that make up the West Sussex Specialist Schools network could appropriately be transferred to other educational areas and contexts.

To answer this question, the chapter draws upon the views of both the LEA and the teacher interviewees. The interviews included a number of direct questions about whether or not the network could be transferred to other situations, what problems there would be in trying to set up networks of this sort, and what advice the interviewees would give to another LEA trying to make use of such a network.

Section 7.2 summarises the views of the LEA officers and school staff on the context of the West Sussex network, Section 7.3 briefly outlines their comments on the potential for schools (more generally) to share good

practice, Section 7.4 highlights the importance of the need for 'egalitarian' school partnerships, Section 7.5 considers LEA and school staff advice on transferability issues and, finally, Section 7.6 offers some concluding comments based upon these perspectives.

7.2 Transferability: The West Sussex Context

In considering the issue of transferability it is important to bear in mind the context in which this particular network was operating (see Chapter 2, especially Section 2.2 which provides further details of the West Sussex context). For example, this particular LEA had the benefit of having no secondary schools which had opted to take on grant-maintained status and, from all accounts, relations between the headteachers and the authority were mostly positive.

The LEA advisers and school staff interviewees were asked about the extent to which they thought that the contextual conditions or characteristics in West Sussex had helped or hindered the operation of a Specialist Schools network. Most respondents stressed that there were important historical, organisational and geographical characteristics within the county that had supported the development of networks. Relevant factors identified included the following:

♦ **A history of collaboration.** There was a general sense that there had been a history of collaboration between the LEA and schools, and also between the schools themselves, in West Sussex. '*Sharing and collaboration has been part of the philosophy of West Sussex*'.

♦ **Good working relations.** Several respondents also mentioned good working relations between schools and the authority: '*The LEA has very good relations with headteachers*' and, as a consequence, the LEA still has a '*significant voice*'. There is a willingness, on the part of schools, to contribute to LEA proposals. The existence of good working relationships was seen as a key pre-requisite for the success of this, and any other form of, school network.

♦ **Confidence in the LEA.** Linked with the previous two points, interviewees stressed that schools and headteachers generally had confidence in their local education authority, both in terms of the leadership it offered and with respect to the way it included schools in decision-making processes. On the part of schools, there is '*good trust of the LEA/Advisory service. The authority is perceived to be 'on their side'. The LEA has a tradition of encouraging independence*'. One respondent stressed that the Specialist Schools network was not some kind of club or a '*talking shop*': '*The network is not just warm words. It is more than a cosy getting together. West Sussex teachers are quite confident...there is a culture of confidence*'.

♦ **'Homogeneous' school population.** No LEA has a totally homogeneous school population, and there were some differences between West Sussex schools (see below), but there were also some important shared school characteristics. The schools are mostly

'comprehensive' in nature and their populations share similar characteristics. One of the interviewees explicitly acknowledged that the lack of competition between schools, in terms of competing for pupil intakes (none of the county's schools took on grant-maintained status), encouraged partnerships among schools and helped the operation of a Specialist Schools network. Another noted that, *'The scattered geography of the schools means less of a sense of competition, they're fairly well spaced'*. (See also Section 6.1 on the need for networking using methods other than face-to-face contact).

♦ **Importance placed on research and evaluation.** The LEA and school staff had a history of encouraging and carrying out research and evaluation activities, from individual teacher level upwards, for example, via the MA in Education programme, through to multi-perspective evaluations of workshops provided by Specialist Schools, through to larger-scale policy evaluations such as the present study. These activities formed part of a *'culture of evaluation'* which allowed for reflection on new developments within the LEA area, both at individual and institutional levels, including considerations of whether new programmes and initiatives had wider applicability, across the county or beyond. *'There is good regular networking of subject teachers and middle management. This feeds in to the Specialist Schools network. There is a feeling that research development is a good thing.'*

West Sussex, then, was seen to have a number of characteristics that were of assistance to the process of setting up and maintaining a Specialist Schools network. There were also, however, one or two contextual factors, identified by the interviewees, which may have hindered or militated against the setting up and operation of this type of school network. These factors were really only evident in certain parts of the county and were given much less prominence in the interviews than the positive factors as summarised above. Briefly, they were:

♦ **Some differences in school characteristics.** Although there was a good degree of homogeneity in West Sussex schools (see above) there were also some minor variations that were not necessarily helpful to the formation and development of institutional partnerships. For example, in some parts of the county, there were middle schools: *'From my perspective – the only issue is the intermediate schools... The different age groupings can make partnerships difficult, though many schools overcome these problems'*.

♦ **Competition between management groups or subject areas.** In one or two parts of the county there was a lack of interaction between schools at middle management levels, or a lack of sharing good practice because departments within a school wished to remain independent from other schools. Respondents reported that there was no problem in terms of headteachers interacting, rather there were one or two issues at middle management/head of department level: *'The departments are quite strong fiefdoms in some of the schools. Headteachers will say that they will do something, but can't always implement it because*

of the power of heads of department. There is not always a huge tradition of departments working across the school'.

On the whole, then, there were a number of reasons why West Sussex LEA provided a favourable context for a network of Specialist Schools. As with any area of this size there might be some issues of partnership working with one or two schools, or departments within schools, but on the whole there was a history of collaborative working which greatly assisted the setting up and development of this network.

7.3 Transferability: The Potential for Schools to Share Good Practice

Following discussion of these 'local' factors helping or hindering the development of partnerships, LEA and school respondents were asked a broader question about the extent to which they felt that schools with different characteristics could successfully share good practice. Most respondents indicated that, in general and in principle, there was no problem in terms of schools with different characteristics sharing good practice. There was a feeling that there were certain generic benefits arising from networking, i.e. it does not matter if schools have different characteristics because there are generic issues common to all schools. The following comments are illustrative of the headteachers' and teachers' views:

- *Schools can share practice as there are a lot of generic issues.*

- *It will work with any school...Classroom skills are fundamentally transferable.*

- *Children are children...all schools have the same sorts of problems with learning a language.*

- *The principles of teaching are the same; you have got to stimulate children, especially the disaffected and take the gifted forward.*

- *Everybody is engaged in the same basic activity...everyone just has a different set of students and resources...Schools are not so unique...approaches will work across a range of schools.*

The sense that teaching and learning was generic may have come from the county's key stage 3 strategy. However, in the view of these respondents, this did not mean that it was easy for schools to network. Some important qualifying comments were made about the need to acknowledge that school networks operate at different levels and about the need to keep networks working over time, with a shared vision and perhaps refocusing where necessary. One LEA adviser commented:

Differences do have an effect, at a number of different levels. E.g. at Headship level there are different perceptions of leadership, different perceptions of the nature of a school. Also at whole-school, cultural level. Some schools are open, collaborative, others are in the early stages of this.

7.4 The Need for Non-elitist School Partnerships

The point was made, particularly by some of the headteachers at collaborating schools, that for good practice to be shared the school partnerships had to be two-way and mutually beneficial. Any hints at the possibility of 'elitism' on the part of Specialist Schools would be damaging to the development of supportive school partnerships. At least three of the collaborative school headteacher interviewees stressed the importance of having two-way, mutually supportive school partnerships: any attempts to impose a top-down partnership, on the part of a Specialist School, would be doomed to failure.[9]

These comments about school partnerships closely reflect findings that have been reported elsewhere in the literature on Specialist Schools. A report entitled *Growing Families of Schools* (Technology Colleges Trust, 1999) examined ten paired school partnerships and the following factors were identified as being very important for the success of these partnerships:

♦ schools must feel that they are equal partners and engaged in reciprocal relationships

♦ all schools that choose to join the partnership must contribute actively to its work

♦ it takes time to build the necessary levels of trust and confidence between participants.

The need for mutually supportive relations was especially relevant where partnerships crossed the secondary school-primary school sectoral divide. One collaborative school headteacher stressed that secondary [Specialist] schools should not look at the relationship as one of '*we can help you*', but rather they should also appreciate the things that they could learn themselves: it is no good if a secondary school approaches another school '*in a lordly fashion*'. Another of these heads stressed that looking at how *both* schools work is important: '*Primary schools are concerned with how students learn, rather than what they learn. Secondary schools can learn from primary schools*'. Another respondent stressed that Specialist Schools do not have a monopoly on good practice.

One of the Specialist School headteachers did appreciate the importance of this issue and had come across it in his attempts to put partnerships in place. He said that transferability (between schools) depends upon the efforts made by the Specialist School: '*There can be differences, but it's really up to us. We have to appreciate their differences. We must have a liaison meeting and listen to what they are saying... We must give them something usable, something valuable*'. Schools with different characteristics sharing good practice, he said, should be '*no real problem*'.

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[9] Interestingly, a similar finding has been reported in the national evaluation of Beacon Schools carried out by the NFER.

Specialist School staff themselves made some helpful comments about the best ways of planning for and supporting school partnerships:

♦ *'establish good relationships with other headteachers and share ideas and listen to their ideas'*

♦ carefully work out the logistics for a partnership (e.g. funding, staffing, resources)

♦ good interpersonal skills are important - treat partner schools sensitively

♦ meet with partner schools on a regular basis *'you need to break down barriers and build in strategies that build up trust'*

♦ appoint a liaison person or coordinator to act as a go-between and to coordinate projects to make them practically workable.

7.5 Transferability in Principle and in Practice

A further, direct question was asked about the ease with which the Specialist Schools network operating in West Sussex could be transferred to other LEAs. This stimulated a number of interesting replies.

Overall, responses to this question indicated that the LEA advisers and Specialist School staff felt that the network *could* indeed be transferred to other areas, but certain *conditions* and/or *support mechanisms* needed to be present for this to be done successfully. These conditional requirements can be identified under three headings. For a network to work there should be:

♦ good relations between the LEA and headteachers

♦ an appropriate level of support from the advisory service

♦ an appropriately-sized geographical area.

The respondents' views on why these requirements are important and how they can be met are now considered in turn.

Good relations between the LEA and headteachers.
The comments summarised in Section 7.2 above show that overall there was a strong belief that relations between West Sussex LEA and the Specialist School headteachers were very good. Respondents also made it clear that they felt that good relations are a necessary general requirement if a network of this type is to be put in place:

• *The one pre-requisite is a satisfactory relationship between the LEA and its secondary school heads.*

• *It wouldn't necessarily be as effective in another LEA. We have good relations with heads. You need good, open, communicative relationships.*

- *West Sussex has a history of partnerships and a good working relationship between the LEA and schools, and... the network might not be successful in other LEAs if this good partnership was not present.*

Several headteachers indicated that the level of co-operation between schools and the LEA was very strong and it was in this context that the network had been set up: *'West Sussex is not unique, but there is a strong AIS and strong support networks at LEA officer level, which is not universal to other LEAs'.* The network could only be transferred, said one respondent, to LEAs where there are *'good federal relationships'.*

One headteacher pointed out that headteachers in the county had *'always worked together'.* There is a Heads' Association that has been in operation for 30 years. All the headteachers, even prior to the existence of the Specialist Schools network, met once a term for business meetings and once a term for professional meetings, and continue to do so. Other counties might not have the benefit of this historical collaborative, co-operative context.

Linked to good school-LEA relations was the need for (or the potential for) a culture of sharing, an openness, a requirement for co-operation between schools rather than competition: *'West Sussex has a history of encouraging sharing. It has always been a part of their philosophy. Other LEAs might not have this philosophy, or it might not be as well established as it is in West Sussex'.*

An appropriate level of support from an advisory service.
Whilst the LEA should not impose itself, 'top down', on a network, it should be there to offer support services and to assist with setting up partnerships when required.

- *...the network could be transferred to other LEAs if there is some external body to help broker and manage the links between schools.*

- *West Sussex also has a large Advisory and Inspection Service, and they do a lot of work with schools. However, not all LEAs have the same relationship, or indeed have an AIS.*

One headteacher added a word of warning though, stressing that if the LEA alone was driving the agenda then the sharing of good practice would not work, *'It cannot be top down'.* He felt the Specialist Schools network could work in another LEA, but emphasised the importance of avoiding conflict between school based and LEA agendas. Another headteacher stated that, to develop effective school partnerships, *'the impetus has to come from the individual schools...the LEA needs to facilitate and encourage the partnerships and not take the lead...they have a very subtle role to play'.*

An appropriately-sized geographical area.

There was a perceived link between the size of an education authority and the support structures it would be able to provide. Unitary authorities, for example, might have difficulty providing the level of advisory support necessary (and consequently should consider working together or in partnership with a larger LEA).

- [The network] *could be easily transferred, but LEAs need to give time to it...*[and] *unitary authorities often don't have advisory teams.*

- *It might be difficult for a small LEA. Perhaps unitaries could come together?*

These three sets of conditions or requirements could be dealt with in a number of ways. Some of the LEA advisers who were interviewed had been closely involved in the setting up and running of the Specialist Schools network. These interviewees were happy to offer advice that could be given to other LEAs who might be considering setting up a similar network:

I'd start by asking a few questions, to tease out what is happening currently, etc. Where are they starting from? How do you take it forward from there? You need confidence to do things. It cannot be externally imposed by the LEA.

LEA involvement must be balanced between intervention and support. The network of schools and the LEA should be '*collaborative light touch, benefiting, sharing, reflecting, supporting and shaping*'. Any kind of forum, meeting or association should be open and '*must not give the image of being elitist*'. Good relationships must be maintained: '*Keep the heads on board!*' Bear in mind that '*It takes time*'.

As with the LEA Advisers, the Specialist School staff were not shy in terms of offering advice on how networks such as the one operating in West Sussex could be set up and maintained in other areas:

- split the schools by phase or specialism, so that they have something in common;

- be clear on objectives and why you want a network, make sure everyone is involved at headship level, establish protocols early on in the process and have evaluation and monitoring built in.

7.6 Conclusion

The predominant view of the LEA interviewees then was that the network was, in principle, transferable: '*I think that the principles could be transferred. The practice might be different*'; '*So, in theory, yes* [the network could be transferred]. *In practice you'd have to look very closely at local conditions and at the LEA.*' Care would be needed in any attempts to set up such a network in other LEAs, and an appropriate culture of working, along with suitable support mechanisms, would be required, but many aspects of the network were generic and could be applied in other contexts. It also needs to be remembered that the quality of the network will ultimately depend upon the quality of the personnel involved. The LEA, stressed one respondent:

> *...would need to work out what the aims are and how innovative they will allow schools to be and examine the organisation and ask if there are people that are sufficiently knowledgeable, skilled, and creative to allow this to happen...the network is as good as the people working in it.*

These requirements relating to the practicalities of setting up a network should not detract those involved from appreciating the benefits of having a network. There are many positive aspects to such arrangements provided that flexibility and adaptability are built in.

> *There's a lot of benefit in having a network. It opens people's eyes. It makes you outward looking. But also – there isn't a standard model for a successful network. But there are some ground rules – there must be flexibility. The network must be organic and evolving.*

8. CONCLUSIONS

There can be little doubt that school partnerships, usually in the context of an LEA or a national policy framework, are going to be an important part of the educational landscape over the next few years. In a recent document entitled *Education and Skills: investment for reform*, the current Government outlines future plans for the transformation of secondary education. While schools would continue to be accountable for their own performance, the document emphasises the *'need to break the culture of isolation that has held back the comprehensive system'* and encourages schools to learn from each other (DfES, 2001).

This statement on the future of secondary education is made in the context of a number of policy initiatives, including the Specialist Schools programme, that encourage the formation and development of school partnerships and networks. As noted in Chapter 4, Specialist Schools are required to submit a community plan as part of their development plans when bidding for Specialist status. This element of their work includes working with other schools and the wider community (for example, local businesses and adult learners).

The research reported on here was a valuable opportunity to collect evidence relating to the operation of these types of partnerships within an LEA-supported network of Specialist Schools. This final chapter presents some of the implications and issues arising from this evidence, as they relate to a variety of 'stakeholders', including schools, LEAs and national organisations.

8.1 Issues for Schools

For schools, partnership working clearly has many benefits. West Sussex Specialist Schools and their partner institutions reported numerous advantages arising from such working, including opportunities for mutual support, for sharing ideas and practice and for professional development. But, having said this, partnership working does require forethought and planning and, from the evidence collected during the course of this evaluation, there seem to be three main sets of issues, as identified in Chapter 6, that schools need to consider as they embark upon or develop partnership working:

♦ managing the extra workload and the additional time demands that involvement in networks and partnerships will necessitate

♦ achieving a balance between the interests (or the agenda) of the lead school and those of the partner institutions (including the LEA, which may well have a different, albeit overlapping, agenda)

♦ considerations of what types of partnerships to have (established or new partners, primary or secondary schools, higher education or business partners, and so on) and how best to conduct these partnerships (including the need for mutual, two-way, professional relationships).

On the last of these points, the manner in which Specialist Schools interact with other schools and the wider community, and the subsequent benefits of such collaboration, have been documented in Chapters 4 and 5. The salient point to make, however, is that much of the interaction appeared to be amongst Specialist Schools themselves and with their primary partner schools, rather than with new, non-Specialist partner institutions.

Relationships between Specialist Schools and their primary partner schools seemed to be strong and understandings of transition were enhanced as key stage 3 staff were exposed to key stage 2 ways of working and vice versa. However, links with business and community organisations, and the development of understanding of these types of relationships, were not as well developed.

8.2   Issues for Local Education Authorities

While, as has already been noted, there is no statutory guidance to determine a local authority's role in supporting Specialist School applications and the development of school partnerships, LEAs are at least indirectly encouraged to give some attention to these tasks as part of their management of local school systems.

Discussions carried out with TC Trust personnel as part of this evaluation indicated that, nationally, LEAs are at different stages in terms of how they approach working with Specialist Schools in their area.[10] A three-fold typology can be suggested:

♦ first, there are those LEAs that have adopted what might be described as a 'laissez faire' attitude in terms of how they work with Specialist Schools (predominantly those authorities with a history of grant-maintained schools)

♦ second, there are those LEAs that have formed a clear strategy with regard to Specialist School applications and their own role vis-à-vis existing Specialist Schools

♦ and, thirdly, there are those LEAs that are moving from the first category towards the second, recognising a need to develop some kind of strategy as regards the identification of, and support for, Specialist Schools in their area.

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[10] The Partnership Boards of LEAs in Excellence in Cities areas do have more specific responsibilities with respect to the Specialist Schools programme.

West Sussex LEA can clearly be located in the second category. It was evident from the viewpoints collected during the course of this evaluation that there was a general consensus that the Specialist Schools network had been working well and that it had brought about a number of benefits for those involved. West Sussex LEA had adopted a coherent and proactive approach to working with Specialist Schools and supporting partnership working and the sharing of information. They were described by one manager at the TCT as being *transparent in their working*, which had created an environment of open and honest discussion. LEA advisers are also currently in the process of receiving training from the TCT to further their understanding of the Specialist Schools programme.

There are a number of issues which West Sussex LEA needs to consider (and indeed which are in many respects already being addressed) in terms of development of the network:

♦ how can the (non-school) community dimension of the network be taken further? There appeared to be a need for encouraging schools, businesses and the local community to think further about how they could develop and benefit from working in partnership.

♦ how can the Advisory and Inspection Service build upon the successes of the main networking groups, such as Languages Link and Technology Link?

♦ how should the network be expanded as the number of Specialist Schools in the county increases (and how should the organisation of the network be modified)?

♦ how can the LEA continue to use the network to best serve the interests of all schools in the county?

These issues will be relevant to many LEAs. However, in terms of considering the issues for LEAs in general, it is important to be aware of the context in which the West Sussex strategy had arisen. As discussed in Chapter 7, there are particular historical characteristics within the county that have supported the development of the Specialist Schools network; namely, a history of collaboration, good working relations between schools and the authority and confidence in the LEA. Furthermore, another factor (not particularly identified by the interviewees) is the innovation of the Specialist Schools themselves in being at the forefront of partnership working with fellow Specialist Schools through the language and technology links. These groups, to a large extent, formed the embryonic basis of the network.

Other LEAs, particularly those that have had a 'laissez faire' attitude with respect to this area of working, may not have a history of collaboration and in many areas an embryonic set of school partnerships, upon which a Specialist Schools network could be built, may not exist. Thus the main issues related to school partnerships and networks for LEAs in general, as touched upon in Chapter 7 on transferability, could be summarised as follows:

◆ if there is no network, how can one be set up and facilitated by the LEA in a way that will involve and carry the support of all parties?

◆ how should the selection of 'lead' schools (including applications for Specialist School status) be planned and organised?

◆ how can an LEA best achieve a balance between its own agenda and the requirements of individual schools (including the balance between intervention and support)?

◆ what form should the actual mechanisms of support for school partnerships take and precisely what roles should advisers play?

◆ should small LEAs consider working with other authorities in order to maximise the benefits arising from school partnerships and networks?

8.3 Issues at a National Level

Although this was a 'local' case study, some of the individuals involved in the evaluation, especially the LEA advisers, talked about the inter-relationship between national and local policies. Relevant issues for national organisations such as the Department for Education and Skills and the Technology Colleges Trust, include the following:

◆ what guidance should be given to LEAs where school networks are being set up and developed (beyond that which is already provided)?

◆ what, if any, is the overlap between the work of DfES/TCT regional advisers and LEA advisers; how can any overlapping of activity or duplication of roles be dealt with?

◆ how can school-non-school partnerships, the wider community element of the Specialist Schools programme, be encouraged? There would appear to be the potential for a greater role to be played by the TCT and LEAs in supporting these wider networks.

◆ what role could national organisations play in terms of planning and coordinating networks of schools?

In a context where school partnership working, within a range of different initiatives, is likely to expand considerably, this last question is a particularly important one. Furthermore, it should be noted that additional support and encouragement to work with more and more partners need not necessarily be through one network such as the Specialist School network, but through a myriad of networks such as, for example, networked Learning Communities. West Sussex LEA was in this situation in the sense that, in addition to the Specialist Schools network, a number of other networks or groupings were in operation, including Beacon Schools, Advanced Skills Teachers, Training Schools, Networked Learning Communities and post-16 partnerships.

It may well be that a multi-layered approach to partnership working such as this, but with clarity of goals, is the best means by which to fully support schools in their various diverse requirements, but issues of planning and coordination then become paramount. One very strong message that came from the senior staff interviewed as part of this evaluation, individuals who had been closely involved in setting up and running the school network, was the view that it is not wise to rush into setting up school networks and partnership arrangements because of their assumed desirability. Very careful forethought and planning are required at a number of levels if these arrangements are to have maximum benefits for the institutions and individuals involved.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON SCHOOLS[11]

School Name	School Type	School Specialism	Single or mixed	Total number of pupils	11-16 or 11-18	% of pupils gaining 5 or more GCSEs grade A*-C	% of pupils gaining 5 or more GCSEs grade A*-G	% of pupils with FSM	% of pupils with EAL
Angmering School	Comprehensive (Community)	Sports College	Mixed	1301	11-18	54	89	9	0
Bishop Luffa CE School	Comprehensive (Voluntary Aided)	Technology College	Mixed	1327	11-18	84	99	2	0
Davison CE High School	Comprehensive (Voluntary Controlled)	Technology College	Girls	888	12-16	73	95	6	2
Hazelwick School	Comprehensive (Community)	Technology College	Mixed	1804	12-18	60	92	5	15
Imberhorne School	Comprehensive (Community)	Language College	Mixed	1627	11-18	69	97	2	1
Millais School	Comprehensive (Community)	Language College	Girls	1361	11-16	78	97	2	2
Steyning Grammar	Comprehensive (Voluntary Controlled)	Technology College	Mixed	1852	11-18	54	94	5	1
The Weald	Comprehensive (Community)	Technology College	Mixed	1385	11-18	63	96	5	1

Source: DFES Schools' Census Form 7 Data 2001 (FSM)
DFES Schools' Census Form 7 Data 1999 (EAL)
http://www.dfes.gov.uk/performancetables/schools_01.shtml

Glossary of school types

Comprehensive – takes all pupils, regardless of their ability, aptitude, or whether they have been selected for a place at a selective school.

Community schools, maintained by the local education authority (LEA). The LEA is the admissions authority – it has main responsibility for deciding arrangements for admitting pupils.

Voluntary aided school, maintained by the LEA, with a foundation (generally religious) which appoints most of the governing body. The governing body is the admissions authority.

Voluntary controlled schools, maintained by the LEA, with a foundation (generally religious) which appoints some – but not most – of the governing body. The LEA is the admissions authority.

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[11] This information refers to those schools visited. In addition to these Specialist Schools, at the time the research was carried out, there were a further seven West Sussex schools that were part of the Technology Colleges Trust Affiliation Network. These were: Boundstone Community College, Chichester High School for Boys, Durrington High School, Ifield Community College, Littlehampton Community College, Oathall Community College and Sackville Community College.

APPENDIX B: SCHEDULES

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SPECIALIST SCHOOLS PARTNERSHIPS:
CASE STUDY IN WEST SUSSEX

Interview Schedule for LEA Specialist School Team

Guidance notes for researchers

This interview schedule is designed for use with Specialist School Advisers working for West Sussex LEA. The purpose of this interview is to explore how the Specialist School network in West Sussex operates, and how this network contributes to the sharing of good practice between schools and promotes educational opportunities for the wider community. The advisers will have particular areas of responsibility (e.g. the EBP, management, Design and Technology, ICT, modern foreign languages, sport) and the questions may need to take account of these responsibilities.

Background and The LEA

1. What is your current role within West Sussex LEA? What responsibilities do you have (especially in relation to Specialist Schools)?

2. What are the general characteristics of secondary schools in this LEA area and of the LEA in general (*prompt*: e.g. climate of competition?)

3. To what extent do (or did) these conditions or characteristics help or hinder the operation of a Specialist Schools network in West Sussex?

4. How was the Specialist Schools network set up in West Sussex? Were you involved in this? Whose idea was it?

5. What do you see as the LEA role in selecting or supporting Specialist Schools applications?

6. How does the Specialist Schools network contribute to the achievement of the aims set out in the Education Development Plan?

7. Do you have any other educational networks or partnerships in West Sussex LEA? (If yes, how do these compare with the Specialist Schools network?).

The Specialist Schools Network

8. What exactly is the LEA role with regard to the Specialist School network? How does the authority support this network and encourage collaboration? Would such a network work without LEA involvement?

9. How exactly do Specialist Schools assist collaborating schools? Can you give examples of this (e.g. from your subject area)?

10. What do you hope that the network will achieve? How is having a network/ school partnerships an improvement on other types of school improvement policies or initiatives?

11. In what ways, if at all, do you think this network is 'innovative'?

12. Does the LEA monitor the work and outcomes of Specialist Schools? If so, how?

13. What do you see as the successful outcomes of the Specialist Schools network?

14. Is the network mainly between Specialist Schools themselves or between Specialist Schools and (non-Specialist) collaborating schools?

15. Do the LEA advisers have contact with collaborating schools? What forms does this contact/support with collaborating schools take?

16. Have you had any contact (a) with the Technology Colleges Trust; (b) with the DfES Specialist Schools team? (If yes, how have these organisations contributed to supporting your Specialist Schools network/partnerships?)

Network/Partnership Aims and Outcomes

17. How exactly does the network help Specialist Schools to share their expertise?

18. How would you say students have benefited from this network/these partnerships? What new learning experiences have they had as a result of these activities?

19. How does the network contribute to raising standards of pupil performance? Can you give any specific examples of how the network has helped to raise standards?

2

20. How does the network help Specialist Schools to assist with lifelong learning in the wider community? Can you give any specific examples?

21. Have the partnerships/networks contributed to the professional development of teachers? How?

The Future: Successes and Challenges

22. What do you think have been the main successes, to date, of the Specialist Schools network? What are the general advantages, for schools and for LEAs, of networking?

23. What are the main issues and challenges you have faced as the Specialist Schools network has been developed? What are the disadvantages of a networking approach, for schools and for LEAs?

24. To what extent do you think that schools with different characteristics can successfully share good practice?

25. How easily could the Specialist Schools network you have operated here in West Sussex be transferred to other LEAs? What problems would there be with this?

26. What, in your experience, are the best ways to plan for and support the development of effective school partnerships?

27. If another LEA telephoned you tomorrow and said 'we are planning to set up a network of Specialist Schools', what advice would you give to them?

28. We are planning as part of this evaluation to look at partnership activities between Specialist and collaborating schools. Are there any particular collaborative projects or school partnerships (in your area of interest) that you think we should include? Why are these of interest?

3

SPECIALIST SCHOOLS PARTNERSHIPS:
CASE STUDY IN WEST SUSSEX

Interview Schedule for Specialist School Headteachers

Background

1. Can you briefly describe the characteristics of your school, in terms of: catchment area (e.g. urban, mixed, rural), pupil intake, percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals, age range.

2. Why did you choose your particular 'specialism'?

Application process:

3. What role did the LEA play in supporting your application for Specialist School status?

4. Did you receive any support from other Specialist Schools during the application process?

5. What support, if any, do you now give to aspiring Specialist Schools?

Specialist Schools network

6. What is the aim of the Specialist Schools network?

7. Who is involved?

8. How does it operate?

   Prompt: *How often does it meet?*

9. What is the role of the LEA in the Specialist Schools network?

Community links

10. How many non-specialist schools are you partnered with?
    (Primary and secondary)

    Prompt: What is the nature of these links? *(Ask for examples)*

11. Are any of these schools causing concern?

    Prompt: How does the Specialist Schools network help their situation?

12. Are you linking with any FE or HE institutions? *(Ask which institutions)*

    Prompt: What is the nature of these links? *(Ask for examples)*

13. Do you have links with any other groups in the wider community?
    (e.g. business, parents, other community groups)

    Prompt: What is the nature of these links? *(Ask for examples)*

14. Does the Specialist Schools network help schools assist with lifelong learning in the wider community? Can you give any specific examples?

15. What is the role of the LEA, if any, in relation to your:

    ➤   school partnerships? (e.g. a brokering role in linking schools)

    ➤   links with the wider community?

Benefits

16. How has your school benefited from being part of a Specialist Schools network?

17. How have partner schools benefited from linking with your school?

    Prompt: Curriculum enrichment
                 Staff development
                 Use of ICT
                 Innovative teaching and learning

18. What has your school gained from these partnerships?

2

19. Have students benefited from these partnerships? Have they contributed to raising standards of pupil performance? If so, how? *(Ask for examples)*

Challenges

20. Has your school experienced any challenges in being part of the Specialist Schools network?

21. Has your school experienced any challenges with wider networks (i.e. school partnerships or links with the wider community)?

22. Have these challenges been resolved? If so, how?

23. To what extent do you think that schools with different characteristics can successfully share good practice?

Transferability

24. How easily could the Specialist Schools network you have operated here in West Sussex be transferred to other LEAs? What problems would there be with this?

25. If another LEA or headteacher telephoned you tomorrow and said 'we are planning to set up a network of Specialist Schools', what advice would you give to them?

26. What, in your experience, are the best ways to plan for and support the development of effective school partnerships?

27. We are planning as part of this evaluation to look at partnership activities between Specialist and collaborating schools. Are there any particular collaborative projects or school partnerships that you think we should include? Why are these of interest?

3

**SPECIALIST SCHOOLS PARTNERSHIPS:
CASE STUDY IN WEST SUSSEX**

**Interview Schedule for Specialist School Headteachers
(telephone)**

Background

1. Can you briefly describe the characteristics of your school, in terms of: catchment area (e.g. urban, mixed, rural), pupil intake, percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals, age range.

2. Why did you choose your particular 'specialism'?

Application process:

3. What role has the LEA played in supporting your application for Specialist School status?

4. Have you received any support from other Specialist Schools during the application process?

Specialist Schools network

5. Have you had any contact with the Specialist Schools network?

6. What is the nature of this contact (ask for examples)?

7. What do you see as the aim of the Specialist Schools network?

8. Who is involved?

9. How does it operate?

    Prompt: How often does it meet?

10. What is the role of the LEA in the Specialist Schools network?

Community links

11. How many non-specialist schools will you be partnered with?
(Primary and secondary)

    Prompt: How do you see these partnerships working?

12. Do you plan to link with any FE or HE institutions? (Ask which institutions)

    Prompt: How do you see these partnerships working?

13. Do you plan to have links with any other groups in the wider community?
(e.g. business, parents, other community groups)

    Prompt: How do you see these partnerships working?

14. Do you think the Specialist Schools network can help schools assist with lifelong learning in the wider community? If so, how?

15. What is the role of the LEA, if any, in relation to your:

➤ school partnerships? (e.g. a brokering role in linking schools)

➤ links with the wider community?

Benefits

16. How has your school benefited from being part of a Specialist Schools network? If so, how?

17. Do you think you will continue to benefit from being part of this network?

Transferability

18. To what extend do you think that schools with different characteristics can successfully share good practice?

2

19. How easily could the Specialist Schools network you have operated here in West Sussex be transferred to other LEAs? What problems would there be with this?

20. If another LEA or headteacher telephoned you tomorrow and said 'we are planning to set up a network of Specialist Schools', what advice would you give to them?

21. What, in your experience, are the best ways to plan for and support the development of effective school partnerships?

3

nfer SPECIALIST SCHOOLS PARTNERSHIPS:
CASE STUDY IN WEST SUSSEX

Interview Schedule for Specialist School Teachers/Coordinators

Background

1. Do you know why your school chose its particular 'specialism'?

Specialist Schools network

2. Are you aware of the Specialist Schools network? What is the aim of the Specialist Schools network?

3. Who is involved?

4. How does it operate?

   Prompt: how often does it meet?

5. What form does your contact with the Specialist Schools network take? (e.g. language link, ICT)

6. How are discussions at the network level disseminated to your school?

   Prompt: What form?
   Who to?
   What is the impact on your department?

7. How does the Specialist Schools network impact upon teaching and learning? *(Ask for examples from the classroom)*

Community links

8. How many non-specialist schools are you partnered with? (Primary and secondary)

   Prompt: what is the nature of these links?

9. Are any of these schools causing concern?

   Prompt: how does the Specialist Schools network help their situation?

10. Are you linking with any FE or HE institutions? *(Ask which institutions)*

    Prompt: what is the nature of these links? *(Ask for examples)*

11. Do you have links with specific groups in the wider community?
    (e.g. business, parents, other community groups)

    Prompt: what is the nature of these links? *(Ask for examples)*

12. Does the Specialist Schools network help schools assist with lifelong learning in the wider community? Can you give any specific examples?

Benefits

13. How has your school benefited from being part of a Specialist Schools network?

14. How have partner schools benefited from linking with your school?

    Prompt: Curriculum enrichment
    Staff development
    Use of ICT
    Innovative teaching and learning

15. What has your school gained from these partnerships?

16. Has being partnered with other schools benefited your professional development?

17. Have students benefited from these partnerships? Have they contributed to raising standards of pupil performance? If so, how? *(Ask for examples)*

Challenges

18. Has your school experienced any challenges in being part of the Specialist Schools network?

2

19. Has your school experienced any challenges with wider networks (i.e. school partnerships or links with the wider community)?

20. Have these challenges been resolved? If so, how?

21. To what extent do you think that schools with different characteristics can successfully share good practice?

22. We are planning as part of this evaluation to look at partnership activities between Specialist and collaborating schools. Are there any particular collaborative projects or school partnerships that you think we should include? Why are these of interest?

3

nfer SPECIALIST SCHOOLS PARTNERSHIPS:
CASE STUDY IN WEST SUSSEX

Interview Schedule for Student Discussion Group (Year 10)

Questions to explore with students

This list gives a suggested common core of questions for all students, however, there may well be additional questions or issues that you may want to explore at a local level in relation to individual schools and individual projects.

Overall views of their school

1. Do they think it is a good school? What do they base their opinions on? (exam results, teachers, facilities etc.)

2. We are looking at the work of Specialist Schools. Your school is a Specialist School - can you please tell me what this means/what it involves?

3. What do you think about your school's specialism (technology/arts/languages/ sports)? How (if at all) is your school's specialism used in other subjects to help your learning?

Specialist School Activities/School Partnerships

4. Are there any activities which you are involved in that involve other Specialist Schools or other primary/secondary schools?

   Prompt: Do you visit other schools or do students from other schools visit your school? If yes, what sorts of activities take place?

5. Does working with students from other schools help your learning?

   Prompt: If yes, how?

6. Are these activities continued/followed up in your classroom (or is the activity a one-off event)?

7. Is your school used by others for community activities or evening classes (e.g. adults from your area)?

8. Are you involved in any activities that involve the community (e.g. charity work, visits to old people's homes)?

Finally

9. Would you like to do more activities with students from other schools?

   Prompt: If yes, why do you think this is a good thing?

10. If they had a chance, is there anything they would change about their school which would help them to improve their learning?

nfer SPECIALIST SCHOOLS PARTNERSHIPS:
CASE STUDY IN WEST SUSSEX

Interview Schedule for Collaborative School Headteachers

Background

1. Can you briefly describe the characteristics of your school, in terms of: catchment area (e.g. urban, mixed, rural), pupil intake, percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals, age range.

2. Do you have any aspirations to become a Specialist School?

   Prompt: If yes, has/would being partnered with a Specialist School helped/ help with this process?

Specialist School Partnerships

3. Which Specialist School(s) do you work with/ are you partnered with?

4. What is the nature of this/these partnership(s)?
   (e.g. training, advisory, meetings, resources)

5. What part, if any, did the LEA play in fostering, encouraging and supporting this partnership?

Benefits

6. How has your school benefited from linking with a Specialist School?

   Prompt: Curriculum enrichment
   Staff development
   Use of ICT
   Innovative teaching and learning

7. Do you think the Specialist School has benefited from a partnership with your school?

   Prompt: In what ways?

8. What contributions have you been able to make to the partnership?

9. Have students benefited from this partnership? Has this contributed to raising standards of pupil performance? If so, how? (Ask for examples)

Challenges

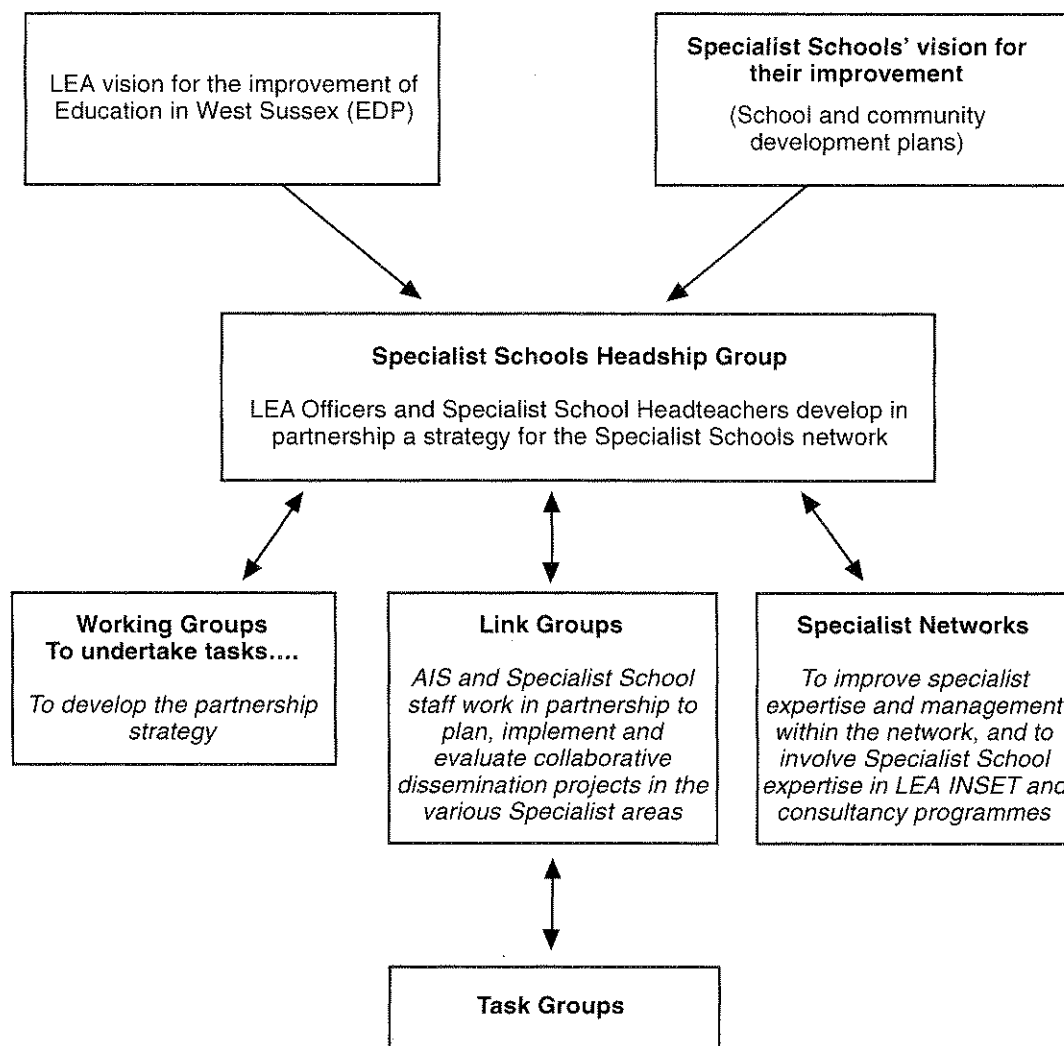**10.** Has your school experienced any challenges in being partnered with a Specialist School?

11. Have these challenges been resolved? If so, how?

12. To what extent do you think that schools with different characteristics can successfully share good practice?

Transferability

13. What, in your experience, are the best ways to plan for and support the development of effective school partnerships?

APPENDIX C: WEST SUSSEX SPECIALIST SCHOOLS STRATEGY

LEA vision for the improvement of Education in West Sussex (EDP)	**Specialist Schools' vision for their improvement** (School and community development plans)

Specialist Schools Headship Group

LEA Officers and Specialist School Headteachers develop in partnership a strategy for the Specialist Schools network

Working Groups **To undertake tasks....** *To develop the partnership strategy*	**Link Groups** *AIS and Specialist School staff work in partnership to plan, implement and evaluate collaborative dissemination projects in the various Specialist areas*	**Specialist Networks** *To improve specialist expertise and management within the network, and to involve Specialist School expertise in LEA INSET and consultancy programmes*

Task Groups

Source: West Sussex County Council 2002. Advisory and Inspection Service, Strategy for the Development of Specialist Schools. Appendix 4

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