

The Education and Training Inspectorate

A Third Evaluation Report

on

The Specialist Schools' Programme

2009-2010

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1. BACKGROUND

1.1 The Department of Education (the Department) set up the specialist schools' pilot project to commence from September 2006 with the four aims that the schools would:

- identify and build on their particular curricular strengths;
- by sharing good practice, secure whole school development;
- contribute to the development of good leadership in schools; and
- take forward a community dimension, such as with other schools, Further Education (FE) colleges, business and industry and the wider community.

1.2 The stated core objectives of the project were to:

- provide opportunities for pupils to benefit from wider learning experiences and to ensure maximum impact of the available expertise and resources, by promoting co-operation and collaboration among schools and between schools and other providers of education and training for 14-19 year-olds;
- provide parents with greater choice among a range of schools, which have differing areas of focus;
- raise standards and realise performance improvement for all young people; and
- develop links between schools, their local communities and the economy to ensure that all young people are given a strong foundation for lifelong learning and work.

1.3 Furthermore, the Department intended that school improvement through self-evaluation and the application of aspects of an existing curricular strength as a whole school development process would be at the heart of the specialist school concept. The Department stated that it was important that the range of specialisms selected, including vocational and applied areas, would enable schools to be innovative and to develop strengths that are relevant to the emergent needs of Northern Ireland as well as the needs of the pupils in the local area served by the school¹.

1.4 Just over two and half years later, on 22 April 2009, the Minister for Education announced that the designation for the fourth cohort of Specialist Schools, which brought the total number of specialist schools to 44 (see Annex 1 for list of the schools in all four cohorts) would be curtailed to two years and the designation for the third cohort would be reduced from four to three years. Furthermore, cohort 1 would have the opportunity to apply for an extension of their designation for a fifth year, "*subject to the school demonstrating that there has been improvement since their designation began in September 2006*". The extension of all 12 cohort 1 schools for a fifth year took place in March 2010. The net result is that all 44 specialist schools will reach the end of their designation period in August 2011.

¹ Full details are available on the Department's website at <http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/80-curriculum-and-assessment/108-specialist-schools.htm>

1.5 The Minister indicated her intention to *'draw on the evidence and experiences from the existing specialist schools to develop a more inclusive model with a sharper focus on: raising standards; tackling the barriers to learning that too many of our young people face; sharing and learning from one another and ensuring that the voice of pupils is sought and listened to in schools'*.

1.6 This report is the third and final summary report about specialist schools produced by the Education and Training Inspectorate (the Inspectorate).² It has been prepared to contribute to the policy deliberation about the more inclusive model that might follow. It draws, mainly, on the evaluations of the Cohort 1 schools which were conducted in December 2009 and January 2010, within six months of the end of their initial four year period of designation. While the full achievement of cohort 1 schools might be judged more fully after the completion of the full initial four years, the evidence here, when complemented with analysis of the trends emerging from the audit and inspection of the other three cohorts, is sufficiently clear and indicative to inform policy.

1.7 This report also reflects the evidence generated by:

- the forty-four baseline inspections conducted (one in each school);
- the audit of the annual reports produced by each school for the Department (71 in total over three years);
- frequent monitoring visits by district and specialist inspectors, and
- 17 formal follow-up inspections conducted where aspects of progress were deemed to be at some degree of risk.

Except where stated otherwise, the findings in this report, while drawing initially on the evidence from the Cohort 1 schools, are reflected generally in the other three cohorts.

1.8 The Inspectorate contributed significantly to a programme of support for specialist school coordinators provided during 2009 by the Regional Training Unit for the purpose of building the capacity in the specialist schools for effective self-evaluation; they also attended and observed meetings and conferences organised by the specialist schools themselves.

² Previous reports were published in April 2008 http://www.etini.gov.uk/specialist_schools_initiative.doc.pdf.pdf and July 2009 http://www.etini.gov.uk/final_version_of_second_evaluation_report_on_the_specialist_schools_programme.pdf

2. SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

STRENGTHS AND AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

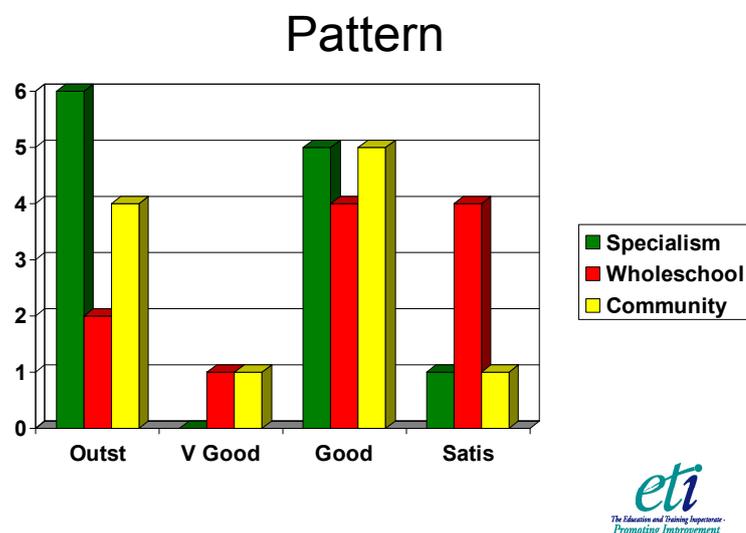


Figure 1: levels of performance of the 12 Cohort 1 specialist schools (eleven in the Community Plan) inspected in December 2009 and January 2010

2.1 The overall pattern of performance in the twelve Cohort 1 specialist schools inspected in December 2009 and January 2010 across the three plans: for the specialism, for whole school improvement and for the community is shown in Figure 1. In the following section, the strengths and areas for improvement identified in each of the three plans, and in the leadership, management and self-evaluation are considered in turn.

THE SPECIALISMS

2.2 Performance in the specialism is mostly good to outstanding.

2.3 Strengths in the specialisms:

- attainment in the specialisms continues to be a strength with achievement in the specialism in most schools comparing favourably with that of non-specialist schools;
- standards achieved in the specialism are the strongest feature of the three specialist school plans; half of the cohort 1 schools were evaluated as outstanding by the Inspectorate and five evaluated as good;
- there is clear evidence that the pupils in specialist schools benefit from wider learning experiences as a result of improvements in the curriculum offered and by their increased uptake of the specialist subjects. All of the schools have introduced new courses in the specialisms, including a range of vocational and applied programmes in, for example, information and communication technology (ICT), science and modern languages. Thirty-six specialist examination courses

at key stage (KS) 4 are offered in Cohort 1 schools and five of which are new vocational and applied examinations which have been introduced. At post-16 level in Cohort 1, 26 specialist qualifications, including ten new vocational and applied courses are now offered. (see Annex 2 for courses supported in all cohorts);

- there is an upward trend in the numbers taking the specialist subjects in most of the cohort 1 specialist schools. In nine of the 12 schools, the average uptake of the specialist subjects is higher than 75% of the year groups in KS4. Uptake is over 100% in four of the schools – where students were taking more than one examination course in the specialism. At post-16 level, in eight of the eleven Cohort 1 schools³ the average uptake is higher than 30% with the average uptake in four of the schools being greater than 50%;
- while the general trend in uptake of the specialism in most schools is good or better, the Inspectorate identified uptake in the specialism as a matter of concern in three of the schools, for example in the specialism in one school it was as low as 13% of the pupil cohort at KS4 and in two other schools which offered four or five subjects experienced uneven uptake across the range over the first four years of the designation. In these instances, strong growth and attainment in some of the specialisms, where there is too wide a range of subjects on offer within the specialism, detracted from both the uptake and standards attained elsewhere in the curriculum. In the five schools offering as many as four or five specialist subjects there is a need to raise standards more consistently across the whole specialism; and
- the pupils' engagement, motivation and learning have increased as a result of the specialist 'enrichment' activities such as educational visits and access to professionals working in the specialist field and resource improvements including the acquisition of ICT hardware and software and the creation of specialist classrooms which have been funded through the specialist schools programme.

2.4 Areas for improvement in the specialisms:

- while the provision of wider learning opportunities is commendable, at least three schools reported that the new specialist courses would be unsustainable without additional funding for staffing or due to small enrolments; and
- while all of the schools report some modest benefits for other post-primary schools within their Area Learning Communities (ALC) and/or beyond, there is limited evidence that specialist school status has accelerated the development of a collaborative approach, within the Entitlement Framework.

WHOLE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

2.5 Whole school improvement is good or better in the majority of the schools.

2.6 Strengths in whole school improvement:

- whole school improvement varies, with four Cohort 1 schools evaluated as outstanding or very good, four as good and four as satisfactory;

³ Only 11 of the specialist schools are 11-18, offering courses at post-16 level.

- all schools reported benefits to the ethos of the school and improvements in image, reputation, within the local community, and in the motivation and self-esteem of pupils;
- in almost all of the schools, standards achieved in public examinations, as indicated by five GCSE passes at grade A*-C, including English and mathematics have improved over the period of the specialism; when compared with similar non-specialist schools, attainment at KS4 is better in three-quarters of cohort 1 specialist schools;
- outcomes at post-16 are less favourable in over one-third of specialist schools, whose attainments do not compare favourably with those of non-specialist schools. It could be expected that changes in performance in post-16 courses would take longer to become apparent;
- in most schools, there was evidence of the effective integration of the specialist school status within school development planning;
- there is evidence in almost all schools that teaching and learning approaches in the specialist subjects are now being shared across the school to raise performance across all the learning areas, including in the use of ICT to support independent learning; and
- in most schools, the specialism has resulted in capacity building across the school, with teachers improving their practice through reflection and self-improvement.

2.7 Areas for improvement in whole school improvement:

- in one half of cohort 1 schools, the inspectorate recommended that standards need to be raised further across the school as a whole. Improved attainment, particularly at post-16 needs to be effected through more accurate target setting; and
- the potential of the specialism to raise standards, by developing teaching approaches, which include the use of ICT, to promote higher-order thinking skills, is not well understood across the schools as a whole.

THE COMMUNITY PLAN

2.8 Performance in the community plan ranges from good to outstanding in almost all schools.

2.9 Strengths in the community plan:

- progress has been made in the community plans and the link with improving pupil outcomes is more clearly understood than was the case at the start of the project;
- the community plan was evaluated as outstanding or very good in five schools and good in five;

- nearly all of the schools reported benefits for feeder primary schools; these included the provision of resources and teaching expertise. In the best practice, work with the primary schools resulted in better learning; a few schools provided some quantitative evidence of improved transitions and a positive impact on attainment at KS3;
- the evaluation of the community aspect of the programme has improved, with three-quarters of schools now evaluating this dimension. Where measurable outcomes were agreed with partners a sharper and more productive relationship has resulted; and
- almost all schools have developed some links with local industry and businesses.

2.10 Area for improvement in the community plan:

- schools need to strengthen their developing links with the FE colleges and work-based learning providers to broaden further the specialist schools' pupils' experiences of the world of work.

LEADERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND SELF-EVALUATION

2.11 Leadership, management and self-evaluation have developed well in the specialist schools.

2.12 Strengths in leadership, management and self-evaluation:

- one of the main outcomes of the specialist schools pilot project has been the development of the capacity for leadership and of self-evaluation. Specialist schools are subject to close scrutiny and accountability to the Department and the Inspectorate;
- through a continuing process of reporting their progress annually and engaging in professional discourse, leadership and management have become more transparent. This transparency is evident both externally, and, more significantly, internally. As a better understanding of the management of change, which is necessary for school improvement, has evolved, the leadership and management of specialist school status has spread from the leadership team, the nominated specialist school co-ordinator and the head of the specialist departments (HoDs) immediately concerned, to the heads of other subjects and to those responsible (for example) for staff development and for the coordination of literacy, numeracy and ICT;
- one indicator of capacity building has been the extent to which HoDs and subject leaders in a specialist school have been trained in the analysis and use of assessment data, in the setting of targets which are both aspirational and realistic, and in making links between learning outcomes and teaching approaches;

- schools have improved in their ability to:
 - evaluate outcomes, as opposed to describing enabling actions;
 - identify indicators to measure improvement, and where necessary;
 - identify clear action to address problematic aspects; and
 - integrate specialist school plans within school development planning;
- over time, Cohort 1 schools in particular, have improved considerably in their ability to set targets which reflect more closely the pupils' predicted levels of performance; take greater account of attainment by the pupils on transfer; of benchmarked examination performance data; of national datasets available for comparative analysis and to link these more explicitly into the school's overall improvement agenda. Many of the targets originally set at the start of the project were unrealistic; and
- one of the Department's original intentions was that Specialist School status would help to move schools from an environment characterised by competition to one of co-operation and collaboration. The specialist schools have created a working network (which they refer to as a 'specialist schools movement') to share approaches and expertise with each other.

2.13 Areas for improvement in the leadership, management and self-evaluation:

- the baseline evaluations of the schools in cohorts 2, 3 and 4 show that half of the schools could learn from the experiences of Cohort 1 schools in reviewing attainment targets and making better use of relevant qualitative, performance and benchmarking data; and
- the need remains for the specialist schools generally to increase the potential for all pupils in the area learning community to benefit from wider learning experiences and to ensure maximum impact of the available expertise and resources, by promoting co-operation and collaboration among schools and between schools and other providers of education and training for 14-19 year-olds.

3. CONCLUSION

THE EXTENT TO WHICH INTENTIONS WERE ACHIEVED AND VALUE FOR MONEY DEMONSTRATED

3.1 When evaluated against the eight original aims and core objectives and the intentions set by the Department for the project (which overlap with each other to a certain degree) and as stated in paragraphs 1.1 to 1.3, the value of the project to the schools themselves and to the education service can be summarised as shown below. These conclusions, while based mainly on the Cohort 1 schools, are reflected largely, unless stated otherwise, in all of specialist schools.

3.2 Almost all specialist schools have identified and built upon their particular curricular strengths:

- by sharing good practice across the community of 44 specialist schools, better understanding and improved skills in change management have, to varying degrees, accelerated improvement;

- as a result of curriculum innovation, the specialist schools have enabled their pupils to benefit from a widening choice of learning experiences within their own schools;
- a smaller proportion of the most effective specialist schools have the potential to contribute significantly to the development of school leadership for change across the school system as a whole;
- standards have been raised and performance improved by pupils in the specialist subjects and across the curriculum as a whole in three-quarters of the specialist schools; and
- community links have been strengthened, predominantly with the contributory primary schools and with the wider parental community.

3.3 However, the establishment of specialist schools has not provided parents with any greater choice among a range of schools, with differing areas of focus. It is not clear how the project design could have achieved this particular objective.

3.4 Specialist schools generally have yet to make a significant contribution to the shared provision of courses within the entitlement framework in the local area learning communities.

3.5 The evidence from the pilot suggests that there are a number of learning points which should be taken into account in the creation by the Department of a more inclusive model:

- the evidence indicates that it can take a period of at least four years of concerted effort to bring about significant whole-school improvement;
- the commitment to a change improvement initiative needs to be effected through a framework of whole school planning and staff development and a shared understanding by all, both within the school and in partner schools and organisations from the very outset;
- middle management need to have developed their expertise in the mechanisms of school improvement and the analysis of assessment data in order to set aspirational, yet realistic targets;
- the teachers need to have a shared understanding of pedagogic approaches, including the use of ICT, which most effectively develop higher-order thinking skills for the pupils;
- capacity-building for change could be accelerated considerably between educators from the most effective specialist schools, both individually and collectively, which have developed the knowledge, skills and understanding to drive system-wide improvement;
- effecting broader curricular choice for pupils requires that the school plan is aligned closely to the area learning community plan, with the aim of strengthening more effective cooperative links with other post-primary schools and with the FE and work-based learning sectors;

- a different design approach than that adopted originally could give pupils greater choice from a variety of programmes offered across a range of schools which have different areas of focus: for this to happen, thought needs to be given to the distribution of specialisms within an area learning community and the needs of the local economy;
- in any new model, more explicit alignment is needed between the goals for specialist schools and those which exist for Every School a Good School, for Extended Schools, for the STEM agenda, for careers education and for the Entitlement Framework; and
- the financial benefit to the schools arising from their specialist school status, coupled with the degree of external accountability to the Department and the Inspectorate, has levered both increased transparency for standards and the internal ownership of change necessary for a drive for whole school improvement to be successful in the timescale.

3.6 The Department, together with the specialist schools who have benefited from considerable financial investment, has a responsibility to ensure that the potential gains for the wider educational system, created through this project, are not lost. By aligning the development of any new model to the role of the specialist school within its area learning community and in the context of the Entitlement Framework, the value for money could be further enhanced and more equitable benefits for all could potentially be derived.

NAMES OF SPECIALIST SCHOOLS AND THEIR SPECIALISMS

Cohort 1 Specialist Schools, designated from September 2006

Ashfield Girls High School, Belfast	ICT
Belfast Model School for Girls	ICT
Glengormley High School	ICT
Ballyclare High School	ICT
St Cecilia's College, Derry	Performing Arts
St Louise's Comprehensive College, Belfast	Performing Arts
Limavady High School	Performing Arts
St Mary's College, Derry	Science
Lumen Christi College, Derry	Science
St Malachy's College, Belfast	Music
Shimna Integrated College, Newcastle	Languages
St John's High School, Dromore	Business & Enterprise

Cohort 2 Specialist Schools, designated from September 2007

Hazelwood Integrated College, Newtownabbey	Arts
Portora Royal School, Enniskillen	Arts
Carrickfergus College	Business & Enterprise
St Patrick's and St Brigid's High School, Claudy	Business & Enterprise
Grosvenor Grammar School, Belfast	Languages
Belfast High School, Newtownabbey	Languages
St Columb's College, Derry	Mathematics & Computing
Loreto College, Coleraine	Science
St Patrick's Comprehensive College, Maghera	Science
St Mary's Grammar School, Magherafelt	Science
St Colman's College, Newry	Science
Dromore High School	Science
Cross and Passion College, Ballycastle	Sport

Cohort 3 Specialist Schools, designated from September 2008

Carrickfergus Grammar School	Science
Downshire School, Carrickfergus	Business & Enterprise
Slemish Integrated College, Ballymena	Humanities
Ulidia Integrated College, Carrickfergus	Arts
Bangor Academy & Sixth Form College	Humanities
St Patrick's Grammar School, Downpatrick	Humanities
Holy Trinity College, Cookstown	Sport
St Paul's High School, Bessbrook	Science
Thornhill College, Derry	Mathematics

Cohort 4 Specialist Schools, designated from September 2009 (with different funding arrangements)

St Louis' Grammar, Killeel	Technology
Antrim Grammar School	Maths and computing
Victoria College, Belfast	Science
Rainey Endowed School, Magherafelt	Mathematics
St Patrick's Academy, Dungannon	Science
St Mary's High School, Newry	Mathematics
Assumption Grammar School, Ballynahinch	Music
St Dominic's High School, Belfast	Humanities
St Ciaran's College, Ballygawley	Business & Enterprise
St Patrick's College, Bearnagheeha, Belfast	Humanities

COURSES SUPPORTED IN SPECIALIST SCHOOLS

	GCSE	AS/A2 Level
Biology	5	7
Chemistry	5	7
Physics	6	8
Double Award Science	1	
Single Award Science	3	2
Applied Science	First Cert 2	2
Gateway Science	1	
Horticulture and Environmental and Land-Based Science	1	
Mathematics	5	4
Additional Maths	2	
Art & Design	4	3
ICT	6	2 and National Cert 1
Applied ICT	2	2
Moving Image Arts	3	3
Business Studies	5	
Business Comms Systems	1	
Applied Business		1
Home Economics	3	
Technology and Design	3	1
Construction		1
English	6	2
English Literature	6	7
Geography	1	1
History		1
German	3	3
French	3	3
Spanish	3	3
Irish	1	1
Latin		1
Media Studies	3	2
Photography	2	1
Journalism	3	1
Essential Skills		
Communication Level 1		
Music	2	1
Dance	2	2
Drama	6	3
Performing Skills Level 2		
Performing Arts	First Cert 1	National Cert 1
Performing Arts Acting	First Cert 1	National Cert 1
Performing Arts Dance	First Cert 1	National Cert 1
Performing Arts Media	First Cert 1	
Performing Arts Dance		National Cert 1
Drama & Theatre Studies		National Cert 1
Digital Arts	1	
Physical Education Entry 1	2	2
Sports Studies	3	
Sport		National Cert 2
Occupational Studies in		
Digital Technology	1	
Occupational Studies	1	

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