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Special Educational Needs (SEN) specialist schools: A BRIEF FOR SCHOOLS AND SPONSORS

The Secretary of State for Education and Skills, The Rt Hon Ruth Kelly MP, is seeking sponsors for secondary special schools applying for SEN specialist status under the specialist schools programme. The Secretary of State believes that these schools have an important role to play in raising educational standards for special needs pupils.

Nearly eighty percent of all secondary schools in England now have specialist status. The 2,540 specialist schools including Academies are maintained English secondary schools which teach the full national curriculum but give particular attention to their specialist subject, sometimes through an extended school day. All maintained schools are eligible to bid for specialist status. There is no government cap on the number of specialist schools and funding is available for every approved bid.

The specialist special schools programme is a key part of the government's plans to raise standards, including overall levels of attainment, in special schools, and to promote greater collaboration between the sector and mainstream schools.

It is important to see this programme in the context of the wider changes taking place in special educational needs in respect of central, regional and local organisations and structures and in schools. Every Child Matters – Change for Children is a new approach to the well being of children and young people from birth to age 19. The Government's aim is for every child, whatever their background or their circumstances, to have the support they need, to be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well being. This means that the organisations involved in providing services to children will be teaming up in new ways.

The aims of the specialist SEN programme are to:

- Raise attainment for all students within the SEN specialist strand, in Literacy, Numeracy and Personal, Social & Health Education and across the whole curriculum;
- Strengthen and develop the quality of teaching and learning strategies in the specialist strand and use them to help raise standards throughout the school;
- Develop within the school characteristics which signal its specialist ethos and identity and which are reflected in the school's mission and objectives;
- Extend opportunities for learning, particularly vocational learning and enrichment activity through the school's specialist work, including its community partnerships, school links and those with the wider community, including the wider educational community;

- Strengthen collaboration with schools, services and multi disciplinary agencies to provide or facilitate high quality learning opportunities and outcomes within the specialist strand by sharing specialist facilities and resources, enhancing further the quality of teaching, developing and disseminating good practice; and
- Provide or facilitate high quality learning opportunities and outcomes in the SEN specialism strand for the schools wider community.

The first 12 SEN specialist schools were established in September 2006. Each one specialising in one of the four strands of the code of practice:

- Behaviour, emotional and social development
- Cognition and Learning
- Communication and Interaction
- Sensory and/or Physical needs (this strand is supported by the YST)

Special schools are also eligible to specialise in any one of the parallel curriculum specialisms creating schools which specialise in the teaching of technology, Mathematics & Computing, Science, Languages, Sports, Engineering, Music, the Humanities, Business & Enterprise and the Arts. 2,540 schools have been granted specialist school status (approximately 80% of all maintained secondary schools) with the support of around £150 million from 700 corporate and charitable sponsors, which currently include HSBC Group, Glaxo Smith Kline, Garfield Weston Foundation, Goldman Sachs Foundation, BAE Systems, The Ogden Trust, The Sutton Trust, The Oracle Corporation, AEEU/Amicus and The Wolfson Foundation. Funding is available from the government to designate every qualified bid for specialist status.

Financial Support from the Government

In return for a sponsor's contribution of £20,000, the Government provides a one-off capital grant of £100,000 for the school which, combined with sponsorship, allows for a capital project of some £120,000.

Specialist SEN schools also receive an annual grant of £60,000. This grant is then divided equally to support the delivery of the school plan and the community plan.

Schools may apply for redesignation at the end of the initial four year period and subsequent 4 year periods, providing they have met their targets and submit a new development plan. Schools that are assessed as high performing may apply to add a second specialist subject and receive an additional recurrent grant in recognition of this additional specialism.

Role of Sponsors

Sponsors, either individually or collectively with other sponsors, provide the following assistance:

1. A one time financial contribution which totals at least £20,000 per school. Donations are deductible against tax and can be given either in cash or in suitable kind but cannot be conditional upon purchase of the sponsors' products. There is no ongoing obligation to provide financial assistance;

2. Sponsors are encouraged (but not required) to enter into long term support relationships with their school. This may include one or more of the following:
 - a. Appointing governors to serve on the school's governing body
 - b. Encouraging the schools to report annually on their progress
 - c. Providing work placements for teachers and students, providing careers advice for students and mentoring of both students and teachers.

Above all, sponsors are invited to help schools develop a businesslike ethos which encourages delivery of a high quality education and value for money. Some sponsors such as Leo Noe through his charity The Rachel Charitable Trust, have entered into long term funding agreements (3 years or more) under which a number of special schools will be supported over a period of time.

Record of Specialist Schools

A recent evaluation by Ofsted says that specialist schools are performing better and improving faster than other schools. David Bell, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools, said: "Being a specialist school makes a difference. Working to declared targets, dynamic leadership, a renewed sense of purpose, targeted use of funding and being a contributor to an optimistic network of like-minded schools, all contribute to a climate for improvement and drive forward change."

The record of specialist schools in raising standards is impressive.

- The 1,838 non-selective specialist schools in operation in the summer of 2005 averaged 58% 5+ A*-C grades at GCSE. This compares with 47% for all other non-selective maintained schools – about a quarter better for specialist schools.
- The intake of these 1,838 specialist schools in 2000, when the 2005 GCSE pupil cohort entered secondary school at age 11, was broadly similar to that of other comprehensive schools, as shown by average key stage 2 point scores per pupil in 2000 of 27.1 for those schools entering the specialist schools compared to 26.4 for those entering the non-specialist comprehensive schools. The better performance at GCSE by specialist schools is not therefore dependent on them selecting more able cohorts.
- Performance by specialist schools in their specialist subjects is considerably higher than for other comprehensive schools in those subjects as well as in the key subjects of mathematics, science and English. In 2005, pupils in the non selective specialist schools achieved 44% 5+ A*-C grades at GCSE including English and Maths, compared to 34% of pupils in the non specialist schools.
- Research by Professor David Jesson of York University shows that specialist schools add more value than other comprehensive schools. Using average Key Stage 2 results at age 11 to predict the proportion of good grades a school should achieve at GCSE, Professor Jesson's study shows that in 2005 the 1,838 specialist schools should have achieved 56.53% 5+A* - C grades at GCSE but actually achieved 58%. By contrast the 1,090 non-specialist schools should have achieved 49.74% but only achieved 46.69%. On a net basis specialist schools had a value added of plus 4.52 good grades.

Application Process

Applications for specialist school status are made to the Specialist Schools Unit at the DfES. For detailed guidance, see DfES generic guidance setting out the criteria for all specialist schools (and combinations) plus separate sections for each of the ten specialisms at www.dfes.gov.uk/specialistschools. The application should contain the following:

1. Information about the school, including size, legal status and recent examination results and individual student attainment data;
2. A development plan to achieve measurable improvements in literacy, numeracy and PSHE over the four year period;
3. Evidence of how the school will work with other schools and the wider community;
4. An outline of the bid for capital grant from the DfES, (grants may be used for the purchase of equipment, furniture and associated building work in order to enhance facilities for the teaching of the specialist subjects).
5. An outline of how the recurrent grant would support the development plan;
6. Details of sponsorship confirmed. The details of the proposed on-going partnerships with sponsors, including co-option on to the governing body.

There are normally two application rounds for specialist schools each year, in March/April and September/October. Typically about two thirds of schools who bid reach the standard required for designation. Some schools bid a second or third time before being designated.

Role of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust

The Specialist Schools and Academies Trust is the lead advisory body on the specialist school initiative for the DfES, providing advice and support for schools seeking to achieve or maintain specialist school status. Founded in 1987, the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust is a registered educational charity which has 250 staff and is funded by fees from its 2,750 affiliated schools, donations from sponsors and foundations, and grants from the DfES. Its work includes the promotion, development and support of specialist school curriculum development and innovation, teacher training in ICT, conference and seminar activities and a publications programme. The Specialist Schools and Academies Trust plays an important role in raising sponsorship and introducing potential sponsors to suitable candidate schools. The Youth Sport Trust supports schools seeking Physical and/or Sensory needs or Sports College status (www.youthsporttrust.org).

Further Information

For more information about any of the sponsorship opportunities outlined, please contact:

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