



Specialist Schools
and Academies Trust
EXCELLENCE AND DIVERSITY



A history of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust By schools for schools



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1987-
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1987-
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By schools for schools

The origins, history and influence of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust.

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The history of the SSAT: a remarkable story that continues today.



The success of specialist schools and academies is testimony not only to the hard work of heads, teachers, staff and students, but also the commitment of external sponsors.

In the early 1990s the organisation employed nine full time members of staff and supported 15 schools. It now employs over 350 people and supports a network of schools over 4700 strong. England now has a specialist system of secondary education.

Charting this journey reveals six factors that appear to have most to do with this success.

The first is timing. The specialist schools programme developed at a time when schools were ready to move away from a 'one size fits all' model of comprehensive education. This coincided with the emergence of new technologies, which transformed so much of the way education is delivered and enabled much greater communication between schools.

The second factor is the design of the specialist schools programme itself. The process of application for specialist status went with the grain of what many schools were trying to achieve. It was helpful to school development. It was a voluntary process led by practitioners, not something imposed from on-high. It raised the esteem of individual schools and by combining an effective process with financial reward became a powerful force for school improvement.

The third factor is the power of the schools' network. When the SSAT started its school affiliation network few people

realised just how powerful a force it would become. Many underestimated the capacity of schools and headteachers to effect change.

The fourth factor is the involvement of external sponsors in the programme. Over 700 individuals, businesses and charitable foundations have contributed £300 million to sponsor specialist schools, CTCs and academies. The importance of the sponsors' role was recognised by the Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, in his foreword to the SSAT brochure (source 1) written shortly after taking office in July 2007. He wrote: 'The success of specialist schools and academies is testimony not only to the hard work of heads, teachers, staff and students, but also the commitment of external sponsors. In future every single secondary school and primary school should have a business partner.'

The fifth factor is the ability of the organisation itself to change and adapt and, in recent years under the leadership of Elizabeth Reid, to build capacity.

The sixth crucial factor is the vision, lobbying skills and determination of its chairman, Sir Cyril Taylor, described by Peter Wilby in the Guardian (source 2) as a 'man with a mission', Sir Cyril has advised 11 successive secretaries of state and chaired the organisation throughout its 20-year history.

It is a remarkable story, and it continues today.

1 Origins

The origins of the specialist schools programme lie in a meeting to address high levels of youth unemployment held at the House of Lords in January 1986, the result was the establishment of 100 technology schools to meet the skills needs of new business.

1987— 1993



From left: Kenneth Baker and Margaret Thatcher, Lord Harris, teacher and student at Mascalls School in Kent, Sir Cyril Taylor

The origins of the specialist schools programme lie in a meeting at the House of Lords in January 1986, organised by Cyril Taylor, for the Centre for Policy Studies. The meeting was called to consider the high levels of youth unemployment prevalent at the time. It was attended by around 60 business leaders and politicians, including the Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, and the Secretary of State for Employment, Lord Young.

A subsequent policy paper (source 3) recommended, among other things, the establishment on a direct grant basis of 100 technology schools to meet the skills needs of business.

The secretary of state for education at the time was Kenneth Baker, now Lord Baker of Dorking. During his time as secretary of state he introduced a

wide range of reforms including the national curriculum, grant maintained schools and the 1988 Education Act which included the concept of accountability for schools. He also introduced training days for teachers known as 'Baker Days'. Dame Mary Richardson, now chief executive of the HSBC Education Trust, which has sponsored over 100 UK schools, and formerly head of the Convent of Jesus and Mary school in Brent, recalls her students being stopped by the police in Oxford Street on the first school 'Baker Day'. The police asked why they were not in school. Their response was that all the teachers were cooking that day.

Kenneth Baker was attracted to the idea of schools with a strong curriculum focus on information technology. Back in 1981, when he was a minister at the Department of Trade and Industry, he had launched an initiative called 'computers in schools'. He believed that information technology could have a strong motivating effect on young people. The Charter Schools in the USA, which paid strong attention to new technologies, also impressed him.

1 Origins

The first Specialist Schools: City Technology Colleges (CTCs)

Establishing 15 CTCs

So, in the autumn of 1986, at the Conservative Party Conference, Kenneth Baker announced the City Technology Colleges (CTC) programme. The CTCs were to be comprehensive schools, independent of local authority control and serving inner city areas, which were usually areas of social deprivation. They were to be rich in information technology and, with one exception, to focus on maths, science and technology. They were to have good vocational provision, be innovative in their practice and have the crucial support of business sponsors. Above all they were required to raise educational standards in the areas they served.

They also had a research and development brief. They were 'laboratory' schools, experimenting with new ways of teaching and learning, challenging established practices and creating new models from which other schools could learn. This aspect of their work proved very important in terms of the influence they were to have later and it is a tribute to their success that so much of the innovative practice which they pioneered in the early 1990s now seems quite normal.

Kenneth Baker began to work closely with Cyril (later Sir Cyril) Taylor. Appointed as the secretary of state's adviser on the programme, Cyril Taylor held this post with the next 10 secretaries of state, both Labour and Conservative.

In 1987 the CTC Trust was established and Cyril Taylor was appointed its chairman. Membership of the Trust's Council was structured to reflect the stakeholders in the new programme – sponsors, heads of schools and colleges, and representatives of other educational bodies. This still holds true today.

In 1988 Susan Fey was appointed chief executive of the Trust. She was from a background in further education rather than schools, but decided to take up the post because she saw in Cyril Taylor the same 'anger and passion' about educational failure that she felt herself.

The Trust's role at that time was to find the sites and sponsors for the CTCs. The initial target was set at 20 CTCs, but this was not a straightforward task. Firstly, there was widespread opposition to the programme. It was vilified by the teaching unions, most LAs and many politicians, Conservative as well as Labour. Most of the media coverage was hostile. CTCs were seen as a threat to local democracy, as 'selective' (despite their comprehensive intake) and as a creeping privatisation of education because of the sponsor involvement. Many viewed them as the pariahs of the education world. Most LAs would not release sites.



From top: Thomas Telford School, Kenneth Baker, Secretary of State for Education and Science 1986–1989

On more than one occasion Susan Fey was 'warned off' visiting an area. Even those LAs that were willing to be involved demanded more money for the land than had been envisaged, greatly increasing the cost of each school. Even in LAs where there was political support for the programme, such as Croydon where two CTCs were established, there was widespread public hostility. Both Susan Fey and Ian Turner, then an LA officer in Croydon and now a director of the Trust, recall meetings at Sylvan High School (now Harris CTC) where the audience behaved like a lynch mob.

Sponsorship was also a challenge. Very few of the major established companies saw it as part of their remit to fund state education. Even direct approaches from the prime minister to company chairmen failed to get a positive response. More often it was entrepreneurs like Philip Harris, Stanley Kalms, Michael Ashcroft and Harry Djanogly who saw the point. Most were motivated by skills issues and by a desire to put something back into the community. Philip Harris (now Lord Harris), who was the sponsor of Harris CTC in Croydon and part-sponsor of Bacons College in Southwark, explains that as someone who grew up in south London he wanted to give something back to the children of Croydon and Southwark. He thought the idea of CTCs 'brilliant', giving him an opportunity to make a difference to the life chances of young people. He also has a particular interest in dyslexia, as he is dyslexic himself, as are his three sons. Harris CTC has a very successful dyslexia unit and is today (2007) rated an 'outstanding' school by Ofsted. Interestingly, Lord Harris later moved on to sponsor several specialist schools and is today a major sponsor of academies, establishing a Harris Federation of schools. He, and his wife Dame Pauline Harris, maintain that providing a good education for every child is crucially important, which is why 'we are sponsoring a group of 12 academies and specialist schools in south London which will work closely together to raise standards' (source 1). Lord Harris pays a personal tribute to Cyril Taylor, saying that without him he does not believe the programme would have got off the ground and that he has done more for education than any other individual in the last 50 years.

The CTC Trust, along with Kenneth Baker and his successor John MacGregor, devoted a great deal of effort to raising sponsorship and negotiating with the sponsors and others involved. The sponsors were generally forceful people, used to getting their own way and quite capable of phoning Mrs Thatcher personally if they felt bureaucracy was standing in the way of progress. Eventually a total of £40 million was raised.

Despite the opposition, 15 CTCs were established between 1988 and 1993, Kingshurst in Solihull being the first in 1988 and John Cabot in Bristol the last in 1993. They are listed along with their sponsors in the timeline on the centre pages.

Kevin Satchwell, the first and current principal of Thomas Telford School, says that the Trust's role in obtaining the land in Telford and bringing together the Mercers' Company with Tarmac plc was 'magnificent'; he describes Cyril Taylor as an 'entrepreneur with vision'. Like some other CTCs Thomas Telford was subject to a legal challenge. Telford LA took the secretary of state to court on the grounds that he had failed to consult them. When the school's project manager, Alan Brymer, produced evidence that the LA had failed to respond to consultation, the first case

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was thrown out in 11 minutes and a subsequent appeal in seven minutes. Thomas Telford School and its sponsors still work together and are now also sponsoring three new academies.

Another case in point is the BRIT School in Croydon, the only CTC to focus on the performing arts. This was a complex project. John Deacon, then director general of the British Phonographic Industry (BPI) and still chairman of governors at the school, describes the negotiations involved in raising funding for the school. The costs of the new building in Croydon were originally estimated at £5 million, but ended up at £10 million. The usual sponsorship contribution was 20%, ie £2 million, but Mrs Thatcher was less enthusiastic about a school for 'out of work actors' and for the BRIT school the sponsors were required to contribute was 40%, ie £4 million. There were six major record companies involved, all willing to make a financial contribution, but not one which would add up to this figure. The funding issue was resolved by a major contribution from a concert at Knebworth (the Nordof-Robbins music charity agreeing to share the proceeds) and by the government agreeing that the sponsor's contribution could be the usual 20%. John Deacon pays tribute to Cyril Taylor for his part in the negotiations and to the Trust's role in supporting the school both then and in subsequent years, for example in advising on the appointment of its current principal.

1 Origins

Curriculum development

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Top: Kenneth Clarke, Secretary of State for Education and Science 1990-1992
Right: John Major, Prime Minister 1990-1997



Curriculum development

In 1990 the chief executive of the CTC Trust, Susan Fey, decided that curriculum development work was a major priority for the organisation. The 15 CTCs, which by then were either open or in the pipeline, needed help with curriculum issues and to develop some common ethos and corporate identity. Bob Findlay of Findlay Publications, the first treasurer of the Trust, made a very generous contribution to sponsor the appointment and the work of six curriculum development directors (CDDs). The Esmee Fairburn Foundation matched his contribution and the Department for Education matched both, making a total of £2 million for the project. The CDDs were to be appointed on three-year contracts and cover six curriculum areas: business; science and maths; languages; design technology; information technology and post-16. Despite the reputation of CTCs and the widespread vilification to which they were subjected, an advertisement for these posts attracted over 700 applications.

Interviews were conducted all around the country and eventually six appointments made. They were a diverse group, including some from higher and further education backgrounds. Susan Fey made a particular point of writing a personal letter to all of the unsuccessful candidates, something she felt did a lot of good for the Trust in terms of public relations.

The CDDs set about their work of supporting the CTCs through visits, organising training events and producing curriculum papers. They had to accept their personal share of vilification. For example, they were frequently blackballed by their professional associations and not allowed to attend conferences. They were, however, appreciated by the CTCs. Kevin Satchwell recalls that in Telford from January to August 1991, before the

school opened, he and a skeleton staff were housed in a fourth floor office in a tower block. They used the time to work on what was to become Telford's famous online curriculum. He could not have done this without Susan Fey and her team of CDDs, who he terms 'first-rate'.

The work of the CDDs continued for three years, leading to publications such as *The essential educational characteristics of a CTC style school*. This work laid the foundation for later developments such as the affiliation scheme and the specialist schools programme. Much of the focus was on innovation, but a change occurred in 1991 when the then secretary of state for education, Kenneth Clarke, wrote the delivery of the national curriculum into the CTCs' funding agreements. Eve Gillmon, one of the CDDs, comments that many CTCs were behind mainstream schools in their preparations for implementing the national curriculum and the CDDs had to turn their attention to support in this area. She believes this development diluted their capacity for innovation.

The CTC programme produced 15 extremely popular and successful schools. Some took a time to show results, but they are now some of the leading comprehensive schools in the country. John MacGregor (now Lord MacGregor) comments that a key to their success was 'no tolerance of failure'. However, the programme was proving very expensive. Finding suitable sponsors and sites was becoming problematic and ultimately the search for both was halted at 15 schools. The next challenge was to find ways to roll out the programme in a more cost effective way and to spread the good practice being developed in the CTCs more widely.

Two crucial developments in 1992 were to have a profound effect on English education over the next 15 years. One was the proposal for technology colleges. The other was the launch of the CTC Trust's affiliation scheme.

Technology colleges

The 1992 *White Paper Technology colleges: schools for the future* proposed the creation of technology colleges to spread the impact of the CTCs. The new technology colleges would have an emphasis on maths, science and technology and would add to choice and diversity in the system. They were to be influenced by business through the appointment of sponsor governors. Schools applying would raise £100k in sponsorship, would receive matched funding for this through a capital grant of up to £100k and additional recurrent funding of £100 per student per year. The funding package is essentially the same today, although the sponsorship requirement is now £50k, sponsorship from educational suppliers having been ruled out, and the recurrent funding has risen with inflation. Schools bidding for technology college status were required to submit a bid which included an analysis of their strengths and weaknesses, improvement targets in each of the subject areas and for the whole school, and a detailed implementation plan. This process would prove to be very important for school development and improvement. For many senior school staff it was their first experience of planning, accountability and self-evaluation.

In 1993 the technology colleges programme was launched. It was controversial because, under John Patten as secretary of state, it was only open to grant maintained and voluntary aided schools; LA schools were excluded. The official reason for this was that the governance arrangements of grant maintained and voluntary aided schools, including provision for sponsor governors, meant they were more suitable for the programme and able to act more quickly. However, some felt technology colleges were being used to promote grant maintained status through the back door. There was much lobbying for a change of policy to open up the programme to all secondary schools.

The role of the CTC Trust was to help schools raise the required sponsorship and in the preparation of their bids. A key element of the sponsorship role was to raise support for the programme centrally and then work with sponsors in allocating the money to particular schools. In the years ahead, the Trust and the schools between them would raise over £300 million to support the programme.

Affiliation scheme

The other development in 1992, which was to have far-reaching repercussions, was the launch of the Trust's affiliation scheme.

The CTC principals, referred to by Kevin Satchwell as '15 rogue headteachers', already met termly. Their meetings were often attended by other important education figures such as the chief inspector of schools, and were regarded as stimulating and productive.

Word of the work going on in the CTCs began to spread and publications began to circulate. As a result the Trust started receiving approaches from other schools seeking advice and contacts and wanting to join in. People at the Trust felt that having links with non-CTC schools would be a good thing and that networking could be very beneficial. So, the affiliation scheme was launched – and, unlike the technology colleges programme at the time, LA schools were allowed to join. It was the brainchild of Susan Fey and led by Eve Gillmon. The latter was one of the original CDDs on a three-year contract, but she was to stay with the Trust for nine years, becoming its first deputy chief executive and later its first Fellow. Later Pam Kemp and Christine Prentice (now Christine Walter, author of this history) succeeded her, both in this post and as Fellows, alongside others deemed to have made a significant contribution to the specialist schools movement.

Fifteen schools attended the first meeting for affiliated schools at the BRIT School in December 1992. Two of the early affiliates attending were Kathy Heaps, head of John Kelly Girls' School in Brent (along with Sandy Young, head of John Kelly Boys') and David Crossley, head of Cirencester Deer Park School in Gloucestershire and now a director of the Trust. Kathy Heaps had visited several CTCs to look at their practice and was convinced that technology could give her school, and the neighbouring boys' school, the edge it needed to improve. David Crossley had visited Thomas Telford School and was looking for a national network which could help with curriculum development, innovation and technology. These two schools were among the first applicants for technology college status.

Applications to join the new affiliation of schools began to flow in. The cost of joining was basically £1 per student per year; the fee structure is very similar today. In 1993 the first annual conference for affiliated schools took place at the St Ermin's Hotel in London. Sixty-four schools were represented, a far cry from today's 2000 attendees, but certainly the start of something big. Another conference in Telford was to follow a year later by which time affiliation numbers had reached 100.

The pattern was set for an affiliation scheme and a conference which many heads would say revitalised them professionally. The Trust began to realise the potential of its network.



Left from top: Kevin Satchwell, David Crossley, the inaugural meeting of affiliated schools, December, 1992



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2 Building the foundations

Events in the next three years would lay the foundations for what was eventually to become a specialist system.

Mike Fischer CBE, Co-founder of RM and Gillian Shephard, Secretary of State for Education and Employment 1995–1997



1994—
1996

Early technology colleges

The first 50 technology colleges were designated, in 1994 were all either voluntary aided or grant maintained schools. To be designated schools had to reach a quality standard, but there was also an expenditure limit on the number of schools that could be designated in any bidding round. So, in future rounds some schools would not be designated despite submitting bids of an appropriate standard. When difficult choices between schools had to be made, issues such as proximity to another specialist school would be taken into account. This would remain the case until 2002.

One of the first 50 schools to be designated was John Kelly Girls' School in Brent. Another was the neighbouring boys' school. They were unusual in two respects. Firstly, they were local authority schools but, when the heads found they could not apply for technology college status because of their local authority status they immediately applied to become grant maintained. The second unusual feature was that, unlike most of the other early applicants, they were inner-city schools. Kathy Heaps feels that the purpose of the programme was somewhat muddled at this time. It was ostensibly about improvement in inner-city schools and that was certainly part of the initial remit of the CTCs, but very few inner-city schools were among the early applicants for technology college status.

2 Building the foundations Early technology colleges



Charles Clarke, Secretary of State for Education and Skills 2002-2004

Both heads were very committed to the programme and determined to succeed. Kathy Heaps recalls consulting Susan Fey about their bid in a session that lasted until 11pm. They had the sponsorship in place from a local company, Bestway, and from Unisys. Their bids were approved, but their first three years proved to be rather a rocky ride. They struggled to meet the targets they had set themselves. Schools' target setting was a very imprecise science in those days as the data which schools use today such as the Fischer Family Trust and PANDA were not yet available. The initial designation period was three years, which was rather short to show significant improvement; it was later to be extended to four years. When the John Kelly schools came to apply for redesignation, known as 'phase 2', during their third year their prospects looked doubtful, as they had missed their targets in years 1 and 2. They delivered 13 folders of information to the Department for Education and Skills (now the Department for Children Schools and Families – DCSF) to make their case. In the end the DfES deferred a final decision until that summer's results, which fortunately showed an improvement and so the two schools retained their status, albeit by the skin of their teeth.

They were later to become exemplary technology colleges. They are both now in their fourth phase. They fully embraced the ethos, including the vocational dimension and later the community side of the programme. Kathy Heaps was later to become chairman of the Trust's London region and a contributor to many of the Trust's leadership programmes. She also hosted numerous visits for the Trust. As an inner city school, with many challenges, which embraced the programme's ethos so wholeheartedly, John Kelly Girls was an obvious port of call for visitors wanting to learn more about specialist schools. Cyril Taylor would regularly bring both potential sponsors and important decision makers to visit. Kathy Heaps recalls telling her staff one Monday morning that during the week both Chris Woodhead, HMCI, and Michael Portillo, then a Conservative politician, would be visiting. One teacher's response was 'could you give us a bit more notice when you decide to invite General Pinochet!'

Involving local authority schools

During 1994 Gillian Shephard (now Lady Shephard), who succeeded John Patten as education secretary, made two very important decisions for the long-term future of the programme. The first was to open it up to local authority schools. Her view was that if it was working for some schools then it could work for all. She was one of several interviewees for this publication to talk of 'letting 1000 flowers bloom'. She believed the programme went with the grain of what was happening in schools. Schools should be able to play to their strengths. The process of application was helpful because, while it was completely voluntary, the financial inducements led to some competition between schools and an awareness of others' achievements.

Her decision was absolutely crucial. It took a lot of the political controversy out of the programme. It meant that Labour-run local authorities felt they could get involved. It was pivotal in leading members of the Labour Party, then in opposition, to the point where they could regard specialist schools as one part of the Conservative agenda which they could adapt to their own purposes, rather than as something to be abandoned on taking office. David Blunkett, when interviewed for this publication, confirmed how crucial Gillian Shephard's decision was, as did Estelle Morris. With this one move, Gillian Shephard effectively secured the long-term future of the specialist schools programme.

The SSAT began to work with local authorities to take the programme forward. Kathleen Lund, who had succeeded Susan Fey as chief executive, came from an LA background and her experience and contacts were crucial in opening doors with both individual local authorities and with the Local Government Association.

One of the first Labour controlled local authorities to get involved was Newcastle. Its director of education was David Bell, later HMCI and now permanent secretary at the DCFS.

He, with the political support of his chair of education, saw the importance of specialist secondary education in the area. While other authorities in the north east still regarded specialist status as back door privatisation and a move to encourage grant maintained status, he thought it was a way of taking the secondary system forward through greater diversity. One very practical step which Newcastle took was to set up a 'mini trust' with the local TEC and EBP, creating a central pot into which companies could contribute sponsorship monies. This removed the need for companies to choose which of Newcastle's 13 secondary schools to support, and meant the authority could move forward in a planned and rational way without too many worries about the ability of individual schools to raise sponsorship.

Language colleges

The other important decision taken by Gillian Shephard in 1994 was the introduction of a second specialist area, languages. Mrs Shephard is a linguist herself, and had extensive practical experience in education as a former lecturer, administrator, inspector and adviser. As chair of education in Norfolk she had introduced French into primary schools and she felt languages received a raw deal. She also believed in the 'locomotive effect' – the ability of a strong, well-led department to lead whole school improvement.

One of the early language colleges to be designated was another Brent school, the Convent of Jesus and Mary. Mary Richardson, the head, had originally wanted technology college status, but found she was too near the John Kelly schools for this to happen. However, language college status was an excellent fit for her school, which already taught nine languages to students of 36 nationalities. She felt it demonstrated to them that speaking different languages was something to be celebrated and to be proud of rather than something to be regarded as a disadvantage.

Gillian Shephard was later, in 1996, to announce a further extension of the programme with the introduction of arts and sports colleges. The first of these were designated in early 1997 and will be covered in the next chapter.

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From top: Sue Williamson, Director SSAT, Sir Cyril Taylor, Chairman SSAT and Tony Blair, Prime Minister 1997–2007

Expansion and the affiliation scheme

By the end of 1996 there were 182 designated specialist schools, mostly technology colleges. In recognition of this the Trust changed its name from the CTC Trust to the Technology Colleges Trust (TCT).

The Trust's affiliation scheme was also growing quickly: by the end of 1996 there were just over 300 affiliated schools. The pattern of the annual conference, which was later to become the biggest education conference of the year, was set during this time. It was a mix of distinguished speakers, awards to schools for outstanding achievement or improvement, an exhibition and breakout sessions and showcases led largely by practitioners, the headteachers themselves and their colleagues. In the early years conferences were held near one of the CTCs, which were visited as part of the programme. An innovative feature was the 'rondeval', the brainchild of Eve Gillmon, during which contributors sat at round tables delivering mini-presentations about new ideas and practice while delegates circulated at will in a marketplace atmosphere. As the conference grew larger both the CTC links and the rondevals had to be abandoned, to the regret of many delegates.

Sue Williamson, now a director of the Trust, recalls her first conference in Bristol back in 1995. She was head of Monk's Dyke School, a technology college in Louth, Lincolnshire. Monk's Dyke had become a technology college to give it a distinctive appeal in an area with neighbouring grammar schools. It made great progress, giving the local grammar school a run for its money.

The conference impressed her in a number of ways. Firstly, she met other heads who were prepared to share their experiences, people like Wendy Davies from Selly Park School in Birmingham and Gareth Newman from Brooke Weston CTC. For perhaps the first time she felt she was part of a network which was focussed on teaching and learning. Secondly, she liked the idea of the awards to schools. She remembers Harris CTC winning one of the awards which had been donated by Susan Fey when she left the Trust. It was for improvement in mathematics and Sue Williamson was determined that her school would win such an award, which it did later on. Thirdly, she made business contacts, including the sponsor of another Lincolnshire school who became one of her governors. She was inspired by the whole ethos of the event and its 'can do' approach.

While the conference was the highlight of the year, other developments were taking place in the affiliation scheme. Technology played a crucial role, as it would continue to do, as email and websites became more commonplace. An early development occurred when Research Machines (RM), a major supplier of information technology to schools, held a training session for 12 headteachers in the use of email, then in its infancy. It gave them each a free email account. Together with Trust director Eve Gillmon, they began regular correspondence with each other and were known as the Headnet Group. Many innovative ideas emerged which led to the formation of the Vision 2020 group (now Futures Vision), which in turn became the focus for innovative thinking about how schools would develop in the future. It led much of the Trust's forward thinking.

Jim O'Neill, head of Carmel RC Technology College in Darlington, was and is active in Vision 2020/Futures Vision. He is a keen supporter of the Trust network in general because it dispenses with local agendas and issues relating to religious affiliation, focussing instead on school improvement and leadership. He happily quotes the mantra 'lead, or get out of the way'.

Preparing for a change of government

It was clear during the mid-1990s that the writing was on the wall for John Major's Conservative government. A major priority for the Trust was to secure the future of the specialist schools programme under an incoming Labour government. It was already working with many LAs following Gillian Shephard's crucial decision to admit local authority schools into the programme. There were also regular discussions with Graham Lane, chair of the Local Government Association's education committee. Now it was time to start talking to the national politicians.

David Blunkett had become the shadow education spokesman in 1994 and was reviewing, in his words, 'which parts of the Tory agenda we could live with'. Where Labour perceived unfairness, distortion or a lack of accountability there would be change, but there would be no wholesale rejection of policy. It has to be said that if the Labour Party had, as expected, won the previous general election in 1992 the situation would have been rather different.

There were aspects of specialist schools which appealed to Mr Blunkett: firstly, the boost that specialism could bring to the self esteem of a school and its standing in the community; secondly, the ownership of the programme felt by headteachers, including a sense of responsibility and accountability; thirdly, the potential to engage with external partners. There would need to be changes, such as the community aspect and an increased focus on disadvantage which will be described in the next chapter, but if the specialist schools programme could act as the trigger to make the education system believe in itself again and to believe it could do something for the life chances of young people, then it was safe. So, when leaders at Yewlands School, located in David Blunkett's constituency and attended by his sons, asked him if they would embarrass him by applying for technology college status, the answer was 'go for it'. He saw the enthusiasm of the staff and was keen to encourage anything that would lift the performance of the school.

David Blunkett saw specialist schools as being 75% about school improvement and 25% about diversity. His colleague, Estelle Morris, a former teacher, saw the programme as a school improvement model with financial incentives. She believes that if you offer money in return for clear objectives and targets backed by detailed plans you will get improvement. The 'badge of difference' is important, linked to the capacity of a department to lead improvement across the school. Her own teaching experience told her that this model went with the grain of school improvement.

Contacts developed between the Trust and the Labour education team. David Blunkett addressed the Trust's annual conference in Bradford in 1996. Relations with the existing government remained close with Michael Heseltine, then deputy prime minister, delivering the Trust's first annual lecture in 1996, but the focus was on the anticipated transition. Gillian Shephard comments that it was absolutely right for Cyril Taylor and the Trust to be building bridges at this time. David Blunkett comments that it is one of the most successful examples of a new administration taking on and adapting its predecessor's policies.

Cyril Taylor also managed to grasp an opportunity to lobby the leader of the opposition, Tony Blair. Mr Blair had agreed to open Carmel RC Technology College in Darlington. The school is in the constituency of his colleague, Alan Millburn, and is adjacent to his former Sedgfield constituency. Its chair of governors at the time was Father John Caden, who knew the Blair family well as parish priest to Mrs Blair and the children. When Cyril Taylor was informed of this event he arranged with the headteacher, Jim O'Neill, to attend the opening and agreed with Mr Blair's office that he would join the potential Prime Minister for part of the train journey to discuss the specialist schools programme. The conversation duly took place and clearly produced long-term dividends, given Mr Blair's subsequent enthusiastic support for the programme.

By the end of 1996 the Trust was well positioned to work with the incoming government.

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Timeline of the origins and development of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust

1986–1993 Origins

- 1986** The CTC programme is announced

- 1987** The CTC Trust is established
Sir Cyril Taylor is appointed its chairman and adviser to the secretary of state, Kenneth Baker

- 1988** Kingshurst CTC opens, sponsored by Hanson PLC and Lucas Industries (CTC sponsors are subsequently listed in brackets)

- 1989** Djanogly CTC (Sir Harry Djanogly) and Macmillan CTC (BAT Industries) open

- 1990** Dixons CTC (Dixons Group and Haking Wong Enterprises), Emmanuel College (Vardy Foundation), Leigh CTC (Sir Geoffrey Leigh and the Wellcome Trust) and Harris CTC (Philip and Pauline Harris Charitable Trust) open

The Trust appoints six curriculum development directors

- 1991** A further six CTCs open: Bacons College (Harris Charitable Trust, Southwark Diocese and the London Docklands Development Corporation); Haberdashers' Aske's Hatcham College (Haberdashers' Company); Thomas Telford School (Mercers' Company and Tarmac plc); Brooke Weston CTC (Garfield Weston Foundation and Hugh de Capell Brooke); ADT College (ADT Group); and the BRIT School (BRIT Trust)

- 1992** Landau Forte CTC (Landau Foundation and Forte plc) opens

A government white paper proposes the creation of technology colleges

The CTC Trust launches its affiliation scheme. The first meeting, attended by 15 schools, is held in December

- 1993** John Cabot CTC (Cable and Wireless and the Wolfson Foundation) opens

Technology colleges are launched, for grant maintained and voluntary aided schools only

By October, 42 schools are affiliated to the Trust. The first conference for affiliated schools is attended by 64 schools



1994–1996 Building the foundations

- 1994** The first 50 technology colleges are approved

The programme is opened up to all secondary schools

Language colleges are announced

The number of affiliated schools reaches 100

- 1995** The first 16 language colleges are designated

The number of specialist schools reaches 100

The number of affiliated schools passes 200

- 1996** Arts and sports colleges are announced

Michael Heseltine, Deputy Prime Minister, delivers the Trust's first annual lecture

The Trust becomes the Technology Colleges Trust

The number of specialist schools reaches 182

The number of affiliated schools passes 300

David Blunkett addresses the annual conference



Timeline of the origins and development of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust

1997–2001 Becoming mainstream

1997

The first arts and sports colleges are designated
The incoming Labour government pledges an expansion of the programme
The community dimension is introduced
245 specialist schools are now operational
There are 391 schools affiliated to the Trust



1998

330 specialist schools are now operational and there are 545 affiliated schools
Education Action Zones are introduced
There is a new target of 500 specialist schools by 2000
The programme is opened up to special schools



1999

400 specialist schools are now designated and there is a new target of 800 by 2003
The first three special schools are designated
The Excellence in Cities programme is launched

2000

550 specialist schools are now operational and there is a new target of 1000 by 2004
Affiliation numbers pass 1000
The Trust publishes its first analysis of educational outcomes
The new academies programme is announced

2001

A government Green Paper sets new targets of 1000 specialist schools by 2003 and 1500 by 2006. It also introduces four new specialisms: science, mathematics and computing, engineering and business and enterprise
700 specialist schools are now designated and 1300 schools are affiliated to the Trust

2002–2004 A specialist system

2002

A 'specialist system' is announced by Charles Clarke with the removal of any cap on new designations.
The Partnership Fund is introduced
Bids for the four new specialisms are received
Affiliation passes 1500
992 specialist schools are operational and there is a new target of 2000 by 2006
The Trust's first full time regional coordinators are appointed
Prime Minister Tony Blair addresses the annual conference



2003

The Trust becomes the Specialist Schools Trust
There are now 1444 specialist schools and affiliation exceeds 2000
Two new specialisms – music and humanities – plus a rural dimension are announced and the first bids for these are received in October
The Leading Edge programme is announced
The Trust establishes a National Headteachers' Steering Group
Rural dimensions launched



2004

1955 specialist schools are operational and there are 2500 affiliated schools.
Plans for 200 academies are announced
A new SEN specialism is announced
High Performing Specialist Schools (HPSS) are announced, including schools with a vocational second specialism
The Trust launches RATL
iNet is launched

2005–2007 New challenges

2005

The target of 2000 is met with 2381 specialist schools now operational.
The Trust is given responsibility for the academies programme and changes its name to the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust
A new programme of trust schools is proposed

2006

The Prime Minister, Tony Blair, addresses the national conference
The number of specialist schools passes 2500 at 2542
2807 specialist schools are now operational
The new national target is that 95% of all eligible schools should be either specialist or academies by 2008
There are 46 open academies and a new target of 400 academies is set
There are over 3600 affiliated schools
HEI networks launched



2007

Trust schools and primary specialist projects launched

3 Becoming mainstream

The four years from 1997 to 2001 saw the number of specialist schools rise to 700, the number of schools affiliated to the Trust rise to just over 1300, the introduction of a further four specialisms and a new target of 1500 specialist schools to be designated by 2006.

1997— 2001



From left: Prime Minister Tony Blair with Education Secretary David Blunkett, sports students, dance students perform at the Roya Opera House

The four years from 1997 to 2001 saw the number of specialist schools rise from 182 to 700, the number of schools affiliated to the Trust rise from around 300 to just over 1300, the introduction of a further four specialisms and a new target of 1500 specialist schools to be designated by 2006. It was the time when specialist schools became not just a side issue but central to the development of secondary education. Most of this happened under the incoming Labour government, but in early 1997, before they took office, the first arts and sports colleges were designated.

Sports colleges

The sports colleges brought a new player onto the scene. The Youth Sport Trust (YST) was given the task of promoting sports colleges. Its role was similar to that of the TCT, helping schools with the preparation of their bids and raising sponsorship. The YST was in some ways a mirror image of the TCT: it was an organisation with a much wider role which took on sports colleges while the TCT started with a focus on the specialist schools support role and later developed a much wider remit. The YST's chair, Sue Campbell, believes that specialist schools developed as a 'movement' rather than just another educational initiative because of the presence of the two organisations. She says they acted as coaches with the schools and that meant the programme became both creative and adaptable. Officials at the Department of Education (now DCSF) would write guidelines for bids and the staff of the two trusts would interpret them to the schools and receive feedback in the process. The feedback would be relayed back to officials and the next set of guidelines would reflect this. So the programme reflected the changing aims and needs of the system and the coaches influenced both the school's performance and policy making. She believes that this link between policy and practice, plus the power of the headteacher networks, accounts for the success of the programme and its development into a national (and latterly international) movement.



Arts colleges

While the YST successfully promoted sports colleges the TCT took on arts colleges. One of the early arts colleges to bid, in autumn 1997, was St Paul's Way School in Tower Hamlets, one of the poorest wards of a poor borough: 95% of the largely Bangladeshi students received free school meals and fewer than 20% achieved five good GCSEs. Nevertheless, visual arts were an area of excellence with over 90% achieving C grades and above. Its headteacher at the time, Martyn Coles, who is now principal of the City of London Academy, agrees that a strong department can lead whole school improvement (the locomotive effect). He and his deputy put a bid together in about three weeks, ignoring the general view that it should be a six month process. He recalls many late night sessions, calling it the 'beer and pizza' approach to bid writing. The sponsorship came in, mainly from local sponsors such as Gartmore and the Aldgate and All Hallows Trust, and the bid was successful.

Designation as an arts college immediately raised the school's profile; it had many high profile visitors such as John Dunford, general secretary of the (then) Secondary Heads Association, Andrew (now Lord) Adonis and Sir Cyril Taylor. In 1998 the Prime Minister would launch the government's new Excellence in Cities programme at the school.

Aside from raising the profile of the school and raising esteem, Martyn Coles believes arts college status gave St Paul's Way a framework and a focus for school improvement. By 2006 65% of students gained five good GCSEs and the school had a positive value added score of 29. He also pays tribute to the value of the network. This was particularly strong among the early arts colleges. In London, for example, St Paul's Way joined with others such as Chestnut Grove, Thomas Tallis, Kidbrooke and Lister in providing school-based initial teacher training. Martyn Coles believes the network was crucial because, unlike existing local or professional networks, it focussed on teaching and learning.

Lesley King, now a director of the Trust, but then head of another of the early arts colleges, Stantonbury Campus in Milton Keynes, takes a similar view: joining the network was umbilically linked to specialist status. She recalls an early meeting at the Trust's offices, then at 9 Whitehall, where Trust staff gave guidance on applying for arts college status. She met fellow applicants, all headteachers with a passion for the arts.

Their network grew quickly to about 30 schools from all parts of the country, who would visit each other's schools. This professional, subject related support and networking was quite new and immensely powerful.

97-01



Above: Martyn Coles, principal at City of London Academy
Opposite: photography students at George Abbott



Brooke Weston CTC

A new government

In May 1997 the Labour Party won a landslide victory at the general election. As anticipated, David Blunkett became secretary of state for education and Estelle Morris was appointed one of his ministers, with responsibility for schools. Both were committed to the specialist schools programme but there were to be changes.

Firstly, the community dimension was introduced. Schools were now to be required to prepare a community plan for working with primary schools, at least one secondary school and some wider community groups. At least a third of their revenue funding had to be allocated to this. Estelle Morris states that this move was essential for reasons of equity when only a minority of schools had specialist status. It was also valuable in helping to address transition issues between primary and secondary schools.

For many schools the community dimension, particularly the links with other secondary schools and wider community groups, represented a great challenge and a significant change of culture. The Trust began to provide specific support in developing the community dimension, something it still does today.

Specialist schools would have a key role in other initiatives to be launched in the next two years. 1998 would see the introduction of Education Action Zones (EAZs), which were located in areas of social disadvantage. Preference would be given to bids for specialist status to schools located in zones provided they met the quality standard. 1999 would see the launch of Excellence in Cities (EiC), again designed to address under achievement in inner city areas. Specialist schools were one of the 'strands' in the EiC programme, and the areas involved were required to take a planned approach to their development.

With the addition of the community dimension and the focus on areas of deprivation, the programme flourished under the Labour government. Government targets for the number of specialist schools to be designated rose from 500 (by 2000) to 800 (by 2003) to 1000 (by 2004) and 1500 (by 2006). At the time this seemed ambitious, but schools continued to apply in great numbers and targets were consistently met early.

The chairman of the Trust, Sir Cyril Taylor, continued to play a pivotal role. David Blunkett appointed him his adviser on the programme. This was met with some surprise given Sir Cyril's well-known background in the Conservative Party. However, he was prepared to give specialist schools priority and resigned his party membership. David Blunkett realised how helpful he could be. He pays tribute to his enthusiasm, connections, commitment, powers of persuasion and self-belief: he was just what was needed to drive the programme forward.

Sponsorship

Increasing numbers of specialist schools meant an increasing need for sponsorship. Many sponsors had been giving generously over the years and continued to do so. In total specialist schools, CTCs and academies have attracted over £300 million sponsorship from individuals, businesses and charitable foundations.

The Garfield Weston Foundation, for example, has donated several millions to the programme. Writing in the SSAT's 2007 brochure (source 1), George Weston, chief executive of Associated British Foods and a trustee of the Garfield Weston Foundation, states: 'From our earliest involvement with the specialist schools project we have just been supporting success. Brooke Weston CTC has become a fantastic school, the 500 specialist schools we have helped sponsor have done well and we look forward to seeing the new academy we are helping to build thrive as well. It's been a joy to have been involved.' Other large sponsors include the Wolfson Foundation, British Airways and British Aerospace as well as the original CTC sponsors, who are listed in the timeline on the centre pages.

Many sponsors have worked closely with their schools to ensure that their particular sector can attract recruits with the necessary skills. Sir John Rose, chairman of Rolls Royce, writes in the SSAT 2007 brochure that 'high value added manufacturing is crucial to the future prosperity of our nation. That is why Rolls-Royce has sponsored a number of both technology and engineering specialist schools to ensure that school leavers have the skills necessary to work in our industry.'

During the period 1997–2001 several new sponsors came on board. These included EMI's Music Sound Foundation and the Sutton Trust.

The Music Sound Foundation

The Music Sound Foundation (MSF) was established in 1997 to commemorate EMI's 100 years as a company. 1997 was its fundraising year and so a letter to its then chairman, Sir Colin Southgate, from Cyril Taylor requesting sponsorship for arts colleges could not have come at a better time. It was a young charity with one full time member of staff, Janie Orr, and it needed to find effective ways to spend its money and make an impact. Janie Orr describes the specialist schools programme as a 'lifeline', because it gave the charity a national profile and also attracted matched government funding, which gave their sponsorship a much greater impact. The Trust would inform the foundation about applicants for arts college status, would say which had strengths in music and would recommend schools which MSF might consider visiting. So, MSF drew on the Trust's expertise before establishing its own links with the schools. Janie Orr describes it as a 'bespoke package for sponsors'. Initially sponsorship for schools near EMI plants was for the full £100,000 required. This was later reduced to £50,000 for schools around the country and when the sponsorship requirement was reduced by the government to £50,000, the MSF contribution usually became £25,000. The foundation became the biggest sponsor of arts colleges and later added music colleges. It has sponsored 32 schools to date, with a total contribution of £1.4 million. Support continues today, particularly with special schools and other Trust activities such as the arts colleges' conference and the arts expert panel. The foundation also organises road shows for teachers and sixth formers.

97-01

The Sutton Trust

Sir Peter Lampl, chairman of the Sutton Trust, describes the specialist schools programme as 'excellent'. While the principal focus of the Sutton Trust is on access to universities and good schools for young people from less privileged backgrounds, school improvement is also crucial. Peter Lampl sees school improvement rather than diversity as the key to the specialist schools programme. His trust has supported over 30 schools. He believes the programme works because it is voluntary and because the application process is sound: it gives incentives for school improvement and the four-year development plan creates its own discipline. He pays tribute to schools his trust has supported such as the Phoenix School in Hammersmith and the Sir John Cass Redcoat School in Tower Hamlets. Both have raised standards dramatically using their specialist status and a mix of strong leadership, ethos and discipline. This, rather than new buildings, is crucial to success. Peter Lampl also says that he regards the sponsorship requirement of £50,000 as 'reasonable', attracting as it does around £500,000 of matched government funding, a gearing of 10:1. Finally, like the Music Sound Foundation, he pays tribute to SSAT's role in nominating schools to sponsors and in facilitating links between sponsors.

Special schools

In 1999 the first three special schools were designated as technology colleges. The early special schools all had a curriculum specialism, special schools with a 'SEN specialism' were to follow later. One of the first three was Crosshills School in Blackburn, which bid jointly with Queen's Park, a neighbouring mainstream secondary school. Mike Hatch, Crosshills' head, pays tribute to the Trust for giving his school the confidence to bid, helping with the curriculum planning and finding much of the sponsorship. He believes the process helped the school in a variety of ways: it raised esteem; it required genuine target setting for the first time; and it gave experience in bid writing. This experience led to other successful bids, such as £1.25 million for an e-learning centre.

As with so many other schools, the relationship with the Trust deepened after designation. Mike Hatch saw the opportunity for a special schools network within the Trust. The first six special schools to join the network held an initial meeting in Peterborough in 2000. The special schools network now has nearly 250 members.

There are now 131 special schools with specialist status, 70 with an SEN specialism and 61 with a curriculum specialism. More are planned. Crosshills is one of the most successful. When it came around for its first redesignation there were issues at the partner school, Queen's Park. In the event Crosshills was redesignated but Queen's Park was not. Officials at the DfES (now the DCSF) referred to this process as the 'divorce'. This caused initial consternation and later amusement at Crosshills because officials would telephone the school asking to speak to Mike Hatch about 'the divorce'. Given that Mrs Hatch works at the school there was scope for considerable confusion.

Educational outcomes: 'something for something'

It was crucial for the specialist schools programme to produce evidence that it really was leading to school improvement in return for its funding. The chairman, Sir Cyril Taylor, refers to this as 'something for something'. For several years it had been possible to demonstrate that results in specialist schools were higher than in non-specialist schools, but this in turn begged a lot of questions about student intake, with accusations of covert selection and so on.

A value-added analysis had been produced for the first time in 2000, covering progress made from key stage 3 (KS3) to key stage 4 (KS4). An analysis of the 2000 examination results, published in 2001, took the debate further forward.

For the first time Professor David Jesson, author of the study, was able to compare results at GCSE with the comparative key stage 2 (KS2) primary school data from 1995. His study showed that not only had specialist schools averaged 53% 5+A*-C grades compared with 43% for non-specialist schools, but that the average KS2 test points were very similar – 24.9 as opposed to 24.5. The better performance was not a result of more able students. The analysis showed a value added score of +5.4 for specialist schools compared with -1.1 for non-specialist schools.

This study, which has continued on an annual basis and grown more sophisticated over the years, was of seminal importance. Debate about the statistics has continued among academics but, on average across all specialist schools, researchers agree that specialist status is linked to higher results at GCSE whether this is on the 5+ A*-C measure, value-added or contextual value added. To politicians, sponsors and the wider public the message was clear and important. David Blunkett recalls discussions within the Labour Party about the merits of specialist schools. He used the Jesson research to argue that if some schools could improve in this way and add value, then so could others. David Bell, by then leading Ofsted, recalls quoting the evidence to a sceptical Education Select Committee. The data was used regularly to convince existing and potential sponsors that the programme was a good use of their money. Today schools make extensive use of the data themselves to evaluate their performance. David Jesson's work has become increasingly important to the SSAT and is analysed regionally, by specialism, by cohort and in the various achievement programmes as well as in individual schools.

The 'clubs'

The outcomes analysis led to another important feature of the SSAT's work – the 'clubs' and celebration dinners. Each year schools with the best results in terms of adding value, school improvement and overall achievement are awarded membership of one or more of three clubs – the value-added club, the most improved club and the 70% club. They receive a certificate and an invitation to a celebration dinner. The dinner includes short presentations by some of the club members and a talk and discussion with a distinguished guest.

The events are an important feature of a culture which celebrates success. Certificates can be seen on display in many school reception areas. Sir Kevin Satchwell, head of Thomas Telford School, enjoys the lively debates and access to interesting guests which the dinners provide. Alison Banks, principal of the Westminster Academy, says that schools can sometimes feel run down and undervalued: special events, rewards and 'treats' can make you feel valued, positive and special. Jenny Jupe, who was deputy head of Selly Park School and is now a director of the Trust, says that to schools the Trust had an 'aura' because of its relationship with powerful people and that the dinners opened up new opportunities for both celebration and networking.

2001 Green Paper

The 2001 Green Paper *Schools: building on success* laid to rest any remaining doubts about the importance of the specialist schools programme. It set new targets for designation – 1000 by 2003 and 1500 by 2006 – and introduced four new specialisms in science, mathematics & computing, business & enterprise and engineering. These were to provoke another rush of applications from schools.

A new chief executive: 'by schools, for schools'

At the beginning of 2001 Elizabeth Reid joined the SSAT as chief executive. Her two predecessors, Peter Upton and Nigel Paine, had both been in post for relatively short periods of time. Her own background was that of a director of education, first in Lothian and then in Hackney.

She had become aware in Hackney that schools were increasingly distancing themselves from their LA and using their specialism as a way forward. The Trust had become 'another centre of gravity' for them.

In her first few months at the SSAT two things struck her particularly strongly. The first was the potential power of the network. It was clear that acquiring a specialism, while transforming in itself, was only the beginning for schools. It was also clear that the big challenge of reaching new designation targets would be largely completed within a few years. The next challenge would be to develop the network in new directions and establish new groups within it. These might be by specialism, region, cohort, type of school and different programmes. The network should be led by headteachers and the phrase 'by schools, for schools' began to be used to describe this.

The second issue was that while specialist schools were now a major plank of government policy, the Trust itself was rather detached from the mainstream policy, both at the DfES (now the DCSF) and elsewhere. There were limited connections at the Department outside of the specialist schools team and there were limited contacts with other organisations such as Ofsted. A major task would be to rectify this.

The first priority would be to build capacity to ensure progress on both fronts. Both David Blunkett and Estelle Morris comment that the Trust was beginning to adapt well during this period, moving from an organisation which mainly provided bidding advice and help with sponsorship to a much extended role. In Estelle Morris's words 'it kept the schools once they had the status' and began to meet their aspirations beyond designation.

The next few years would prove to be a period of rapid growth and great change for the organisation.

97-01



Elizabeth Reid,
Chief Executive, SSAT

4 A specialist system

The biggest criticism of specialist schools was that it was felt their success was achieved at the expense of other schools. Although the self-review required for a specialist school application was thought to be liberating for schools, a collaborative, rather than competitive approach was wanted.

Stephen Timms, Minister of State, DfES (Schools Standards) 2001–02



2002-
2004

Lifting the cap

When Charles Clarke succeeded Estelle Morris as secretary of state for education in 2002 he felt that the biggest criticism of specialist schools was that their success was achieved at the expense of other schools. He thought the self-review required for a specialist school application was in itself liberating for schools, but he wanted a collaborative rather than a competitive approach.

Up to this point there had been a financial cap on the number of schools that could be designated in any bidding round. This usually meant that some bids meeting the quality standard would not be approved. There might be 100 bids of an appropriate standard, but finance would dictate that only the best 70 would succeed. Furthermore, some parts of the country with a high proportion of specialist schools had at one time had an overall limit imposed for their area. Proximity to another specialist school could be an issue.

At his first question time as education secretary Mr Clarke was able to announce a lifting of the cap: from now on any bid that met the quality standard and had the required sponsorship would be approved. It was no longer to be a competition and there was to be a new target of 2000 specialist schools by 2006.

There were other important aspects to Charles Clarke's vision for what he termed a 'specialist system'. With the four new specialisms coming on board in the same year, he wanted to see a more balanced approach to the spread of specialisms in any one area. He wanted specialist schools to feel accountable, not just in a formal way at redesignation, but to external moderators such as the Trust and the YST. He also wanted them to give priority to local partnerships with business and other relevant organisations. As many schools struggled to raise the required sponsorship, he established a Partnership Fund, a mix of private money (donated by the Garfield Weston Foundation) and public money, to which schools could apply to make up any shortfall in the £50,000 sponsorship required.

4 A specialist system Lifting the cap

However, when applying to this fund schools had to demonstrate that they had been trying to raise sponsorship and establish partnerships for at least a year.

The Partnership Fund was essentially about fairness. Some schools found it easier than others to raise sponsorship because of their location. Mr Clarke's whole approach was to universalise the programme. He says that education has a capacity to divide itself into sheep and goats, which is unhealthy. Moreover it is misconceived – not all good schools are popular and not all popular schools are good.

Mr Clarke's approach later led to the five-year strategy for children and learners and the 'new relationship with schools', including his vision of a 'self-improving system'.

Expanding the programme

The effect of lifting the cap on new designations plus the four new specialisms was a rapid rise in the number of specialist schools. The system was now demand led, without any expenditure restrictions. In 2002 there were 992 specialist schools. By 2004 this figure had risen to 1954. In 2003 a further two new specialisms were announced – music and humanities – along with the possibility of adding a rural dimension to any bid. A SEN specialism for special schools was announced in 2004. In 2003 the Trust changed its name to the Specialist Schools Trust (SST). The Trust's network of affiliated schools continued to grow. The number of schools affiliated passed 1500 in 2002 and reached 2500 in 2004.

A regional structure

Coping with these numbers presented a challenge. There was clearly a danger in becoming too big and impersonal. One answer was to establish a regional structure and in 2002 the first full time regional coordinators were appointed. There had been some part time regional support before on the basis of a one day a week release from schools, but this was the first move towards full time dedicated regional staff. Each worked with a committee of volunteer headteachers in their region and this steering group set the local agenda for events and other activities.

Headteachers steering group

In 2003 the National Headteachers Steering Group was established. It was made up initially of the chairs of each regional steering group. Representatives of each specialism were added later. Its task was to steer the Trust's strategy for its services to schools. The importance of this group has grown over the years. This was the 'by schools, for schools' model taking shape.

The Trust also began to involve headteachers and other educationalists in other ways. Thirteen headteachers are now members of the Trust's council. Associate directors have been appointed – retired headteachers or distinguished academics closely associated with particular programmes. Examples are Professor David Jesson, who produces the annual outcomes analysis, Professor David Hargreaves, who works with the Trust on personalising learning and Ken Walsh, a former headteacher, who works with the Trust on ICT issues and Futures Vision. Another feature is associate headteachers – serving headteachers who contribute to Trust programmes.

Several new programmes were established during this period, all on the 'by schools, for schools' model.

Raising Achievement Transforming Learning (RATL)

The RATL programme arose from a 'priority review' of secondary underperformance conducted in February–March 2003 led by the then DfES (now DCSF) School improvements and targets unit, working with acting head teachers temporarily seconded to the team. The work, which was originally commissioned by Charles Clarke and had the strong support of schools minister David Miliband, resulted in, among other things, the introduction of Fischer Family Trust contextual value added (CVA) data to identify 'coasting' schools. DfES adopted a number of approaches to challenging coasting schools to improve, one of which involved commissioning SSAT to work with the prime minister's delivery unit to devise a support programme in early 2004. This subsequently became the RATL programme.

The RATL programme adopted a collaborative approach in which schools would be invited to participate and would establish partnerships with mentor schools and consultant headteachers. The aim was to empower participants, not make them dependent. The watchwords were 'inspire – challenge – motivate – support'.

The diagram (right) illustrates the alternative approaches.

After it was agreed in discussion with Elizabeth Reid that the SSAT programme would embody a 'by schools, for schools' approach, David Crossley, who had been an active member of the Trust's network since its inception, agreed to head up the RATL programme. The first year's cohort consisted of 224 schools, 40% of which were not specialist. Cohorts B and C followed, and to date 516 schools have participated in the programme. They all make extensive use of David Jesson's data in analysing their performance.

The schools in the programme have improved at a rate well above the national average in terms of 5+A*–C grades – the overall improvement being 2.8%, compared with 1.8% nationally. They also exceed national averages for improvement in terms of 5+A*–C including English and mathematics, and value added scores.

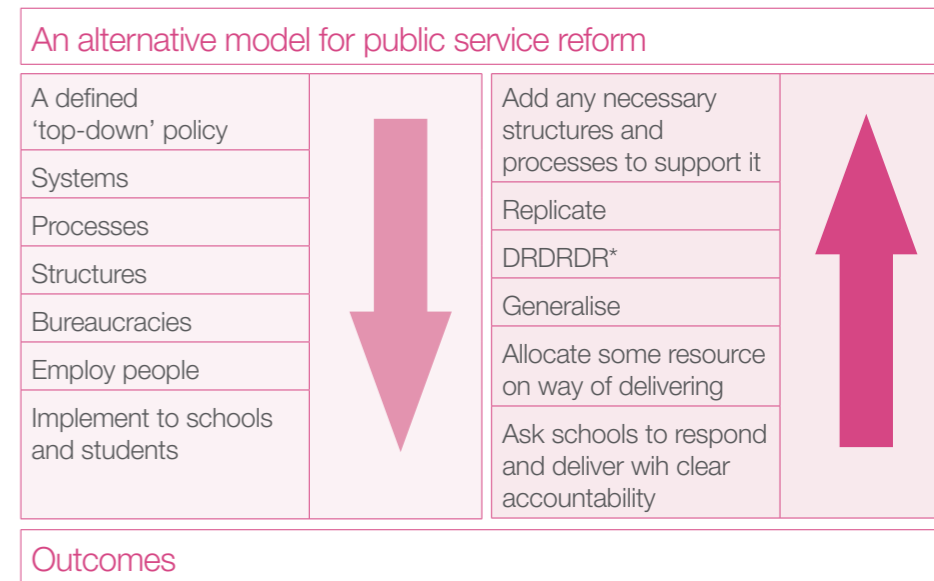
Sixty mentor schools and 70 consultant headteachers are involved in the programme. One of the consultant heads is Glenn Mayoh, head of Abbs Cross School and Arts College. His involvement in the programme is interesting because he started as a 'project school', a participant in the programme, after some weak results. Following an improvement his school became a 'mentor school' and he is now a 'consultant head' visiting five schools in Cohort C. He talks about the challenge of 'mutual mentoring'. All schools have something to offer and the capacity to learn from each other. This is not a programme in which a 'good school' imparts wisdom to a 'bad school'. It is a two way, not a one way, process. He appreciates being able to contribute to the network as well as taking from it and he believes firmly that all programmes should be practitioner led.

RATL has proved a great success. Peter Wanless, director of school performance and reform at the DCSF, says it means 'belonging to a network of schools that share your problems and are keen to help you'. He believes one of the most powerful ways of achieving school improvement is the lateral transfer of knowledge and experience between schools. Research by Professor Andy Hargreaves from Boston College, Massachusetts, describes it as 'one of the most distinctive, promising and successful reform models to emerge in the recent history of educational change and school improvement'.



From top: Professor David Hargreaves, Professor David Jesson, David Miliband, Minister of State DfES (Schools Standards) 2002–2004

02-04



* Development /Research



From top: Professor David Hopkins, Brian Caldwell, Yong Zhao, Alma Harris

Practitioner-led programmes

The model of practitioner-led programmes is replicated in other areas of the Trust's work that developed between 2002 and 2004.

Leadership programmes began with courses for aspirant headteachers and 'developing leaders', teachers with around five years experience identified as having potential. Today they cover the range from newly qualified teachers to executive heads. The key feature is that they are designed and delivered by school leaders. They are intellectually stimulating, but rooted in practice. There are currently (September 2007) 1068 participants from 764 schools.

Alison Banks, principal of the Westminster Academy, says the key is that you do not feel you are being 'lectured at'. Kathy Heaps, head of John Kelly Girls' Technology College, appreciates heads delivering their own materials which are grounded in reality, rather than delivering a lot of theory.

As well as delivering its own leadership programmes, the SSAT has also been commissioned by the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) to deliver a series of school based leadership programmes and school to school visits in London.

CPD networks were also developed during this period, delivering ICT based subject training in schools.

International Networking for Educational Transformation (iNet)

A major new venture between 2002 and 2004 was the development of the Trust's international arm – International Networking for Educational Transformation – known as iNet. This is supported by the HSBC Education Trust and Professor David Hopkins is the HSBC iNet Chair of International Leadership. The new international network grew organically throughout the period in response to demand from schools in England and overseas, starting principally in Australia. Today, it has over 1300 overseas members, and networks also exist in New Zealand, Chile, China, Hong Kong, South Africa, Wales, Northern Ireland, Mauritius, Holland, the USA and Sweden. Again, it follows the 'by schools, for schools' model: activities include visits, study tours and conferences as well as relationships between individual schools.

While the Trust's network was developing a wide range of activities in response to demands from schools, two new government initiatives were to have a major impact on its work.

Leading Edge programme

The Leading Edge Programme was announced in 2003. Estelle Morris had had a similar idea back in 1998 when she floated the idea of a specialism in school improvement or, as she puts it, 'the best to lead the rest'. In brief, Leading Edge involves 200 lead schools working with 800 partners, almost a third of the secondary system. They work on issues such as extended schools, Every Child Matters, personalising learning, the 14–19 curriculum and harnessing new technologies. The SSAT has won a tender to run this programme. It now sits in the Trust's Achievement Networks directorate alongside RATL; its practitioner-led philosophy is very similar.

High Performing Specialist Schools (HPSS)

In 2004 the DfES took the next step in the specialist schools programme by offering 69 high performing specialist schools (HPSS) the chance to enhance their specialist role by establishing a second specialism. Today around 550 specialist schools play a role in system wide reform through this programme. It is linked to the redesignation process: in broad terms it means that the one third of specialist schools that meet the HPSS criteria may opt for one of the following programmes:

- Development of a second specialism
- Becoming a training school
- Participating in an achievement partnership programme – Leading Edge, RATL or one run by the YST
- Development of a vocational specialism
- Development of a SEN/inclusion specialism

This development had huge implications for the SSAT. It affected the work of several directorates, Achievement Networks, Specialism and Curriculum Networks (SCN) and Strategy and Programme Networks (SPN) as will be seen in the next chapter.

Building capacity: school-led system leadership

Throughout the period 2002–2004 the Trust was building capacity as an organisation. It was also strengthening external alliances and an academic base, working with several professors of education. These were key priorities for the chief executive. Its income came from a variety of sources: a grant from the DfES to support the specialist schools programme; commissioned work from the DfES such as RATL; contracts won in open competition such as Leading Edge; sponsorship and other support from commercial organisations and trusts involved in education; and income earned from schools in affiliation fees and payments for services such as CPD and events. All income streams were growing fast and would grow even more in the years ahead. This was essential if staff were to be recruited in sufficient numbers and with the required expertise to support the levels of activity that the schools wanted to see.

The aim was to support a self-improving system – now termed 'school led system leadership'. The next chapter will examine where that stands today.

In 2004, following a challenge from the then Schools Minister, David Miliband, the Trust started working with headteachers to define personalising learning. Professor David Hargreaves held a series of workshops with some 200 headteachers and identified the nine gateways to personalising learning. There followed a series of five conferences with ACSL (then SHA) to examine the gateways. After each conference David Hargreaves produced a pamphlet with case studies from schools. By the time of the last conference in January 2006, it was evident that the nine gateways could be conveniently clustered into four groups: deep learning, deep experience, deep support and deep leadership. The National Conference in 2006 focussed on the four deeps and a number of schools have restructured their leadership teams on this basis. A second series of pamphlets – *A New Shape of Schooling* – were produced and examined each of the deeps. The Trust also established development and research networks to enable schools to lead the search for next practice. Student networks have been established in each of the Trust's regions and schools are being helped with the development of student voice and leadership. In 2007, the Trust formed a system redesign network – initially partnering 10 highly successful, innovative schools – to determine the building blocks of system redesign in education for the 21st century in England. This work was then expanded to all affiliated schools including schools affiliated to iNet.

02-04

5 New challenges

The four years from 1997 to 2001 saw the number of specialist schools rise to 700, the number of schools affiliated to the Trust rise to just over 1300, the introduction of a further four specialisms and a new target of 1500 specialist schools to be designated by 2006.

2005 — 2007



Specialist schools programme
The target of 2000 specialist schools was met a year early in 2005 when the total reached 2381. In 2007 the figure stands at 2807, which represents well over 80% of English secondary schools. There are also 83 open academies. The new target is that 95% of eligible schools should be either specialist or have become an academy by 2008.

Redesignation is now linked into Ofsted Section 5 inspections along with a school's development plan and self-evaluation form, and will no longer require a separate bid. The concept of specialism is now truly integrated into whole school development, rather than being regarded as a separate issue.

Is there anything left for the SSAT to do in terms of specialist school designation? Firstly, there are still a few hundred schools without either a specialism or an academy plan. There is also the task of supporting special schools in their bids for either the SEN specialism or a curriculum specialism. However, the big new task is one of ongoing support, called cohort working. Cohort working events are those at which schools at the same stage of specialist development, for example those in the third year of phase 1 or the second year of phase 2, are brought together to review their progress and look at ways of moving forward. The events involve a self-analysis of progress against targets and an opportunity to share good practice.

Academies

A big new challenge for the Trust came in September 2005 when it took on a central role in the government's academies programme. David Blunkett had announced the programme back in 2000. Its aim was to challenge under achievement in the country's poorest performing schools – mostly those facing the greatest social challenges. It involves sponsors from a wide range of backgrounds, including universities, individual philanthropists, businesses, the charitable sector, existing private schools, educational foundations and faith communities. Sponsors will, as the norm, establish an endowment fund worth £2 million (or £1.5 million for fourth or subsequent academies for multiple sponsors). Sponsors appoint the majority of academies' governors.

As a programme it has many similarities to the CTC programme of the early 1990s, and most of the original 15 CTCs have now converted or plan to convert to academy status. The Trust had played some part in supporting academies before 2005, but in September of that year, when Ruth Kelly was secretary of state for education, its role was formalised. Another change of name was required and the organisation became the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT).

In 2005 the target figure for academies was 200. This subsequently rose to 400 under Alan Johnson's tenure as secretary of state. The SSAT's role includes:

- Helping to integrate academies into wider SSAT networks as well as establishing an academies network
- Helping with media relations, publicity materials, newsletters and publications
- Sponsor relations

- Organising support programmes for individual academies and their principals
- Organising leadership and induction programmes for new principals

The Academy Networks directorate is led by Lesley King, formerly head of Stantonbury Campus Arts College and a former associate director of the Trust.

The support work is widely praised by academy principals. On an evaluation scale of 1 (excellent) to 5 (very poor) the average evaluation was 1.54. Alison Banks, principal of the Westminster Academy, who has received 90 days of adviser support over two years reports that it has been 'fantastic'. She is linked with Mossbourne Community Academy, led by Sir Michael Wilshaw, and has drawn on his expertise in aspects of school management such as finance and personnel. All her staff visited Mossbourne, which she says lifted their perceptions of what could be achieved. She is very appreciative of the academies network steering group.

On the sponsor side, David Samworth, sponsor of three academies in the East Midlands, approves the Trust's role in sponsor relations. As he sees it, SSAT provides a collective voice for sponsors; it is a meeting place and means of networking; it has expertise in education upon which sponsors can draw; it can take up matters of concern relating to issues such as VAT and procurement; it can provide curriculum advice; and finally it can be asked to provide a specific service, for example help in the appointment of a principal. He describes the SSAT leadership as 'brilliant' and 'impossible to replace'.



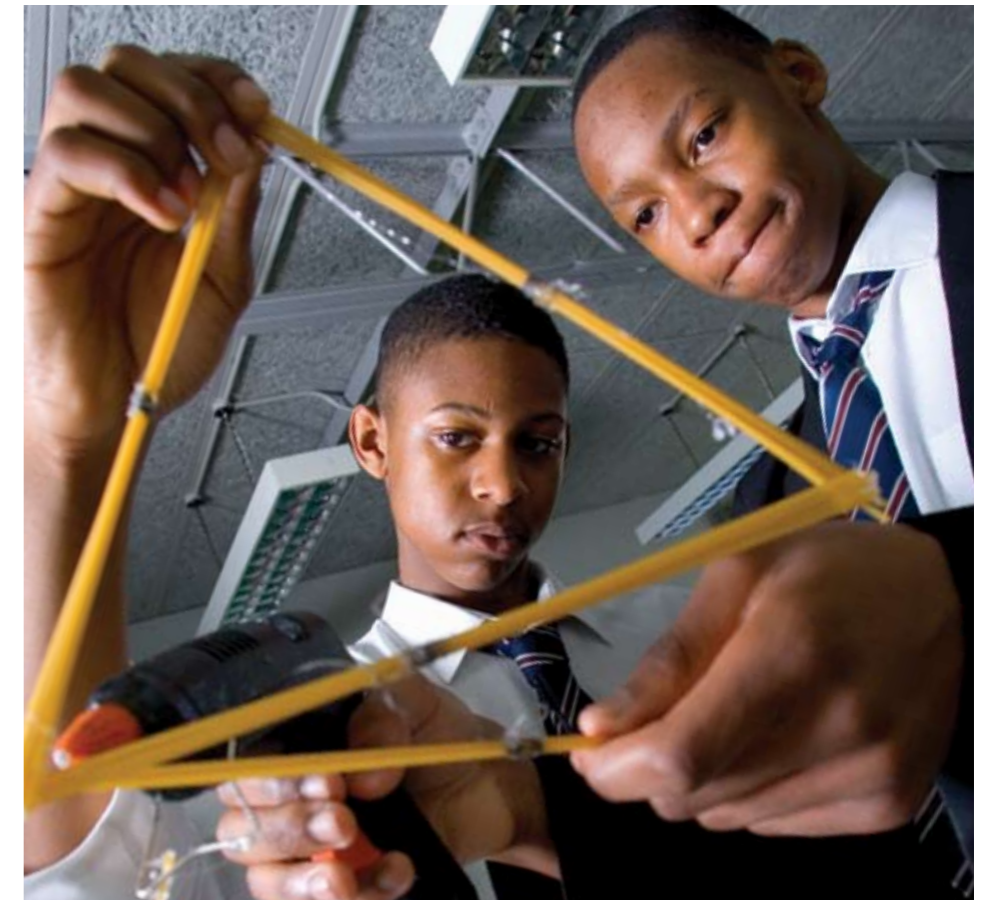
From top: Ruth Kelly, Secretary of State for Education and Skills 2004-06, Alan Johnson, Secretary of State for Education and Skills 2006-07

Growth of the organisation

The SSAT has been growing at a phenomenal rate in recent years. When it moved to Millbank Tower in 1998 it seemed ambitious to commit to half a floor. It now occupies three floors. Staff numbers at the time of the initial move were 30. They now stand at over 350, many being based outside of London in one of the growing number of regional offices or at home (a long way from the CTC days of a chief executive, a PA, an accountant and six development directors). The SSAT also makes extensive use of consultants and secondees. Financial turnover has risen from around £18 million in 2003/4 to around £60 million in 2007/8.

The structure of the funding has also changed and continues to change radically. In 2003/4 the DfES specialist schools grant represented 42% of funding. By 2007/8 it accounted for 24% while 37% came from other commissioned work from the DfES and 35% from commercial income – work won by competitive tender along with affiliation fees and income earned from events, training provision and so on.

The situation continues to change. As of now the specialist schools grant no longer underpins the SSAT's infrastructure costs. All overheads have to be borne by individual programmes. More and more work is becoming subject to competitive tender rather than being directly commissioned, and this trend will increase. In short, the SSAT has become a not-for-profit business as well as being a membership organisation.





Each of the SSAT's six directorates covers a wide range of activity. A brief summary of the role of each will give some idea of the scope.

Strategy and Programme Networks (SPN)

Led by Ian Turner, who has a teaching and LA background, this directorate covers:

- The specialist schools programme, including new designations, cohort working events and redesignation including support for High Performing Specialist Schools
- Support for the development of the government programme of Trust Schools. The legislation for these was developed under Ruth Kelly's tenure as secretary of state and the pathfinder schools were identified under Alan Johnson. SSAT has a formal role in supporting the pathfinders.
- Sponsorship, with an increasing focus on longer term business engagement
- Work to support schools with their community programmes, the rural dimension, extended schools, links with higher education and business
- The regional structure, the London team and network membership
- Communications, marketing, publications and events
- SEN network

Specialism and Curriculum Networks (SCN)

Led by Jenny Jupe, formerly deputy head of Selly Park School and then chief executive of the Design and Technology Association, this directorate provides specialism and curriculum support.

The principal areas are:

- Specialism expertise and strategy, including support for HPSS with their second specialisms
- Vocational expertise and strategy, including those HPSS that choose the vocational option and the new specialised diplomas
- CPD in specialist areas
- Work on 14–19 curriculum issues
- The Trust has now also become a Confucius Institute, supporting the teaching of Chinese language and culture in England
- Work with individual practitioners such as lead practitioners (seconded for a few days each year from schools to work with other schools) and advanced skills teachers (ASTs)

Several mechanisms are used in this work, including:

- Headteacher steering groups for each specialism
- Expert panels for each specialism
- An annual conference for each specialism
- The lead practitioners, who support schools regionally through workshops and individual meetings, and nationally through websites with examples of good practice

The directorate has a strong influence on curriculum development. Significant work has been commissioned on enterprise education (the Schools' Enterprise Education Network – S'EEN) and on the development of vocational courses, work which basically enables government policy to be put into practice.

Leadership and Innovation Networks

Led by Sue Williamson, formerly headteacher of Monk's Dyke School in Lincolnshire, this directorate covers the following areas whose beginnings were described in the last chapter:

- Leadership programmes
- iNet, including Teachers International Professional Development (TIPD), an overseas visits programme.
- Continuing professional development (CPD) programmes

It also includes:

- Work in ICT, including the ICT Register which utilises school expertise
- The family of schools programme for primary school affiliates, which now number around 200
- Innovation work which includes the personalising learning programme, which alone has involved over 1300 schools in its work, student voice, development and research networks and Futures Vision (originally Vision 2020)

The directorate is also responsible for the Trust's annual National Conference, which now attracts around 2000 delegates and is 'the largest education conference of the year' according to the then Prime Minister Tony Blair, who addressed it in 2006 for the second time, having first attended in 2002. He added, 'The Trust is the most dynamic education organisation in Britain. You are the true change-makers in our country today. You are lifting the sights of our young people, teaching them better, educating them more profoundly and to a higher standard than ever before in our country's history. It is an amazing achievement' (source 5).

Achievement Networks

In addition to RATL and Leading Edge, described in chapter 4, this directorate covers:

- The Specialist Schools Achievement Programme for schools at risk of losing their specialist status
- Examination performance data analysis and school self-review
- Work on the Every Child Matters agenda and inclusion issues
- New technologies, workforce reform and school design

The remaining two directorates are Academy Networks, whose work is described earlier in this chapter, and Finance and Information Services, led by Colin Kerr, which provides central services to support the infrastructure of the organisation.

So, what is the outlook for the next decade?

As the SSAT grows larger, but also has to win an increasing amount of its work by competitive tender and to generate more of its own income, there are clear risks. There is also a risk in its growing size – a danger of becoming more remote, impersonal and even bureaucratic. All the key personnel interviewed were clearly aware of these challenges and were working to minimise them. They clearly have a great deal of success: Peter Wanless at DCSF describes the organisation as ‘progressive, active and pacey’, with a ‘spirit of action’ and a ‘can do’ ethos.

What the Trust has on its side is the immense power of its network of schools and the authority that brings. The fact that it is a not-for-profit business and a membership organisation gives it a unique standing in the market place. It is well placed to grasp new opportunities. What are these likely to be?

Interviewees for this publication took widely differing views. David Blunkett identified school leadership as the key issue. Estelle Morris focussed on school improvement, describing the SSAT as ‘the government’s school improvement agency’. David Bell mentioned the development of groups of schools, whether through the new trust schools programme, federations or academy groupings. Glenn Mayoh, whose school is one of the new SSAT pathfinder projects, agreed with that view. Sue Campbell talked about the Every Child Matters agenda. Several people identified academies, the international dimension and primary schools as growth areas. Lord Harris was particularly interested in primary schools and in the specialist primary pilot project currently being run by the DCSF. Kevin Satchwell and Jenny Jupe both mentioned social justice and a new era of social responsibility. Some saw the organisation developing into a sort of education consultancy, others more as a quasi-academic institution.

Chairman Sir Cyril Taylor has a characteristically practical agenda involving the successful completion of the academies and specialist schools programmes, a further raising of standards and spreading of best practice, developing the importance of the specialist subjects, literacy,

numeracy, the care of vulnerable children, the integration of minority groups, developing community facilities, leadership programmes and vocational education.

Elizabeth Reid, chief executive, speaking at the 2006 annual conference, explained her vision: ‘We are close to a wholly specialist system and the work of building that system is nearly over. The next stage, which should be characterised by school leadership of that system, lies ahead of us. The networks, and a growing body of knowledge as well as development and research capability, are all in place’ (source 5).

A consensus emerges around one theme – the SSAT must say true to the ‘by schools, for schools’ principle and retain the hearts and minds of its member schools. It is schools that will lead the system. In the words of Elizabeth Reid, we will have ‘school led system leadership’ and the SSAT will be there as a facilitator and supporter. More than that, its staff are determined that it will lead and it will listen. It will have the capacity both to support and to contribute. If, as an organisation, it can remain adaptable while staying true to its fundamental principles, there should be a long and exciting future ahead.



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Ian Turner, Colin Kerr

Fellows of the Trust: A small number

of Fellows have been elected by the

Council for longstanding and valuable

contribution to the specialist schools

movement and the work of the Trust.

The current fellows are: Mr Ron Jacobs

OBE, Mrs Eve Gillmon, Mrs Pam Kemp,

Mrs Valerie Bragg, Professor Brian

Caldwell, Dame Mary Richardson,

Mr Ken Shooter HMI, Mrs Christine

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