One Thousand Beacon Schools: Catalysts for Change?

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Abstract

This thesis explores the rationale underpinning Beacon Schools Policy and the implications of school improvement research for its potential efficacy. It also provides an early evaluation of the operation of beacon schools in practice.

The thesis is based on interviews with two elite respondents, an analysis of the individual web pages of all beacon schools in existence in summer 2001, a questionnaire survey of beacon headteachers and case studies of four beacon schools.

Underpinning the policy is the belief that successful schools can act as catalytic agents to improve less successful ones through site-based improvement activities. To that extent, the policy is emblematic of the wider approach to school improvement adopted by the Labour Government.

In common with other 'model', innovative' and 'lighthouse' schools, beacon schools embrace the idea that they can help to scale up reform across local, non-beacon schools and eventually to the school system as a whole. Yet, the lessons from these experiments is that it is unrealistic to expect such schools to have a major impact on school improvement in the short term. This thesis suggests that, although Beacon School Policy is popular with the schools and teachers it directly implicates, it is both under-resourced and insufficiently conceptualised to be able to bring about large scale improvement generally.

Rather than viewing the policy altruistically, headteachers tend to see beacon status primarily as a means to improve their own schools. This belief in the potential of the policy for self-improvement is supported by evidence from the operation of individual beacon schools.

It demonstrates an atomistic approach to policy making, where already successful schools can receive multiple funding for the same activities through participation in different site-based initiatives. The policy may be seen as a useful and motivating backdrop for school improvement work, rather than as a direct means to bring about improvement.

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This thesis was undertaken at a time of significant change in schools, with the introduction of new curricula, new funding regimes and a number of other reforms. In this context, I am particularly grateful to the headteachers of the hundreds of beacon schools who took the time and effort to respond to my survey questionnaire.

The headteachers and staff of the case study schools made me very welcome and freely gave their time to be interviewed. I am indebted to them for this.

Finally, I would like to thank the staff at my own school. During the last three years they have provided numerous insights into the operation of beacon schooling and have shown through their daily work, the possibilities that this policy presents for improving the life chances of young people.

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Introduction

This thesis focuses on Beacon School Policy for two main reasons. First, I am the headteacher of a large urban secondary beacon school and I wish to stand back from the policy and reflect on its consequences both for my school and for education generally. Second, the Labour Government believes that successful schools should act as catalytic agents in order to help other less successful schools to improve. This catalytic agency approach is emblematic of current national educational policy and the approach used for the distribution of educational resources by government. The approach involves targeting resources in particular directions. It can be seen in the proposals made in the White Paper *'Schools Achieving Success'* (DfES, 2001g), with the creation of city academies, more beacon schools, advanced specialist schools and advanced beacon schools, all of which are proposed in order to raise standards in other schools through networking and the sharing of good practice.

Given inevitable economic constraints on public spending, the government is distributing educational resources using explicit criteria of worth. This is a departure from the previous Conservative and Labour administrations where a greater focus was placed upon the quantity of resources available to the system as a whole. The current policy attempts to hold in tension the need for equity with the need to reward in order to encourage good practice. Translating this into practical action in terms of resource distribution raises difficult issues. Rewarding good practice alone may be insufficient to encourage this practice to spread to areas in need of it. Furthermore, identifying some parts of the educational system as being more worthy of reward inevitably reflects badly on those parts of the system considered to be unworthy. Whether exposure as being less effective will provide the impetus for these schools to improve, or whether it will discourage improvement is a debatable point.

Beacon School Policy is an example of the broader way in which this government distributes resources and of its strategic approach to school improvement. For this reason, Beacon School Policy is of central significance to the government's view of how to approach the next phase of school reform. It represents a relatively inexpensive means of

acknowledging success in the educational system.

This thesis is therefore not just a study of beacon schooling. It is a study also of a policy which is a significant exemplar of the government's approach to the engineering of school reform as exemplified in the 2001 White Paper '*Schools Achieving Success*'. Multiple strategies proposed in that White Paper, and in the consultation paper on teachers' professional development, '*Support for Teaching and Learning*' (DfES, 2000e), hinge upon the notion of mentoring, networking and the sharing of good practice in order to raise attainment.

Therefore a central aim of this thesis is to scrutinise the wider approach to school improvement proposed by the Labour Government.

David Jackson, Director of Research at the National College of School Leadership refers to Beacon School Policy as a vehicle for fostering change in other schools, as being seriously under-conceptualised (p 40). There is little evidence to support the notion that attempts to cascade successful practice between schools is effective. For example, the fifteen City Technology Colleges (CTCs) which were also grounded in this notion, were called 'beacons of excellence' by at least one Secretary of State for Education, but they did not develop practices worthy of sharing. The chances of their work being disseminated to neighbouring schools was limited by the hostility which surrounded them. Because the CTCs were held up as 'beacons', they were under enormous pressure to succeed and to do so in an innovative manner. This created internal pressures within the CTCs to guard any new ideas at the expense of other schools. The result was that CTCs never really fulfilled their beacon role (Whitty et al 1993, p138).

The CTC experiment shows that in order to spread good practice, it is insufficient simply to designate a group of schools as 'beacons' or 'lighthouses' and enhance their funding. Measures must be taken to ensure that other schools are willing to work with beacon schools and that models for how this might operate should be created.

Beacon School Policy does have enormous potential. Prior to the inception of beacon schools, LEAs enjoyed a virtual monopoly as local providers of professional development and expertise for school improvement. Yet LEA advisory teams vary in their effectiveness and by definition are not current classroom practitioners. In contrast, beacon staff enjoy the credibility of being current practitioners whose success can be publicly seen in the performance of their schools.

Thus the beacon school model represents a new strand in school improvement work in the UK. It can be seen as undermining the role of Local education authorities (LEAs) in promoting beacon staff rather than LEA advisors as the focus for improvement. Neither the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), nor LEAs, direct the kinds of improvement activities that beacon schools and their partners engage in. Teachers are free to determine their own development needs and to allocate time and resources provided by government accordingly.

The beacon initiative implies a new and different model of professionalism for teachers. The policy places schools and teachers at the centre of the drive for improvement. Beacon School Policy possesses the means by which teachers can be empowered and through which classroom practitioners can drive the process of change towards improvement. It can be seen as the ultimate in 'bottom-up' change. Yet, to realize this potential, certain questions must be asked of the policy, most notably:

- Can school effectiveness and improvement research inform Beacon School Policy in practice?
- What do we know about mechanisms for the effective dissemination of best practice and how do these compare with the reality of beacon school work?
- How can Beacon School Policy best integrate with other government initiatives, particularly those in 'Schools Achieving Success' in order to maximize improvement in schools?

This thesis provides some of the answers to these questions.

Section 1:

The Policy

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Introduction to Section 1

The Policy

This section is written in two chapters which cover the early development and implementation of Beacon School Policy and the ideas underpinning it.

Both chapters draw upon data derived from semi-structured interviews with two people centrally involved with beacon schooling. An interview was conducted with Keith Andrews, the senior civil servant at the DfES in charge of national Beacon School Policy. The other interview was with David Jackson, Director of Research and School Improvement at the National College of School Leadership (NCSL). David Jackson is an ex-beacon headteacher who has a special interest in the policy. The interviews were audio-recorded and extracts from them are used in this section. The interviews elicited new information, including access to previously unpublished DfES data. The semi-structured interview schedules used to collect this data are included as appendices 1 and 2. Discussion of how these interviews contribute to the overall research design for this study is found in Chapter 3.

Chapters 1 and 2 also make reference to existing school improvement research literature and to a recent National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) review of beacon schools.

Chapter 1

Early Policy Development and Implementation

Beacon School Rhetoric

The government explains the purpose of its wider public sector Beacon Policy as follows:

> Beacon schemes have been introduced in different parts of the public sector to identify first-class performers so that others can learn from their knowledge and experience.

> (Cabinet Office, 2001, p1)

Since 1997 the Labour Government has introduced a variety of beacon schemes in the public sector. These include NHS beacons, beacon councils, police beacons, central government beacons and beacon schools and colleges. All of these beacon schemes share the common characteristic that they are considered to be both high performing and should be able to disseminate their good practice to other organisations in the same sector

The first public announcement of plans for the creation of beacon schools as centres of excellence was made by the former Minister for School Standards, Stephen Byers, in Summer 1998 (Hackett, TES, 1998). The official remit of such schools was subsequently defined as follows:

> Beacon schools are those identified as amongst the best performing in the country and represent examples of successful practice to be brought to the attention of the rest of the education service. By taking positions of leadership they work in partnership with other schools so that their particular areas of expertise can be shared and passed on and others can be helped to reach the same standards.
> (DfES, 2000a, p1)

Beacon schools are one strand in a wider DfES school improvement strategy designed to raise standards of teaching and learning through the use of school-based initiatives.

Related initiatives include specialist schools and early excellence centres, the primary sector SCITT (school centred initial teacher training) consortium, Excellence in Cities Schemes (EiC), Educational Action Zones (EAZ) and city academies.

The success of Beacon Schools Policy is predicated on the notion that school improvement can occur through building partnerships in order to develop a two way exchange of knowledge between professionals. The concept is not one whereby schools in the scheme attempt to impose their practices on other schools. Instead, it is one where beacon schools share ideas that have worked for them in their particular circumstances, allowing partners to decide for themselves whether the principles can be adapted to their own situation (Brundrett 2000, p1).

Beacon schools receive on average £35,000 per annum from the DfES (DfES, 2001b) to be spent on any activity which disseminates and shares good practice. Eligible expenditure may include supply cover, additional allowances for staff, necessary equipment purchase and administration costs. It may not include expenditure on provision of services which the school charges for.

Unlike many other previous and current school improvement initiatives, the way in which beacon schools operate is largely unregulated by the DfES. The only brief given to beacons is to spend their enhanced budget on providing 'professional development' for partners. Thus the beacon model is a loose framework which gives schools considerable scope in order to decide what to do.

A Controversial Beginning: Selecting Beacon schools

Keith Andrews, Head of the DfES Beacon Unit since March 1998, recalls that the original proposal for beacon schools emanated from Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools (HMCI), Chris Woodhead. He suggested the idea to education policy advisors at Downing Street and to Michael Barber, former head of the DfES Standards and Effectiveness Unit (SEU) just after the May 1997 election. This is how Keith Andrews recalls the beginnings of the policy:

> Michael Barber joined the DfES to head up the new Standards and Effectiveness Unit and beacon schools was one idea he brought with him. I was brought in and told that beacon schools were going to be centres of excellence for spreading good practice and I was then told to get on with it.

> (Keith Andrews)

The DfES Beacon Unit was given six months by ministers to clarify what beacon schools should do, identify selection criteria, publish the details and select the schools. This short lead time and lack of clarity about beacon schools caused difficulty for civil servants. Keith Andrews explained the difficulties that this caused and how he attempted to overcome these problems:

> It is all very well to say beacons are excellent schools, but how would we identify them? We looked for the quickest, simplest method of doing it. At that point we decided that probably the easiest way was to look at the HMCI OFSTED annual report where the chief inspector names the best schools that have been inspected that year. We knew this might be unfair on those which had not yet been inspected. We did it this way to get things up and running quickly.
>
> (Keith Andrews)

Thus the DfES invited all of the schools identified in the 1996/97 HMCI annual report as being outstanding to express an interest in becoming beacon schools. One hundred and seventy six schools expressed an interest. Subsequently the DfES Beacon Unit found that it had only been given sufficient funding for seventy five schools.

An assessment panel to judge the applications was set up, comprising members of the Secretary of State's Standards Task Force. Members included distinguished educationists such as Professor David Hargreaves of Cambridge University and Professor John MacBeath of the University of Strathclyde. The panel included a group of headteachers and teachers who, it was felt, would be able to judge whether what was being proposed by the schools was feasible. According to Keith Andrews, the use of practicing teachers on the panel was seen by Ministers as part of a wider strategy to change the way government works by involving external partners. The panel choose seventy five schools (see Table 5,

page 27). The schools were given a remit to undertake the role for at least a period of three years, with a total budget of £1.8 (Hackett, 1998).

There were by now one hundred unsuccessful schools who were 'disaffected and disappointed'. This caused the DfES Beacon Unit some difficulty because these schools had been invited to apply and had been given almost a commitment by Michael Barber that they would be involved. But the biggest criticism according to Keith Andrews was:

> People said all of those schools are so good, they are all in leafy
> shires, they all have good intakes of pupils. Critics said of course
> they are successful. Do you expect the rest of education to learn
> by looking at elitist schools? Ministers were taken aback by the
> strength of criticism.
>
> (Keith Andrews)

The DfES still felt that this policy would become a success. The then Secretary of State for Education, David Blunkett, indicated a firm commitment to the policy when he set as one of the five priorities for the Chief Inspector of Schools in his new contract, 'the development of Beacon School Policy in order to build on the work of successful schools' (Hackett, G. 1998a). However this target was to lead to private difficulties between ministers and HMCI as follows:

> Ministers wished to widen the initiative in the next round and
> overcome criticism about elitist beacon schools. This sparked a
> row with Chris Woodhead because he wanted any expansion to
> focus purely around the 'outstanding' schools he had identified
> in his report. But ministers were quite clear that it had to change,
> even though there was pressure from policy advisers at Downing
> Street, we had to come to a compromise for the next stage where
> we used a mixture of selection criteria.
>
> (Keith Andrews)

This indicates that there was a clear division within government as to the purpose of beacon schools. HMCI Chris Woodhead saw beacons as being only those outstanding schools named in his report. These were mainly grammar and selective schools, often with middle class and mainly white intakes in suburban areas. Ministers and critics understood

that if the purpose of beacon schools was to disseminate best practice, there was a need to widen the definition to include effective schools in different categories, including urban areas. Ministers were clear that a wider range of selection criteria should therefore be introduced.

In Phase One, the selection criteria for the first seventy-five schools required them to be performing at a GCSE or Key Stage 2 national test level within the top ten per cent consistently for the last three years. Phase two needed a different approach.

A Broader Definition of Excellence: 'School Circumstances'

Keith Andrews explained that Ministers came to realize that the beacon school selection criteria that they had adopted were likely to result in the selection of an unrepresentative group of schools:

> Now we knew if we purely took the top ten per cent of performing Schools we would end up with a list of grammar schools and this is not what ministers wanted. So we had to find a way of getting a range, and we did this by looking at school circumstances or free school meals and this is still a criterion that we use.

> (Keith Andrews)

Therefore, from the phase two expansion in September 1999, two criteria were used:

- Appearance in the most recent annual report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools as a 'high performing school'.

and

- Past and present performance in relation to school circumstances.

In order to assess performance in relation to school circumstances, the DfES now measure GCSE and Key Stage 1 and 2 results in the light of Free School Meal (FSM) information. For secondary schools, the DfES eligibility criteria is 'excellence'. This was defined as an

end of key stage examination performance in the top ten per cent compared to other schools in the same free school meals band over a three year period. The excellence criteria for secondary and primary schools used in the 2001 expansion are shown in Tables 1 and 2 below (DfES, 2001a).

Table 1:

Excellence Criteria for Secondary beacon schools

GCSE 90th percentiles – Percent of pupils with 5A-Cs at GCSE

FSM*	1997	1998	1999	2000
Less than 5%	76	80	80	82
5% to 9%	64	66	69	70
9% to 13%	59	59	62	65
13% to 21%	52	53	56	55
21% to 35%	44	45	46	47
Over 35%	35	37	40	40
Over 50%	30	31	32	37

*FSM is Free School Meals

(Source: DfES 2001a)

For primary schools, 'excellence' was defined by the DfES as performance in the top fifteen per cent in their free school meal band according to Key Stage 2, level 4, mathematics and English performance. This performance should have been maintained for three years (see Table 2, page 19). In addition, highly improved primary schools were identified whose performance was in the top forty per cent in 1998 and which had improved by at least eighteen per cent in English and twenty-four per cent in mathematics (i.e. at least twice the national average rate of improvement) to be amongst the top twenty per cent of performers. This is shown in the improvement Table 3 overleaf (DfES, 2001a).

Table 2:

Excellence Criteria for Primary beacon schools

Key Stage 2 Free Meal Benchmarks, 85th Percentiles

English (FSM)	1998	1999	2000
Less than 8%	88	92	94
8% to 20%	78	85	88
20 to 35%	69	78	81
35% to 50%	60	72	76
Over 50%	58	70	75
Maths (FSM)	1998	1999	2000
Less than 8%	90	93	97
8% to 20%	82	86	90
20% to 35%	74	78	83
35% to 50%	67	71	77
Over 50%	61	67	74

Source (DfES, 2001a)

Table 3:

Improvement Criteria for Primary beacon schools

Key Stage 2 Free Meal Benchmarks, 85th Percentiles

English	1998	2000
Less than 8%	81	96
8 % to 20%	72	88
20% to 35%	62	80
35% to 50%	54	72
Over 50%	48	67
Maths	1998	2000
Less than 8%	77	94
8% to 20%	67	85
20% to 35%	56	78
35% to 50%	46	71
Over 50%	43	68

Source (DfES, 2001a)

In the case of First or Infant schools, beacon schools were identified as being those consistently in the top fifteen per cent of performers for their free school meal band, according to Key Stage 1 level 2b mathematics and reading performance over three years

(Table 4). In addition, the DfES identified highly improved schools whose performance was at least in the top forty per cent in 1998 and which had improved by at least ten per cent in reading and twenty two per cent in Mathematics (that is, at least twice the national rate of improvement) to be amongst the top twenty per cent of performers (DfES, 2001a).

Table 4:

Infant Schools, Beacon Criteria % at level 2b and above

Reading	1998	1999	2000		Maths	1998	1999	2000
Less than 8%	87	89	90		less than 8%	88	89	94
8% to 20%	79	82	83		8% to 20%	80	82	89
20% to 35%	69	73	74		20% to 35%	72	74	83
35% to 50%	63	68	70		35% to 50%	68	70	79
Over 50%	62	64	63		Over 50%	68	67	77

Source (DfES, 2001a)

Once schools met these examination criteria, the DfES then checked the Ofsted database in order to confirm the short-listed schools' suitability for beacon status in terms of *'overall high performance and delivery of consistently high standards of teaching'* (DfES 2001a, p8). Following this two stage process, the DfES produced a list of schools meeting the beacon criteria. This list was subjected to further selection relating to geographical location and type of school, so as to avoid creating imbalances in the beacon school network in individual LEAs or regions.

Using these methods in Phase Two, the DfES sent out invitations to schools to bid. By May 1999 a further 125 schools had been selected with an additional budget allocation of £3.75 million (DfES 1999). These schools, selected using 'school circumstance' criteria, brought in a more diverse range of beacons, (including my own school) to the network. By this second phase of expansion there were two hundred designated beacon schools.

Another forty-seven schools joined within a few months bringing the total to two hundred and forty seven by September 1999.

Involving Local Education Authorities

During both Phases One and Two, concern had been expressed by beacon headteachers that some local education authorities were uncooperative and saw beacon schools as a threat to their advisory work. Keith Andrews stated that a number of LEAs saw beacon schools as '*an attack on their future existence*'. This was as a result of 'Fair Funding' where budgets to maintain LEA advisory functions had been delegated to schools. Some local authorities feared that schools might choose not to buy back their services and use beacon schools for advisory support instead. Partly as a consequence of this from 1999, LEAs were required to show how the activities of beacon schools contributed to their education development plans (Thornton, 1999).

By the time Phase Two beacons had been launched, the DfES had received initial unpublished results from an NFER evaluation of the first seventy-five pilot beacon schools (subsequently published as DfES, 2000g). This research suggested that the scheme was working well. This feedback, as Keith Andrews noted in interview, coincided with the national launch of the Excellence in Cities (EiC) initiative:

> We decided that beacon would become a key strand under EiC and that we would go for a really huge expansion to 1,000 schools by 2002. Whilst EiC is largely secondary, it had never been the intention to restrict beacon schools to the secondary sector. Beacons can be nursery, special, primary and secondary. EiC areas needed a lot of support and we felt that beacons could play a role in EiC areas while using the areas as a means to boost the beacon network.
>
> (Keith Andrews)

In this way beacon schools would provide an engine for the new EIC policy and this would clearly impact on the location of subsequent beacon schools. Under EiC, the DfES made a commitment to each LEA that they would get at least one new beacon school in each year. In order further to support EiC, after May 1999, potential beacon schools were required to name in their application at least one 'City Partner School'. These schools

were defined as those which are likely to have an intake of socially disadvantaged children. In addition, the selection criteria were altered so that twenty-five per cent of all beacon schools would be in, or would serve an urban area (DfES 2001b).

Although the 'school circumstances' or free school meals criterion increased the breadth of schools involved, the DfES noted difficulties with the method. For example, two schools can have similar free school meals percentages, but may still have very different intakes and also differ in their effectiveness. For example schools which possess best practice in special educational needs, or in inducting refugee learners, or those who are effective with learners with English as an additional language, may not necessarily be selected using a free meals system. A further refinement in the criteria was therefore needed to meet Ministers' desire to form a representative group of beacon schools.

Up until the beginning of 2000, the DfES had conspicuously ignored local authorities in the creation of the beacon network. In interview, Keith Andrews pointed out that initial NFER research (DfES, 2000g) reported that where local authorities were assisting beacon schools this was seen as very helpful, yet in other cases they were still very hostile.

As a consequence, in 2000, the selection criteria altered again to include the possibility of nominations from LEAs. This was done both to secure the advantages of LEA co-operation for all beacon schools and to assist with the broadening of the beacon network to include other kinds of schools. Keith Andrews explained this as follows:

> One reason for LEA hostility was that we had left them out of the loop when we announced the policy, they weren't involved at all, it was just something between the department and the schools. In hindsight I think this had pluses and minuses, I am not sure if we did it again we would do it any differently, but lessons were learnt, as we moved on we felt we ought to involve them a little more. Initial evaluation showed that where LEAs were involved it was helpful.
>
> (Keith Andrews)

In order to rectify this omission, in the Phase Three expansions in 2000, LEAs were given the right to nominate schools which might not otherwise meet DfES criteria. The DfES would consider these schools if there was a special reason (for example, a good example of a school achieving success for learners with English as an additional language) and if they were close to meeting the standard beacon criteria.

Tables 5 to 9 (page 27) show the distribution of beacon schools in each phase between type of school, type of local authority and government region. The Tables also show the percentages of beacon schools in urban authorities and in EiC zones. Table 5 shows that at Phase 2, the majority of beacon schools were in the secondary sector. This was to change in favour of the primary sector as the numbers of beacon schools grew. Table 7 shows that in Phase 2, under half of beacons were located in urban areas, whilst Table 8 shows that just sixteen percent of beacons were located in EiC zones. These proportions were set to rise significantly as the size of the network expanded.

Political Expedience and Beacon Schools

The DfES began to link the beacon network to a series of emerging political and educational priorities. In March 2000, David Blunkett announced a 'zero tolerance' approach toward the lowest achieving secondary schools (DfES, 2000f, p13). This was to involve a new role for beacon schools. Any secondary school achieving less than fifteen per cent 5A*-C grades at GCSE by 2004 would be closed and re-opened as a 'fresh start'. The five hundred and thirty schools in this category were to be twinned with either a beacon or a specialist school. In practice this twinning meant that new beacon schools had to identify one of five hundred and thirty named schools as a partner in their beacon applications. It was left open to the schools involved to decide how they would work and what this partnership meant in practice.

A clear assumption was made by the DfES that the differing and varied approaches to beacon work offered by some of the most successful schools in the UK would be successful in raising attainment in some of the most disadvantaged schools, with the most

intractable problems. In the same speech, David Blunkett challenged critics to send their children to schools where one in five pupils left with no qualifications and 'just sit and watch them fail'.

In the Phase Three expansion in September 2000, the beacon network more than doubled with three hundred new schools and a budget allocation of a further £18 million raising the total number of beacons to five hundred and fifty (DfES, 2001b). Table 5 (p 27), shows that by Phase three, the proportion of beacon secondary schools had dropped from forty-seven percent of all beacons in 1999 to just thirty-three percent in 2000. At the same time, the proportion of primary beacon schools grew from forty-two percent to fifty-nine percent. Reflecting the new emphasis on EiC areas, the proportion of beacons in these areas jumped from sixteen to thirty-nine percent of all beacons (Table 8, p27). Similarly, the proportion of beacons in urban areas increased from forty-three percent to sixty-four percent (Table 7, p27). This large expansion gave the beacon schools network a primary school and urban emphasis.

During this expansion, the NFER research referred to by Keith Andrews, when finally published, concluded that beacon schools had the *'potential'* to play a major role in school improvement. It also said that beacons were not yet consistently doing so because the policy was underconceptualised (DfES, 2000g). Yet on the basis of this the DfES committed resources to a major expansion of the programme.

In November 2000, Ofsted published a report on the Government's National Literacy Strategy which hailed the transformation of reading standards in primary schools while pointing out that more needed to be done to improve standards of writing (Ofsted 2000, p3). The DfES immediately announced the creation of thirty eight new primary beacon schools chosen because of their expertise in the teaching of writing. These were to join the existing primary beacons to form a three hundred and fifty strong primary writing beacon network.

Beacon Schools Today

During the Phase three expansion the Beacon Unit at the DfES was inundated with applications from potential beacons. This led to a great deal of disappointment amongst schools, something which Keith Andrews said caused ministers great concern. As a result of this the DfES decided to change the application procedure completely. This was to be in line with the broader move away from a bidding culture which was being promoted in order to reduce bureaucracy in education.

From 2001, achievement of beacon status was no longer to be the result of a competition. The DfES selected new beacon schools using its centrally held data and sent out invitations. Schools no longer needed to bid. LEAs were sent a letter by the DfES detailing which schools it proposed to invite and local authorities were asked to comment and make their own nominations. Keith Andrews saw this as allowing the DfES to gain the benefit of using local knowledge held by LEAs.

The fourth phase expansion in September 2001 coincided with the expiry of the initial three year period of beacon status granted to the first seventy five beacon schools in September 1998. Of these, thirteen schools decided not to reapply. Keith Andrews explained that the reasons given for voluntarily withdrawing from the initiative varied from a decline in examination results in some schools, to a perception of beacon status as involving too heavy a work-load. He stated that some schools may have realised that they had actually done very little beacon work and so would not get through the re-selection procedure.

In September 2001, a further four hundred and twenty five schools joined the beacon network taking the total to one thousand schools with a total budget allocation of £39 million (DfES, 2001d). In this expansion, the emphasis on primary schools continued with sixty-two percent of all beacons being primary and the proportion of secondary schools falling to just twenty-eight percent. Numbers of Special schools grew to six percent of beacons (Table 5, p 27). The proportion of beacons in London fell steadily over time to just under nineteen percent of the total (Table 6, p27), whilst metropolitan and shire

beacons stayed at a relatively constant level throughout (approximately twenty-nine and thirty-seven percent respectively). The proportion of beacons in unitary authorities grew from ten percent in 1998 to fifteen percent of the total in 2001. The proportion of beacons in urban authorities rose by nearly half from forty-three percent to fifty-nine percent of the total (Table 7, p 27). Similarly table 8 shows that the proportion of beacons located in EiC areas more than doubled from sixteen percent to thirty-eight percent. Thus this most recent and large scale expansion, continued with a primary school and urban focus in the location of new beacons

Table 9 shows that the North West government region contains more beacons than any other area, whilst the Eastern region possesses fewest. This table shows that more than half of all beacons are located in just three of the nine government regions, that is, in London, the South East or the Northwest.

For the 2001 phase five expansion the DfES altered the definition of 'excellence' used in its selection criteria. Excellent secondary schools now included those in the top fifteen percent of their free school meals band, rather than just those in the top ten percent. This widening of the criteria was necessary in order to broaden the choice of secondary schools available to the DfES. The criteria for Infant and First schools altered so that it no longer made reference to social circumstances as measured by free school meals. Instead these schools were to be selected from amongst those scoring in the top ten percent in absolute terms in reading, writing, spelling and mathematics scores (DfES, 2002). This change is likely to mean that in future Infant and First Schools awarded beacon status may be relatively privileged in their intakes compared to these sectors as a whole.

Tables 5 – 9 Categorisation of beacon schools by phase and region

Table 5: Beacon schools by Type*

	Primary	Secondary	Special	Nursery	Total
Phase 1, Sept 1998	36(48%)	23(31%)	3(4%)	13(17%)	**75**
Phase 2, Sept 1999	102(42%)	116(47%)	22(9%)	7(3%)	**247**
Phase 3, Sept 2000	325(59%)	182(33%)	30(5%)	13(2%)	**550**
Phase 4, Sept 2001	618(62%)	283(28%)	62.(6.2%)	37(3.7%)	**1,000***

* 38 Primary Writing beacons joined the network between the Phase 3 and 4 expansion. Coinciding with Phase 4, the 75 Phase 1 beacon schools came up for renewal of status. 13 schools decided not to renew. This gave an overall total of 1,000 beacons.

Table 6: Beacon schools by Type of Local Authority

	London	Metropolitan	Unitary	Shires	Total
Phases 1& 2, Sept 1999	62(25%)	65(26%)	25(10%)	95(38%)	**247**
Phase 3, Sept 2000	125(23%)	162(29%)	61(11%)	202(37%)	**550**
Phase 4, Sept 2001	189(18.9%)	292(29%)	153(15%)	366(36.6%)	**1,000**

Table 7: Beacon schools by Urban Authority

(defined as London, Metropolitan and a selection of Unitary Authorities)

	Urban	% of total
Phase 2 – September 1999	85	43%
Phase 3 – September 2000	193	64%
Phase 4 - September 2001	328	60%
Total after Phase 4	589	59%

Table 8: Beacon schools in Excellence in Cities Authorities

	Number of beacon schools	% of total
Phase 2 – September 1999	32	16%
Phase 3 – September 2000	120	39%
Phase 4 – September 2001	202	37%
Total after Phase 4	**388**	**38%**

Table 9: Beacon schools by Government Region

Total	North East	North West	Yorkshire and Humberside	East Midlands	West Midlands	South West	East	London	South East
247	10	40	24	15	26	19	17	62	34
550	42	110	44	33	46	39	30	125	81
1000	70	193	102	61	95	76	57	189	159

Source: Unpublished data provided by DfES Beacon Unit.

Future Plans for Beacon Schools

The DfES plans to create a more representative network of beacon schools over time. Within this network, EiC zones will take priority. Subject to the EiC regional bias, the DfES will give areas with low numbers of beacon schools or areas with a lack of schools in a particular phase priority. Keith Andrews explained:

> If every area had equally good schools, in an ideal world, we would have four per cent of each type of school as beacons in each LEA. We know we will not achieve this for a variety of reasons, but it is a notional target.

(Keith Andrews)

The ease with which this geographical balance could be achieved was to be skewed by other intentions for the beacon network. In February 2000 the DfES published a consultation document called *Professional Development; Support for Teaching and Learning* on professional development for teachers (DfES, 2000e). The stated aim of this consultation was to find ways of '*recognizing and deepening the commitment to professional development among teachers, schools and local authorities*'.

The work of beacon schools in involving teachers in partner schools in mentoring, consultancy and work shadowing was identified by the DfES as being '*a signpost*' to the way forward nationally. The evidence underpinning this assertion is unclear. The document called for a new emphasis on beacon schools to lead the way by showing excellence in professional development. This consultation was followed up by the publication of '*Learning and Teaching: A strategy for professional development*', (DfES, 2001e) in March 2001. This document signposted a renewed drive by the DfES to promote high quality continuing professional development (CPD). The strategy proposed the identification of three hundred new Professional Development beacons. Yet no guidance was produced for beacon schools as to how they might do this, nor was a lead given by the DfES on what was expected. Indeed, no reference of any kind was made by the DfES Beacon Unit in its communications with beacon schools to the strategy outlined in *Learning and Teaching*. Beacon schools, including my own, carried on as before,

interpreting the role locally as they saw fit. This situation hints at a lack of co-ordination between different departments within the DfES.

In March 2001, Ofsted officially recognised beacon schools by publishing an amendment to the inspection framework by providing information to school inspectors on how to inspect them. All beacon school inspections must now report on the progress that the schools are making in their dissemination work. The DfES criteria for re-approval as a beacon mainly depend upon direct evidence of the impact of beacon work on partner schools. Yet Ofsted inspection criteria advise inspectors not to contact partner schools. Instead, inspectors are to concentrate upon self-evaluation processes and in-school management structures for beacon work (Ofsted, 2001, p17). This raises the possibility that Ofsted may give a school a glowing report for its beacon work, yet the same school could subsequently be refused re-approval as a beacon school by the DfES (Ofsted 2001e).

In February 2002 the Government published a Green Paper designed to signal major reform in the 14-19 qualifications framework. This document indicated that for the next phase of beacon expansion in September 2002 there would be a new emphasis on schools offering expertise in collaborative practice in educating 14-19 year olds (DfES, 2002a).

Thus, by 2002 beacon schools had been proposed as a model for urban educational renewal through the creation of EiC zones containing beacon networks. They were to play a central role in raising standards in primary writing, in improving the lowest attaining five hundred and thirty secondary schools and also in leading the way to excellence in a renewed drive for better professional development for teachers. New secondary beacons to promote collaborative practice in educating 14-19 year olds had also been announced.

All of this was proposed before a full evaluation of the beacon initiative had been undertaken and before any guidance had been issued by the DfES relating to the kinds of practice that might best promote sharing and transfer of professional expertise.

Green and White Papers: *'Building on Success' and 'Schools Achieving Success'*

In February 2001 the DfES announced in the Green Paper *'Building on Success'* the intention that every school should have the opportunity and responsibility to make a contribution to a family of schools, to the development of the educational system as a whole, or to the local community (DfES, 2001c, 4.17). A target was announced of one thousand beacon schools by September 2001, consisting of two hundred and fifty secondary beacons, with an intention to expand this number to four hundred in the longer term. When the subsequent White Paper *'Schools Achieving Success'* was published in Summer 2001, a new type of beacon school was introduced specializing in the provision of services for 'families and communities' (DfES, 2001g, p39).

The Government in outlining its Green Paper plans to establish city academies, advanced specialist schools, training schools and more beacon schools said that it believed *'increasing diversity leads to more opportunities for schools to learn from each other'.* Similarly, the Government argued that, *'through a range of policies, including the establishment of beacon schools, we have made it easier than ever to find and apply best practice'* (DfES, 2001c, p17).

It is unclear on what basis the DfES assumes that diversity between schools increases learning by schools from each other. Similarly, it is uncertain that a policy like Beacon Schooling has the power to assist in the effective transmission of best practice.

The same message was reinforced in *'Schools Achieving Success'* which introduced a new type of beacon called the advanced beacon school and which put beacon schools at the very center of future educational policy. *Achieving Success* made it clear that policies for school improvement in future were to be based *'on what successful schools do'* and that the DfES would work with these schools in order that *'they could take a leading role in the next wave of education reform.'* (DfES, 2001g, p41).

Schools Achieving Success also proposed that the '*best*' secondary schools should be able to opt out of parts of the National Curriculum and have flexibility over teachers' pay and conditions (DfES, 2001g). Many of the schools in a position to do this will be beacon schools. If these schools do opt out to develop practices specific to their contexts, there may eventually be little good practice left to share with less successful schools. This is because less successful schools will not (because of the White Paper proposals) be able to emulate the curriculum and staffing structures of their more successful and therefore more autonomous and different beacon counterparts.

According to the White Paper, beacons would exist in a world where every school had a particular special character, either specialist, beacon or faith. The likelihood is that many beacon schools will become specialist schools because they have the good management and know-how needed to attract the necessary sponsorship and write competitive bids to the DfES. Thus, the *Schools Achieving Success* proposal to expand the number of schools '*with character*' may need greater thought if it is to avoid concentrating educational resources amongst already successful schools and so avoid channeling funds meant for the sharing of best practice into the budgets of schools who are least in need of it.

Keith Andrews indicated to me that policy makers saw beacons developing in the next five years as part of 'diversity partnerships'. These are seen by the DfES as local groupings, involving a beacon school, a faith school, a training school and a specialist school all sharing practice together. The centrality of this emphasis on sharing good practice for the second term of the Labour Government arguably makes it essential that models for effective beacon practice are developed. Some of the research literature which might underpin these models is discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 2

Ideas Underpinning Beacon Policy

Beacon School policy is predicated on the notion that it is unproblematic to identify examples of excellent practice and so designate certain schools as beacons. Yet there are difficulties in defining 'excellence'. Government rhetoric presents Beacon Policy as 'modernising the comprehensive principle', with clear implications for the status of non-beacon schools. The policy assumes that it is possible for beacon schools to operate as agents in order to bring about wider systemic change and school improvement. This chapter considers these key ideas underpinning the policy and the research evidence to support them.

'Excellence'

A central thread in government education policy for school reform as set out in the White Paper, *Schools Achieving Success*, (DfES, 2001g) lies in the identification of successful schools and in the promotion of success throughout the system by encouraging these schools to share their good practices. Beacon Schools are one practical example of the notion of bringing about school improvement using the agency of successful schools to share their practice. The use of networking and peer support for improvement is emblematic of Labour education policy. Therefore government strategy relies heavily upon being able to identify successful schools and successful practice. Yet *Schools Achieving Success* is unclear about how these schools and practices will be identified.

Goldstein (2001) suggests that the lack of clarity by the DfES in how they might identify good practice is no coincidence. He argues that it exists because it is very difficult to identify successful schools. His main argument is based around what he sees as the unsatisfactory nature of league table comparisons as a means of identifying success. He argues that using raw league tables (as the DfES did to identify Phase One beacon schools) does not account for the intake characteristics of pupils. The beacon schools identified in 1998 using this method were widely considered to be those with advantaged

intakes rather than necessarily being 'effective' schools. In Phase Two of the beacon expansion, adjustment was made for intake by taking account of the percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals. This is a very narrow definition of intake because it ignores factors like gender, pupil mobility and prior attainment all of which impact heavily on examination success. Because of this, the method of identifying successful schools used by the DfES in the first two phases of beacon expansion would have been unable accurately to identify effective schools other than those outliers at the very top end of performance. By utilizing LEA recommendations and local knowledge for the third phase of expansion this weakness in the procedure has been partially ameliorated.

Statistical techniques involving multi-level modeling can adjust for a wide range of intake factors in order to produce a 'value added' analysis of attainment. Yet a reliable national data set has not yet been created which would allow this analysis to be undertaken for all schools. Where multi-level value added studies (on a sample basis) have been carried out, it has usually been found that when adjustment is made for statistical error, the majority of schools are not significantly different from the average (Goldstein 2001). Thus the most sophisticated tools for calculating value added cannot provide a sound basis for identifying successful schools.

Keith Andrews indicated in my interview with him that in the near future the Government was looking to identify potential beacon schools using a value added system. Yet research by Goldstein (1997, 2001, 2001a) strongly suggests that if value added analysis were possible on a national basis it would only be able to identify a small percentage of very highly performing or very poorly performing schools. Potential beacon schools identified in this way, would be statistical 'outliers'. They would by definition be small in number and may not be representative of the schools that they are expected to work with.

It is true that random statistical error makes the identification of successful schools difficult. Yet Goldstein may be overstating his case when he argues that this difficulty implies that it is not possible to identify successful schools. There are clearly other foci

which can be used alongside examination results to do this. David Jackson of NCSL recognised this in his interview with me when he suggested that it would be a good idea for Beacon Policy to broaden in the future to include good examples of all kinds of schools, including for example, *'schools in special measures making good progress towards getting a clean bill of health'*. He made the point that it is possible to identify success in different circumstances using 'common sense' measures, other than just simply examination attainment, and this might include consideration of inspection reports.

Sammons et al (1997) argue that schools tend to be differentially effective, and perform differently depending on the subject department, year group and the initial attainment of each child. Additionally some schools may exhibit relatively good performance for initially poorly achieving students and produce relatively weak performance for initially highly achieving students or vice versa (Goldstein, 1997, p2). If this is the case, Goldstein (2001) argues that it makes the concept of identifying 'successful' schools even more problematic. Schools are loosely coupled so that there may be failing departments in successful schools, but this failure may be masked by high overall average attainment. This implies that policy could usefully focus less on successful schools and more on successful parts of schools or 'beacon departments'.

Increased Inequality Between Schools?

Goldstein (2001) also argues that attempts to identify success through examination results are likely to promote increased inequality between schools, an outcome which is the exact opposite to that intended by Beacon School Policy. He suggests that schools with better intake attainments and more privileged pupils, will tend to be identified as 'successful'. With the DfES approach to using successful schools as agents to improve others, these schools will receive more funding and their practices will tend to be the ones used as exemplars. It seems likely that this will increase social and academic segregation (Goldstein, 2001, p2). This is a clear danger with the policy.

The use of targeted resourcing based on examination success has been used to create beacon schools. Yet the 'light' from these schools may burn at the expense of others and

not just in terms of attracting resources. Myers (2000) points out that in some cases, schools in urban areas have 'improved' by simply changing their intake. Often schools have achieved this to the detriment of other less popular schools, which have been left with a disproportionate number of disaffected children.

Thus, identifying success in terms of examination results produces an incentive for schools to alter their intakes towards pupils with higher initial achievements. Those schools that are successful in doing this will be perceived as '*good*' schools because their intakes will produce good examination results. The success of these schools will leave other schools with largely disadvantaged intakes and consequently a lower chance of achieving examination success. Hence a focus on league tables and on creating 'lighthouse schools' such as city academies, advanced specialist schools and beacon schools is likely to increase the probability of failure in non-lighthouse schools. This failure is associated with the difficulties created by concentrations of disadvantaged children rather than a lack of adoption of the practices evident in beacon schools. In this way, beacon schools may indirectly help to create failure elsewhere.

Managing The Change, A World Class Vision?

Michael Barber has described overall government policy for schools as driving through school improvement by creating a 'world class' educational system through a strategy of '*high challenge coupled with high support*' (Barber, 2000).

The current strategy represents an intensive and wide ranging package of reforms which in terms of examination attainment does seem to be having the desired effect in raising standards at ages 11,14 and 16. By world standards, '*it is an impressive example of large scale reform*' (Bassey, 2000). But, in the words of Michael Fullan (2000), '*the goal is not only to establish large scale reform, but to sustain it*'. Whether or not current reforms, of which beacon schools are a part, will have any longer term impact is contestable. The teaching unions, research evidence, and even the main architect of the drive to improvement suggests that there will be difficulties in embedding reforms for the longer

term. Michael Barber (2000, p18) has pointed out that as a consequence of reform *'the capacity of the system is stretched to the limit'*. He also recognizes the dangers of reform being seen as imposed from above:

> the sustained drive from national government risks the creation of an entirely top-down reform with its associated pressures to conform, whereas all the evidence suggests that successful change requires a combination of top-down and bottom-up change.

(ibid)

This aptly expressed concern about the long-term impact of top-down reform arises because those who are expected to change (teachers and students), and those who are expected to accept the changes (parents and community), assign their own meanings to change and respond to it in ways that are consistent with their existing knowledge, beliefs and practices (Oakes, 2000). Because schools are 'loosely coupled' organizations (Elmore, 1983), the change process is unpredictable, non-linear and non-rational (Louis & Miles, 1990). This means that change will not go forward precisely as planned (Fullan, 1999) and the impact of reform will depend upon the particular culture of each school (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Therefore, even when change is successful, reforms are adapted and reformulated as they are attempted in individual schools and classrooms (Fullan, 1999, Hargreaves, 1994).

Thus critics suggest that reform efforts like those proposed by Barber for a world class system fail to achieve what they originally intended because they do not take sufficient account of the depth, range and complexity of what teachers do (Basia and Hargreaves, 2000). It is argued that prescribed pedagogical change does little to develop a learning culture amongst educators. Instead, by sometimes undermining teacher moral and by creating a bureaucratically unwieldy approach to enforcement, these kinds of reforms may do more harm than good (Whitford and Wong, 2000).

Whilst Beacon Policy does give schools scope for freedom of action, the benefits of this

may be lost in the myriad of other tightly specified reforms which constitute the drive toward a world class educational system.

Lessons from 'Lighthouse Schools'

Whilst Beacon School Policy can be seen as representing a 'bottom up' reform strategy, this still does not mean that the policy will automatically be successful. In order to have the desired impact, beacon practice would have to be scaled up to the level of the whole system, and systemic reform is not easy to achieve.

There have been other attempts at systemic reform through building networks of co-operative schools where participants freely choose to implement reforms (Slavin, 1998). These include Sizer's (1992) Coalition of Essential Schools, Levin's (1987) Accelerated Schools and the New American Schools Network (Stringfield et al, 1996) in the USA. In Britain the Improving the Quality of Schools for All project (Hopkins et al, 1994), and now the beacon schools network are similar examples. It seems clear from the White Paper *Schools Achieving Success* (DfES, 2001g) that this networking approach between families of schools is likely to be a central focus of the drive towards school improvement for the second term of office of the Labour administration.

These networks share the common characteristic that 'model', 'innovative' 'lighthouse' or beacon schools attempt to act as catalysts to "scale up" reform across other schools in the larger systems within which they are embedded. In the case of some of the American Lighthouse initiatives, the schools were brand-new and so carried a double burden because they had both to establish themselves and then disseminate their practice. Fink (2000) charts the lifecycle of lighthouse schools as usually beginning as places of hope, enthusiasm and creativity, but within a relatively short time a significant number of these schools regress into convention through the attrition of tradition. Unlike Lighthouse Schools, beacon schools are already established, and so need only focus on dissemination. Furthermore, this dissemination is of good practice, which is not necessarily the same as 'innovative practice'. In theory, this gives beacon schools a greater chance of success than American Lighthouse Schools had.

Beacons as Catalysts for Systemic Change

'Schools Achieving Success' (DfES, 2001g) makes it clear that the Government expects to bring about systemic improvement through the creation of a range of new types of school, including beacon schools. Yet there is relatively little research literature about the effectiveness of 'lighthouse' or 'model' schools as catalysts for change in a wider system. Commentators such as Goodlad (1996) and Prestine (1998) suggest that the strategy has limited power to promote systemic change. Others commentators accept that model schools and their practices are not easily replicated, but point out that they do:

> break paradigms of existing educational practice….this paradigm breaking function is the most important one that lighthouse schools perform… they do this by creating living images of possibility, practicality and hope.

> (Hargreaves, 1992, pp.126-7)

This mould-breaking function underlies the *'model school'* approach to systemic reform (Barber 1996, Manno et al, 1998, Sizer 1992, Stringfield et al 1996). Fink reports on the experience of one 'lighthouse' school in Canada using the pseudonym of Byron School. Efforts by other schools to copy Byron's purposes, structures and culture ultimately met with rejection (Fink, 2000, p44). The school was slow to effect change elsewhere. This change occurred over a period of twenty-five years as it provided a stream of new leaders with a different outlook who took up promoted posts. This suggests that, for 'scaling up' to work, it must be more of a long term re-culturing process than a strategic plan of transportation (Goodlad, 1996; Newmann and Wehlage, 1995).

A beacon can dim. In the Byron case the school was found to have lost its innovative character over a ten year period. The school began to conform with those around it. This is likely to have happened because the act of dissemination of good practice is very time consuming.

That seventeen percent of the original seventy-five beacons did not seek re-designation is unsurprising. As Lortie (1975) has said, *'lighthouse schools are often voracious consumers of human energy and resources that leave other schools in the shadows'.* Schools have finite energy for these activities and dropping out may be a rational decision before beacon activities start to damage the performance of the school. The Byron case study suggests that schools as separate organizations may not be centres of change, but rather the "objects" of change. Byron's creation, growth and long-term attrition were largely due to forces beyond its control. This implies that when governments establish 'model' schools with a view to scaling up to larger systems, this can undermine the sustainability of the school's innovative ethos. Conversely, when the authorities take steps to protect the advantaged position of the 'model' school, they invite overt and covert opposition from other schools (Fink, 2000, p47).

The long time-frame evident in the case of Lighthouse Schools is not a feature of Beacon School Policy. The Government intends that practice in beacon schools will be scaled up through dissemination to other schools within the initial three year life of a beacon. For this accelerated impact to occur, beacon schools may need support in how to disseminate most effectively.

Yet school improvement research suggests that, while a good deal is known about creating *'islands of change'*, there has been little success in creating *'continents of reform'* (Hargreaves et al, 1996). Research into scaling up is often research into the conditions under which educational practice can get more widely adapted, rather than about how the purposes and principles underpinning these programmes might be spread, even if the programmes themselves are not (Fink, 2000, p46). This suggests that the DfES might experience greater success by commissioning research into how reform can be scaled up alongside work on dissemination strategies for beacon schools to use.

The evidence that exists from Lighthouse Schools suggests that to sustain innovation in a model school, while using it as a catalyst for change in a larger system, educational leaders must adopt a very deliberate, low profile and long-term scaling up strategy. This

would involve elimination of words like 'innovative', 'model', and 'lighthouse' from discussions about scaling up. These terms would be replaced by discussions about pilot projects and experiments (Fink, 2000). This suggested approach is unfortunately very different from that used in England.

Practical Issues in the Transfer of Best Practice

The DfES consultation paper '*Support for Teaching and Learning*' (DfES, 2000e) sets out a vision for the future of professional development which is based upon the sharing of good practice. The purpose of this work is clearly to bring about school improvement by focusing on classroom skills. An important feature of the beacon initiative is that its success or otherwise, is predicated not only on the capacity of beacon schools to translate appropriate and effective provision but, just as crucially, on the capacity of the non-beacon partners to translate and implement beacon practices (DfES, 2000g). The fact that this can be achieved is not seen as problematical. Whether this transfer of best practice is possible at all depends both on the kinds of professional development activity engaged in by beacon schools and their partners and whether this activity matches the kinds of work that school improvement research has shown will raise standards in schools (DfES, 2000g).

David Jackson was headteacher of a Phase One beacon school. His recollection of the initiative is as follows;

> My experience is entering into a grossly under-conceptualized initiative which was founded on very naïve principles about sharing and using language which was alienating to the rest of the profession and a group of people whose bids ranged from the absurdly trivial to the deeply profound.

> (David Jackson)

Evaluation of the first seventy-five beacon schools carried out by NFER for the DfES found that beacon activities often included the following;

- annual events (like conferences and seminars)
- regular events (like weekly visits to and from schools, or regular training courses)
- daily events (like use of ICT or internet)
- ad hoc events or events continuous in their availability (as in offering advice, schemes of work, management policies or examples of good departmental practice)

The most popular methods of dissemination identified by NFER comprised interpersonal, face-to–face methods such as meetings, visits and discussions involving beacon and non-beacon staff (DfES, 2000g, p5-6).

David Jackson identifies two developing models of dissemination amongst beacon schools:

> Very small primary schools have come up with niche work, often initial teacher training. These are schools with limited capacity, working with Higher Education, sometimes with just three or four teachers and making a major impact. There is a huge gulf between these and schools with a co-ordinator who says 'come over and look at us' - these are surrogate professional development providers who say 'come to a conference at our place.

> (David Jackson)

This variation in approach to site-based dissemination from superficiality to highly structured work, without any central guidance from the DfES, is unlikely to promote universal transfer of good practice. For example, Showers et al (1987, p85) suggest that

> The first message from training research is that the important components of teaching practices are cognitive in nature... Thus the purpose of providing training on any practice is not simply to generate the external visible teaching 'moves' that bring that practice to bear in the instructional setting but to generate the cognitions that enable the practice to be selected and used appropriately.

This suggests that the kinds of practices identified by the NFER given above as being used by beacon schools (DfES, 2000g) may not be enough to achieve effective transfer. This is why David Jackson described Beacon School Policy as a grossly under-conceptualised initiative. Beacon schools may need to develop a model which is more intensive and interactive (DfES, 2000g, p36).

Conflicting Strategies Within The DfES

The importance of deeper dissemination involving coaching and mentoring is well understood within the DfES. This is shown by the approach to continuing professional development in *Learning and Teaching: A strategy for professional development (DfES, 2001e)*. The aim of this document is to help develop the strategy for professional development outlined in the Green Paper, *Building on Success (DfES, 2001c)*. It makes clear that the Government will place a renewed emphasis on providing more opportunity for teachers to learn from best practice in professional development in other schools. The strategy outlines a commitment by the DfES to carry out good quality research and evaluation into professional development opportunities *'in order that we can build up evidence of what works'* (DfES, 2001e, p7).

The DfES has pointed out that teachers identify that *'taking part in focused classroom skills training, involving coaching and mentoring'* has the greatest impact on their classroom practice (DfES, 2001e, p10). Therefore it appears odd, if the DfES understands the need for a structured model for professional development, that the Beacon Unit has not provided guidance, or at least made reference to this strategy in its communications with beacon schools. By the September 2001 expansion to one thousand beacon schools, the two policies seemed to be working with little reference to each other. This appears to be evidence of a lack of 'joined-up' thinking in policy making.

From the perspective of Keith Andrews, the most successful aspect of Beacon Policy has been in the area of professional development. As he explains:

What has been most successful are the side effects we were not expecting. Whilst the aim was always that we should aim to raise standards, the unanimous message is the gain in the continuing professional development of beacon school staff, the opportunities arising from working with others and for staff to evaluate themselves. This is not something that we had deliberately set out to do, it was a by-product, but given the importance now placed by the government on continuing professional development, it is a bonus.

(Keith Andrews)

So, whilst dissemination may not yet be having the benefits that it might, there are clearly gains in the continuing professional development of beacon school teachers.

Intelligent Networks and Beacon Networks

David Jackson suggests that Beacon School Policy is not as successful as it could be because the schools are not adequately networked, but work in an 'atomistic' fashion. He makes the point in the following way:

Beacon schools started from crude principles. That is, identify a scattering of schools and tell all the other schools 'you ought to learn from them'. It is a real turn off. A more successful approach might be to create capacity within what might be called 'learnerful schools' and get them to work with identified clusters.

(David Jackson)

But the creation of these 'learnerful' schools requires an explicit approach which aims to generate theories of transfer and improvement. In this light, Jackson says of beacons, that

Some of them have formed sustainable partnerships, but we are not generating theory from it, the knowledge is not transferable because we are not conceptualizing that knowledge.

(David Jackson)

Yet, at the same time, Jackson points out that inter-school networking is known to be a weak link from existing school improvement work (Hargreaves, et al 1992). A better model, he argues, is to adopt the focused group approach of the New American High

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Schools. In this model, the central or focus school works intensely with one school in the cluster at a time, rather than according to him, in a *'random scatter-gun beacon way'..* Jackson argues that this would build the capacity of that school in turn, to help the others. To become a capacity-building concept, Jackson suggests that beacon schools will need strategic shaping and development. This is a role that the DfES could be expected to perform.

Yet Beacon Policy does seem to have been of benefit to individual beacon schools. This benefit is not something that was originally intended by the DfES, but it is an important side effect. David Jackson suggests that beacon schools benefit in the following way:

> Enquiry activities emerging from beacon work generate animation. The process of defining beacon in relation to your own sense of yourself and the journey that you are traveling, the ways in which it creates synergies rather than just being another initiative all add value. If a school can integrate beacon status into its existing improvement work, it gives it both an impetus and a vehicle for improvement

> (David Jackson)

Thus Jackson argues that the strengths of the beacon model are in the opportunities that it gives for the reflection on practice that has to happen before teachers engage in dialogue with other teachers. In this way the work can become a stimulus for development and a lever for improvement.

He suggests that, even though there may be little over-riding strategy guiding the operation of beacon schools and that they operate at an unplanned, non-strategic level in terms of the whole system, they are still very useful. This is simply because of the sense of pride generated for staff working in a beacon school and the motivation to assist others that this creates. The beacon network has the latent potential to be much more than a better replacement for LEA advisory support. To achieve this would require structured external support and management of the network in terms of guidance on dissemination and network learning strategies.

Section 2

Surveying the Policy

Chapter 3   Methodology in Researching Beacon Schooling

- Previous Beacon School Research

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Introduction to Section 2

This section is written in two chapters. It includes comments on data derived from elite interviews, web site analysis, review of survey questionnaires, case studies and research undertaken in my own school.

Chapter 3

Methodology Used In Researching Beacon Schooling

Previous Beacon School Research

At the time of writing, two major pieces of research have been conducted into Beacon School Policy. Both of these have been commissioned by the DfES and undertaken by the National Foundation for Educational Research (DfES, 2000g, 2001f). The aims of the DfES research in 2000 were to evaluate:

- the range and quality of beacon activities offered to support good practice.
- the use made by beacon schools of resources.
- the perceived value of beacon school activities to their 'target audience' of non-beacon schools.

This research was based on an analysis of beacon school annual report questionnaires returned to the DfES alongside eight more detailed case studies. The follow up research in 2001 attempted to:

- identify the more successful modes of dissemination.
- assess the impact of beacon activities on partner schools and on the beacon schools.
- assess the nature of relationships between beacons schools and partners.
- consider issues of cost effectiveness.

My Research Design

In contrast to the previous NFER research, this research considers the underpinning rationale of policy makers in launching Beacon School Policy. It also explores the policy in terms of the implications of school improvement research for its potential efficacy. Finally, my research aims to consider the operation of beacon schools in practice.

To achieve these diverse aims (and for the reasons given below) no single research technique is sufficient. Therefore the research approach used here is a mixed-method one involving the following components:

- Elite interviews with the senior civil servant in charge of Beacon School Policy and also with the Director of Research and School Improvement at the National College of School Leadership (NCSL).
- Interrogation of official web site pages of all five hundred and eighty-seven beacon schools established by July 2001.
- Questionnaire Survey of all Headteachers of beacon schools.
- Case Studies of a beacon secondary, primary and special school.
- A case study of my own school compared with another secondary beacon school.

This multi-method approach was chosen to enable me to build up a comprehensive picture of different aspects of Beacon Schools Policy.

Methods of Data Collection

The interviews

To explore the original aims behind Beacon Schooling and how the policy came to develop, it was necessary to interview key informants within government. Assisted by my supervisor, Professor David Halpin, I contacted Professor Michael Barber (then Head of the DfES Standards and Effectiveness Unit) to seek an interview. Professor Barber referred me to the senior civil servant with responsibility for the policy, Keith Andrews. Keith Andrews has been head of the DfES Beacon Schools Unit since it began, and he has a unique understanding of how Government Ministers developed this policy within the DfES.

It was clear that Keith Andrews would naturally have a high personal interest in presenting the policy as being very successful. To counterbalance this potential bias, I also interviewed David Jackson, Head of Research and School Improvement at the NCSL.

Previously, he had been headteacher of one of the first beacon schools. As a headteacher he had been heavily involved in the Cambridge University 'Improving the Quality of Education for All' (IQEA) initiative which is concerned to create networks of schools in order to share and develop good practice. Furthermore, David Jackson went to the NCSL with a clear brief to set up networked learning communities and therefore would have a good understanding of how this could be done in practice as well as an understanding of the problems and possibilities of beacon schools. It was intended that these two interviews would provide a contrasting perspective on how the policy was created and how it was likely to work in operation.

Both interviews were conducted using semi-structured interview schedules (appendices 1 and 2) which I provided in advance to both respondents. The interviews were audio-tape recorded. I considered the semi-structured format to be the most useful because it gave me flexibility to alter the course of the interview in the very likely event that my two very experienced and knowledgeable respondents were to introduce some new and unexpected information (and both did). As Bryman (1990) suggests, semi-structured interviews differ from structured interviews in terms of the potential for the perspective of those being investigated to be made known. In Powney and Watts' (1987) terms these were still 'respondent interview' formats because my areas of interest set the broad parameters for the interview. Yet, at the same time, this semi-structured format, (unlike with a structured interview) would give me some freedom in the exact wording, sequencing and time given to different topics. It would also allow me as interviewer, to join in the conversation by discussing my own views on particular topics (Fielding, 1993). This method was appropriate because it was important for me to be able to deviate from the 'ideal' of a cool, distant and rational structured interviewer. This was because of my professional involvement in the topic as a beacon school headteacher.

The Questionnaire Survey

By Summer 2001 there were five hundred and eighty-seven beacon schools in operation and some had been working as beacons for three years. Because of the numbers of schools involved, face to face interviews would have been impossible. A questionnaire survey of

schools was a quick and efficient means of obtaining basic data about the schools, their original intentions and their experiences, good and bad, over time.

Headteachers are the key figures in deciding whether they wish their schools to operate as beacons. Headteachers are therefore in a unique position to report on why their schools wanted to join the network and what the impact of this has been. It is for this reason that the survey questionnaire was targeted at them.

I used the fact that I was a 'colleague' beacon headteacher to encourage other headteachers to reply. I made this clear by using my school headed notepaper showing the beacon logo in the letter accompanying the survey (appendix 5). As an incentive to participate, I offered to provide confirmation of receipt of responses to headteachers so that they could include these responses as evidence of their own beacon outreach work. I also offered to provide a summary of the main research findings to responding headteachers and many indicated that they would find this very useful. A draft survey was tested on a sample of twenty-five schools.

Whilst questionnaires provide a quick way of obtaining standardised data, there are also some disadvantages with this approach. The method assumes there are few problematic issues involved in establishing the 'reality' of beacon school experience for participants. Moreover, questionnaire surveys assume a realist ontology where social reality exists independently of the questioner and the respondent. They also assume social reality is ordered and that uniformities can be uncovered, even explained, by systematic questioning. In designing the questionnaire and in specifying the questions, I was aware of constructing a social 'reality' for beacon schools out of the meaning it has for me. This plays down the variety of 'realities' and perceptions which participants might feel are important.

I made a partial attempt to overcome this problem by providing space at the end of the questionnaire for respondents to make their own comments. This is a partial solution

because the questions asked in the survey still set the context within which respondents might make their 'free response'.

The involvement of headteachers in the questionnaire survey meant that there was a chance their responses might be overly positive through self-interest. This kind of effect has been noted in previous studies of school leaders (Caldwell, 1994). It was therefore essential that I was able additionally to visit case study schools and talk to a variety of staff to triangulate the questionnaire responses.

In summary, the survey questionnaire was used because I considered it would give basic information in a form which could easily be subjected to further processing to produce useful summary statistics. It was also used because it would allow headteachers to make some 'free responses'. The main drawback was that it would make a limited attempt to understand 'reality' as defined and experienced by beacon school participants. To gain this additional understanding a further less structured technique was required.

Case Studies of Beacon Schools

In order to build on the survey research and obtain a greater depth and breadth of understanding, I undertook three case studies of beacon schools. These are found in Chapters 5, 6 and 7. I did this because case studies can be interpretive in nature and the approach can elicit information about what different actors seem to be doing and what they think is happening (Bassey, 1999). I hoped that case studies would provide some 'writ large' examples of trends manifest in the questionnaire survey and that they would flesh out the detail. To preserve anonymity, the names used for the case study schools in this thesis are fictitious.

Case studies need not necessarily contain any of the attempts at triangulation to establish an 'objective' perspective (a perspective which may not necessarily be that of any of the respondents being surveyed) inherent in survey questionnaires. Yet, when coupled with such questionnaires they give a rich source of qualitative and quantitative information. Another important reason for choosing to use case studies is that they would provide a

detailed backdrop which I could use to reflect upon my own work as headteacher of a secondary beacon school.

I choose three case study schools representing each of the main categories of beacon school. That is, a secondary, a primary and a special school. Because beacon schools are considered by the DfES to be examples of successful schools, I selected these three cases as examples of exemplary educational practice. The selection criteria used were:

- Schools which had responded to the questionnaire survey.
- Excellence identified in most recent Ofsted report.
- Top 5% examination performance in the last year using Ofsted Performance and Data Report (PANDA) information (except for Special school).
- Geographical accessibility and proximity to home.
- One Secondary, one Primary and one Special school.
- 'Maturity' of beacon status - choosing three schools which had been beacons for varying lengths of time.
- I also wished to find a Phase One school of the type which had caused initial controversy for the policy because of descriptions of 'elitism.'

The secondary case study school (Fairlawn School, chapter 5) was selected partly because it was one of the Phase 1 beacons and because it had been named by HMCI as an outstanding school. It could therefore be said to nominally represent an example of 'exemplary educational practice'. The school is located in an affluent suburban area and has an advantaged intake. These features also made Fairlawn a good example of the kind of school that critics of Beacon Policy had used to attempt to undermine the policy at its inception. Critics asked how others could learn from 'elitist' schools in leafy suburbs with 'good intakes', like Fairlawn. Using Fairlawn as a case would allow me to investigate whether these criticisms were well founded. Fairlawn was also selected because the school had responded to the questionnaire survey and because it was geographically convenient to reach.

The primary case study school (Appledore School, chapter 6) was selected partly because it was an academically very successful school (as measured by assessment results and its Ofsted report) and therefore could be said to represent exemplary educational practice. Another selection criteria was that Appledore is located in an urban area and this location would provide a contrast to that of the secondary case study. Furthermore the questionnaire survey response from Appledore indicated that the school had experienced difficulties in working as a beacon school. There is a possibility that a number of survey schools might have failed to respond because their headteachers were reluctant to report their difficulties in implementing beacon status. This was an important reason for selecting Appledore. Also the school was in an accessible location for me.

The special school case study (Highcrest House School, chapter 7) was selected because it had received an excellent Ofsted report and also because the questionnaire response from the headteacher indicated that this school had particularly difficult contextual circumstances to overcome in order to achieve beacon status. These were the same circumstances which HMCI (Ofsted 1999) had used to explain why so many special schools had been failed by Ofsted. Highcrest House was a shining example of 'exemplary' educational practice. A further reason for selection was the surprising fact that this exemplary special school tended to work not with other special schools but with secondary schools. The reasons behind this were worthy of investigation. Furthermore Highcrest House was conveniently located for me.

I also used the school where I am headteacher as a case study and compared this to another secondary beacon school. The later was selected on the basis of responding to the survey and also having similarities to my school (page 55).

In undertaking the case studies, I gathered a range of documentary evidence from the schools. This included annual returns to the DfES and copies of evaluations of beacon work from partner schools. I also gathered other data through the use of semi-structured interviews. I sent copies of the semi-structured interview schedules to the schools in advance, along with a letter outlining the research (appendix 7).

The core of the case studies was based upon semi-structured interviews because these lent more importance to the issues and experiences felt to be relevant by participants than structured interviews. The method assumes aspects of a nominalist ontology where social reality is taken as the product of processes by which social actors together negotiate their meanings for action and situations. I surmised that semi-structured interviewing and a case study approach would give a greater voice to beacon school participants. I chose case studies because this method would enable me to gain a further depth of understanding of the operation of beacon schools from the perspective of those within them. However, as Hitchcock and Hughes (1994) argue, if the aim of the exercise is really to see as other people see, there is still a problem of the representativeness of the eyes and therefore of how useful the results really can be. By using a range of types of evidence in the case study, I hoped to minimise this issue.

Even if issues of representativeness are addressed, other issues with the approach arise. For example by focusing on intentions, semi-structured interviewing downplays the unintended consequences of actions and this is a taken for granted assumption of the method. As Cohen and Manion (1997) point out, while social reality may be a product of actors' definitions of situations, there is the possibility that actors might be falsely conscious. Furthermore, there are also problems of reactivity of respondents to semi-structured interviews. On the one hand, headteachers might be expected to react well to talking honestly about their experiences to another headteacher rather than to the DfES, whilst on the other hand, less senior staff might be more cautious. Teachers may worry that I (as a headteacher) might report their views to their own headteacher, even though I would promise to maintain confidentiality. There is similarly a danger when talking with headteachers about their beacon work. It is quite possible headteachers might worry that their individual comments, if negative in any way about Beacon Policy, might be reported to the DfES and that this could influence the success of any bid for re-approval as a beacon in the future. This would certainly be a concern for me if I were interviewed about my own school. As Scott and Usher (1996) point out, whether in a realist or nominalist paradigm, research (including case study research) is a process of objectification. Semi-structured interviews construct others as objects of knowledge and control. Thus I knew

from the start I would need to be very careful in distancing myself from the DfES and make it very clear to headteachers that the case study work would be anonymous and absolutely confidential.

My own School as a Case Study

Chapter 8 considers the professional significance of beacon status for me as a headteacher and for my school. It also tests whether my own aspirations for introducing beacon status have been met. Collecting data in my own school had inherent dangers. When acting as a 'practitioner-researcher' it is easier simply to 'tell a story' which confirms my own view of things. My own pre-conceptions could have clouded issues and staff in the school may have been more likely to give biased responses if they thought that these would be scrutinised by their headteacher. Cohen and Manion (1997) list the possible disadvantages of participant observation as those of being subjective, biased, impressionistic and idiosyncratic. To minimise this risk I used comparative analysis in chapter 8 so that the experience at my school is compared and contrasted to that of another beacon school.

This comparator was chosen on the basis of possessing similarities with my own school in certain key respects. Specifically, the comparator like my own school was academically high performing but it did not have an established tradition of reflective practice. As in my case, beacon status was introduced by a new headteacher in order to help to provide a focus and direction that had been previously missing. An anonymous questionnaire was designed for teachers in both schools to elicit their views on the impact of beacon status (Appendix 8).

Managing My Data

The DfES web site (http://www.dfes.gov.uk/beaconschools/) contains pages giving basic details for beacon schools such as school phase, name of headteacher, address and areas of beacon expertise for each school. The pages of all the schools were accessed in order to create an address database to use in producing a mailmerge and to send personalised letters and a copy of the survey questionnaire to each school. Website pages for all of the five hundred and eighty-seven schools were accessed and printed off. Details about the

areas of expertise offered by each school were entered from these pages on to a series of grids (one for primary, secondary, special and nursery schools) to produce a tally of competences by school phase and overall. The tallies were then converted to percentages of schools offering particular competences and finally these were tabulated to show beacon competences in frequency order.

The survey questionnaire data were imported into SPSS and a series of queries were generated for inclusion in the results. These queries related to the average number of competences offered by type of school, the key characteristics of the schools, reasons for seeking beacon status, types of beacon activities engaged in and perceptions of success experienced with particular kinds of activity. These results are reported in Chapter 4 and are also drawn upon in the case studies as appropriate. At the end of the questionnaires there is a space for headteachers to write positive, negative and any other comments. All of these comments were input into a word processor and using cut and paste, grouped into a series of categories. An item constituted a category if it recurred frequently. These categories formed the basis for identification of the main advantages and disadvantages of beacon status as identified by headteachers. This information was then compared and contrasted to the findings of the previous two NFER studies (DfES, 2000g, 2001f).

Comparisons were made of key statistics relating to beacon schools with all schools nationally. This was achieved by comparing sample averages and other statistics generated via SPSS, (for example, percentage of pupils eligible for free schools meals, school size etc), with benchmark data found in the Ofsted National Summary Data Reports for Primary and Secondary schools (Ofsted, 2000 a and b, 2001f) and the Ofsted Performance and Assessment Data Reports (Ofsted 2000d).

Audio tape recordings of the interviews undertaken at the case study schools were transcribed. These data were compared and contrasted with the key themes emerging from the survey questionnaires. Furthermore, the annual returns made by the case study schools to the DfES were analysed and summarised for inclusion in the case studies.

Limitations of the Research

There are inherent dangers in assuming that my use of interviews and structured survey questionnaires alongside semi-structured interviews and case studies will give an accurate representation of the 'reality' of the operation of Beacon School Policy. As a researcher, my role is to interpret the outcomes. But I am also the headteacher of a beacon school and therefore I am likely to have a particular perspective which influences my interpretation of the results. It is also possible that I share the outlook and prejudices of the headteachers of the case study schools. We may all tend to see things in the same way because of our jobs as beacon headteachers. This danger inherent in professional reflection does not mean that such reflection has no value. Reflection as a practitioner and professional is a central principle of the Doctorate in Education and it represents the core of my own professional learning in undertaking this research. Far from being a disadvantage, this reflection on practice is the main advantage of the EdD for me as a beacon headteacher.

Responses to the postal survey were reasonably robust with two hundred and thirty nine responses (that is, forty-three percent of the survey schools). All of the nursery schools, forty percent of primary schools and forty eight percent of special schools responded. Only thirty eight percent of secondary schools replied, which was a little disappointing. The overall response to the survey was reasonably good. Yet responding schools form a self-selecting sample and it is possible that non-response to the survey might be correlated with different attitudes to Beacon Policy from those held by responding schools. Within the scope of this research, it was not possible to explore this issue further.

In selecting the three case studies I choose three examples of exemplary practice based on national test performance and Ofsted inspection reports, because this is what the DfES claims beacon schools represent. This may be a limiting factor since the cases may confirm by definition, what I am seeking to discover.

The perspectives on the work of beacon schools and on Beacon Policy in operation presented here are those of the beacon schools only. As beacons were originally set up with the intention of sharing best practice in order to benefit other schools, the

perspectives of these partner schools are also very important in terms of understanding the impact of the policy. The perspectives of partners have not been addressed here. This is because this research is an early evaluation of Beacon Policy. It is produced in a context where there has been very little published work on beacon schools. In such a situation, it seems reasonable that an early evaluation should focus directly on the beacon schools themselves.

Ethical Issues

I asked schools to provide sensitive information, both in terms of the work they are doing with partners and also in terms of how this information could be used to judge them (for example, by the DfES or Ofsted) should the schools be made known publicly. I interviewed teaching staff whose opinions may or may not be those which their headteachers might wish them to express in public. The schools also provided revealing documentation, including evaluations by others of their work. Similarly, I interviewed two senior educationalists, (one a civil servant and the other a high profile leader at the NCSL), both of whom are representatives of organisations whose views and policies they are tasked to represent.

In doing this I adopted the ethical premises of respect for persons, respect for truth and respect for democracy as suggested by Bassey (1999).

I attempted to operationalise these three premises in the ethical principles that I have adopted as shown below. These are that in this research:

- Participants will remain anonymous.
- All information will be treated with the strictest confidentiality.
- Case Study interviewees will be given the opportunity if they wish, to verify statements when the research is in draft form. If they wish to do this, then provided those involved are satisfied with the fairness, accuracy and relevance of accounts which pertain to them and that these accounts do not necessarily expose or embarrass them, the accounts should not be subject to veto.

- Participants will receive a copy of the final case study.
- The research is an attempt to explore Beacon Policy in practice. It is hoped that the final report may be of benefit to the schools involved and to those in them who took part.

<div align="right">(adapted from Bell, 1999)</div>

In interviewing the two senior educationalists, I provided copies of the semi-structured interview schedules in advance and asked that I be able to tape record the interviews. There were occasions in the interviews when both respondents asked that something that they wished to say was given 'off the record' as a way of explaining a particular point. I willingly agreed to this and turned the recorder off. I also did not use these comments in the written report. I took particular care with the senior civil servant whose role is to support Ministers and implement their policies by making sure that none of the questions would compromise his position.

In undertaking the survey and case study research, complete anonymity was promised to all respondents in the accompanying letter. This was very important in terms of gaining the confidence of respondents to give their honest views as to the advantages and disadvantages of the policy.

The following chapter presents the research findings.

Chapter 4

Beacon Policy Surveyed

This chapter surveys the operation of beacon schools in practice. It is based on two pieces of primary research data, as follows:

1.   The individual internet web pages on the DfES Beacon Schools web site (http://dfee.gov.uk/beaconschools/) were accessed for each of the five hundred and eighty seven beacon schools in existence in Summer 2001. This was undertaken to find out which areas of expertise these schools were offering for dissemination. The information was categorised to provide an overview of the main areas of expertise offered by the beacon school network.

2.   A national postal questionnaire survey was carried out of the headteachers of all beacon schools in existence before the expansion to one thousand beacons in September 2001. The purpose of this survey was to gather information about both the basic characteristics of beacon schools and the ways in which Beacon Schools Policy is working in practice.

The Survey Schools

The beacon schools surveyed were broken down by category as shown in Table 10 below;

Table 10: Survey Schools by Category in Summer 2001

Primary	Secondary	Special	Nursery	Total
365	178	31	13	587

Source: Unpublished information from DfES Beacon Unit.

Beacon Website Survey: Areas of Competence Professed by Beacon Schools

In their original beacon applications, schools were asked by the DfES to categorise the areas of beacon activity that they were able to share with others. The DfES subsequently placed these details onto the individual web pages of the schools on the beacon schools web site. Potential partner schools are able to visit the beacon web site and search by keyword for those beacon schools offering particular areas of expertise by phase and by geographical location.

Analysis of the individual web pages of the schools shows that beacons in both main phases offered a similar number of areas of activity, approximately seven (see Table 11 below). Within secondary schools, the number of activities offered ranged from one to eighteen and within Infant, Primary, Special and Nursery schools the number ranged from two to twenty four activities.

Thus, beacon schools tend to offer a range of areas of expertise, rather than just one or two particular foci to their partners.

Table 11   Average Number of beacon Activities by School Sector

Number of beacon activities offered	Infant, Primary, Nursery, Special	Secondary
Mean Average	6.9	7.1
Range	2 to 24	1 to 18

Table 12 below illustrates the diversity of beacon activities. These range from support with general curriculum development, to assistance with programmes for pupils with severe learning difficulties, to strategies to reduce in-school bureaucracy and assistance with improving school leadership.

Table 12

Areas of beacon Activity in the 587 schools ranked by frequency of offer

Activity	Percent of Schools
School Leadership	49.8%
Development of Writing	49.6%
Literacy	48.5%
Teacher Training/Support for NQTs	40.7%
Continuing Professional Development	40.5%
Numeracy	35.8%
ICT	35.1%
Curriculum Development	28.7%
Monitoring and Evaluation	28.5%
Curriculum Subjects (other than Literacy & Numeracy)	27.1%
Parents/Home-School/Community relationships	26.5%
SEN	25.6%
Behaviour Management	24.2%
Target Setting/pupil tracking	21.5%
Raising standards & School Improvement	16.5%
Gifted and Talented pupils	15.8%
Extra Curricular Provision	13.8%
Support for schools in difficulty	13.3%
Early Years/Nursery/Reception	12.5%
Inclusion	11.5%
Teaching and Learning	11.5%
Assessment and Recording	9.6%
Primary-Secondary liaison	8.5%
Ethos	7.3%
Spiritual, Moral, Social, Cultural education	6.5%
Finance and Resources	5.8%
Thinking Skills	5.6%
Attendance and Truancy Management	4.7%
Boys Achievement	4.2%
Self Evaluation	4.0%
Governors	3.5%
Severe Learning Difficulties	3.5%
Science	3.3%
PSHE	3.1%
Learning Support Assistants	2.9%
Citizenship	2.7%
Development Planning	2.5%
Vocational Education	2.5%
Performance Management	2.2%
Sixth Form	2.2%
Use of data	2.0%

Table 12- Continued

Areas of beacon Activity in the 587 schools ranked by frequency of offer

English as an Additional Language	1.6%
Reducing Bureaucracy	1.6%
RE	1.5%
Multi-cultural Education	1.3%
Support for small schools	1.1%
Differentiation	1.1%
Health Issues	1.1%
Homework	1.1%
Individual Education Plans	1.1%
Student Councils	0.7%
Ofsted	0.4%
School Policies	0.4%
Business Links	0.2%
Ethnic achievement	0.2%

An analysis of the areas of competence offered by secondary schools and by primary, nursery and special schools only, is given as Appendices 3 and 4.

It seems reasonable to assume that beacon schools, as examples of successful schools, will be well led. Therefore it is unsurprising to find that the most popular activity offered by beacon schools of all kinds is support with school leadership and management. Nearly fifty percent of all schools offer this as an area of expertise. The next most popular area of activity is the development of writing. This reflects the DfES priority to improve writing (DfES, 2000b) which has been identified as a weakness in the Key Stage 2 National Literacy Strategy. Although development of writing is offered by nearly half of all beacon schools, it is offered by seventy-four percent of all primary, nursery and special schools (see Appendix 4). A number of primary schools in their questionnaire returns indicated that they had been asked by the DfES to offer this area of expertise. This illustrates that the DfES has a significant influence on the areas of expertise made available to all schools within the beacon network.

Forty percent of schools offer continuing professional development or a willingness to host and run courses as an area of competence. Approximately a quarter of beacon schools offer support with particular curriculum subjects, reflecting their own areas of strength.

Table 12 above shows, in total, some fifty five broad areas of competence offered by the beacon schools network. Because of the likely differences in interpretation made by headteachers when reporting areas of competence to the DfES, it is highly likely that the total number of beacon areas of expertise far exceeds fifty-five.

Whilst the most frequently offered areas of beacon activity predictably reflect DfES priorities, the range of areas of competence on offer is very broad indeed. The competences offered by the Beacon network include a variety of less popular areas of capability reflecting local expertise. For example, some beacon schools offer skills in running effective school councils or help with creating individual education plans for special educational needs pupils. These are small niche areas which can be of great value to those schools in need of this kind of support. These kinds of niche areas reflect the intention articulated by Keith Andrews:

> That beacon status would enable schools not just to reflect government policy in their efforts to share expertise, but also to share very specific local areas of excellence with any school which might be able to benefit from this.

The wide range of competences offered by the beacon network as shown in Table 12 support the view that the policy intention to allow diversity and the sharing of niche areas of good practice has been successful.

Analysis of Questionnaire Survey Responses

A questionnaire was designed for beacon headteachers. This was tested on a sample of twenty-five beacon schools in June 2001. The questionnaire was subsequently amended and posted to all existing beacon schools in late September 2001.

To maximise response rates, I approached beacon headteachers as a fellow beacon headteacher (see letter and accompanying questionnaire, appendix 5). The purposes of this survey were to gain information on the work of beacon schools in practice.

Two hundred and thirty nine schools returned the questionnaire giving a response rate of forty one per cent. These responses were analysed using SPSS for Windows and the results are presented below.

Characteristics of Questionnaire Respondents

A full statistical analysis of the characteristics of those schools replying to the survey is given in Appendix 6. In summary, those schools participating in this research represent the full range of different types of beacons in terms of school phase and legal status (Tables 33 to 36, p190). With the exception of Nursery schools (with a 100% response) there was a reasonably consistent rate of response between schools in the different phases of education. On these criteria, a balanced sample of beacon schools has been obtained.

In terms of social disadvantage (as measured by proportions of pupils eligible for free school meals), these schools are broadly average for their different phases, which is surprising given their largely urban location and high multi-ethnic intakes (appendix 6, p193). This suggests that the sample schools may be relatively advantaged compared to other urban schools. With an overall forty-one percent survey response rate, it is not possible to determine to what extent this suggestion of 'urban advantage' is a feature of those schools responding or a feature of the beacon network as a whole.

Table 38 (p 193) shows that across responding schools approximately eighteen percent of pupils were of backgrounds other than White UK. Nationally, only eight percent of secondary schools (Ofsted 2000a, p38) and four percent of primary schools (Ofsted, 2000b, p32) had a similar pupil constitution. These beacon schools are therefore significantly more multi-ethnic in their intakes than schools nationally. Given this fact, it is surprising that so few schools explicitly mentioned raising the attainment of minority ethnic pupils in their areas of competence offered to partners (see Table 12, p62). It may

be that this is subsumed under the general category of 'raising attainment'. It is certainly an area worthy of further study by others. That is, do some of the most academically successful multi-racial schools in England achieve their success by adopting a 'colour blind' approach to raising attainment, or do they adopt the approach recommended by Ofsted (2001a) which recognises that certain groups face particular barriers and which recommends that schools address these specifically in order to raise achievement.

Why Do Schools Seek Beacon Status?

A large number of schools indicated they had been invited to bid for beacon status by the Department for Education and Skills, usually because of good end of key stage attainment scores in national tests or GCSE examinations. Headteachers reported that the initial invitation to apply was usually well received and was a cause of pride amongst staff, parents and governors. The strategy of providing an initial invitation to make an application has been a key factor in winning over schools to the notion of becoming beacons. Although for many the invitation to bid was unexpected, headteachers usually had a clear vision that they wanted their schools to become beacons and they had definite views as to why. Headteachers indicated in their questionnaire responses the following reasons for seeking beacon status.

Table 13: Reasons for seeking beacon status

Reason for seeking beacon Status	Percentage of respondents
Using beacon as a vehicle for self-improvement	71 percent
A desire to influence the practice of other schools	64 percent
In order to gain extra resources	45 percent
Using beacon to market the school	34 percent

Although the rhetoric of beacon schools is about ensuring that all schools have access to the best practice, nearly three quarters of beacon headteachers identified the potential benefits to their own schools as the driving force behind wishing to become a beacon. For many headteachers, this was manifest in the opportunity that beacon status gave to codify their own good practice and to reflect on that practice with others.

Many of these schools were aware that they were already perceived as 'lighthouses' of good practice in their areas by partner schools or local authorities. Some had already established strong working relationships with other schools. For example, one headteacher gave as a reason for becoming a beacon *'to strengthen our already existing network of eleven small rural schools'*. Another headteacher commented that *'the school was already receiving many visitors to view good practice. Beacon status was a formal recognition of this and rewarded us for the work we had been doing'*. For these schools, beacon status provided a means of publicly confirming or quality marking the status of their existing partnerships.

Sixty four percent of headteachers indicated that a key reason for wishing to become a beacon school was to influence the practice of others. These were clearly confident schools with the self belief that they could make a difference elsewhere. A number of headteachers expressed this as a desire to assist teachers and pupils in disadvantaged circumstances. For example, one headteacher said:

> We were already developing an outreach role in the Special Needs field in our locality. Beacon status was an opportunity to enable us to ensure that we influence special needs in the wider area with better resourcing.

Just under half of headteachers expressed the desire to gain extra resources as a prime motive for becoming a beacon school. One headteacher reported that *'finance and funding were an important reason to gain beacon status and so underwrite our own improvement'*. Schools indicated that they wanted the money to pay for partnership activities already under way, or to employ a 'beacon teacher' who would be of benefit both to the school as well as to its partners.

A number of small schools and those with falling rolls saw beacon status as a means of surviving financially, for example one headteacher said that *'as a small rural school with spaces available we felt this was one way of ensuring that our school would survive should cut-backs be necessary in our LEA,'* whereas another said *'it was possible, due to*

falling numbers, that the school could be closed down. Beacon status would be a good reason for keeping it open'.

Just over a third of headteachers identified the advantages in marketing their own school as being a main attraction of beacon status. For example one primary headteacher said,

> This is a deprived inner city area, where parents take a great pride
> in the school and are very supportive. The recognition of the school
> in this way meant a great deal to them and to the staff and this was
> a great motive for being a beacon school.

These responses indicate that altruism is not the only reason behind the desire of many headteachers to gain beacon status. In nearly all cases headteachers have wanted the status because they knew that it would improve their own schools in some important way. Thus, while the rhetoric of the DfES focuses on partners benefiting through collaboration and sharing, this desire to share often seems to be the side-effect of a primary motive for self-improvement on the part of beacon schools.

Have Beacon Schools Changed Their Offer Over Time?

A third of headteachers indicated that, although the areas of competence currently offered by their schools were the same as in the original application, more emphasis was given to some areas rather than to others. This was nearly always in response to needs identified by partner schools. This stability suggests that the means used by beacon schools to select initial areas for their beacon work were successful.

Of the twenty four percent of headteachers who indicated that their areas of expertise had changed, the majority did so in response to requests for new types of support from partner schools or because a new area developed as a strength. A reason given by a secondary headteacher whose school included Physical Education as a key element of beacon expertise reported: *'We have not been able to offer any PE because the staff have all left for promotion!'*

In other more established beacon schools the work is changing because a deeper partnership has been developed over time with a smaller number of schools. The headteacher of a primary school reported:

> The balance of our beacon work has changed over the first three years. We now do more intensive work with a smaller number of schools, we have fewer educational visitors or tourists and more focused work on long term projects. This is because we know and understand each other better.

Where beacon schools are offering new areas of expertise it seems to be because the relationship between beacons and other schools has matured from that of provider and recipient school, to partners responding to mutually identified needs.

Whilst the means of identifying areas of expertise within beacon schools may have been successful, this does not mean that these schools were necessarily successful in disseminating their work. The ability to disseminate is a different skill to knowing what to disseminate. To fully determine success in this area it would be necessary to conduct a separate large scale survey of beacon partner schools.

Most Successful Types Of Beacon Activity

A large number of beacon schools have been in operation for two or three years at the time of undertaking this survey. Between them, these schools have attempted a wide range of practical activities and are likely to have found some ways of working to be more effective than others. Table 14 below shows headteacher perceptions of the effectiveness of the different methods of dissemination used by their schools.

Table 14: Most successful types of beacon dissemination activity

	High success	Fairly successful	Low success	Very low success
Documentary evidence of good practice	23	27	16	34
Activities involving extended partnerships and follow up in the classroom at partner schools	50	33	6	11
Organising INSET courses/ events on areas of school expertise	55	26	6	13
Visits from partner schools and demo lessons for colleagues	49	33	6	12
Paying for consultancy advice/training and sharing with partners	34	22	6	38

Given that the purpose of beacon activity is to spread good practice, it seems reasonable that the ultimate criteria by which to judge success should be improved classroom practice and consequently improved learning.

The activities perceived by headteachers as those with which they have had most 'success' (with half of respondents agreeing) were organised INSET courses in areas of beacon expertise, visits from partners schools to see demonstration lessons and longer term partnerships involving follow-up by beacon staff in the classrooms of partner schools. The activities where fewer headteachers perceived success were in buying in consultants to provide training or simply sharing documentation with partner schools. Only one third and quarter of headteachers respectively perceived these to be successful.

The research literature is clear that for teachers to improve their skills and learn new approaches to teaching, they need to do more than attend an off-site stand alone course (Joyce et al, 1995). Unfortunately, at least two of the dissemination activities perceived by half of the headteachers as 'most successful' represent little more than such courses. This does not bode well for the effective dissemination of good practice, through many of the kinds of training considered by beacon headteachers to be successful.

For example, the provision of documentary evidence of good practice to partner schools is perceived to be very successful by a quarter of responding headteachers. This may well be a successful technique in terms of allowing a beacon school to log numbers of dissemination activities undertaken. It may also be effective in terms of raising awareness about a technique and providing some conceptual understanding for teachers. However, it is unlikely to be an effective means of sharing good practice, simply because sharing teaching materials on paper is unlikely to build expertise for secure skills transfer to different contexts (Joyce et al, 1995).

Similarly, organizing in-service courses for partner school staff, which was identified by half of responding headteachers as very successful, is unlikely to bring about changes in classroom practice because it only addresses the theory underpinning a technique. Even if this involves a demonstration, it does not allow for the practice, feedback and coaching over time that is required for transfer. The same argument applies to buying in external consultancy to provide training.

The provision of demonstration lessons for partner school staff goes some of the way towards aiding skill transfer. Teachers receiving this are at least likely to have the opportunity to hear about the theory underpinning the technique and see it being modeled. However, with this approach, the necessary practice, feedback and coaching required for successful skills transfer are not provided.

Half of headteachers reported having great success with activities involving extended partnerships with follow up in the classroom at partner schools. This kind of dissemination activity has the potential to fulfill the requirements for effective transfer (Joyce and Showers, 1995). This is because it allows teachers to visit beacon schools, receive theory-based talks, see demonstration lessons and then practice the techniques at their own schools whilst receiving feedback and coaching from beacon staff.

In summary, much of the activity considered by beacon school headteachers to be successful may have raised morale in partner schools and in the beacon schools also, but it is unlikely to have maximized payoff in terms of student achievement. This is because it has left implementation within classrooms to individual teachers working alone.

If a significant proportion of beacon headteachers perceive an extended partnership model to be successful, it is important to know if those schools are actually using this model. The next section addresses this issue.

Models of Beacon Activity

Beacon schools are academically successful schools, but this does not mean that they will be automatically successful in identifying and disseminating their good practice to others. As Burton and Brundrett (2000, p 491) have said

> Schools taking on beacon status have demonstrated a range of
> features which have identified them as being effective as schools,
> but as providers of professional development they may be
> relatively unproven.

Early research commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills into the first two hundred and fifty beacon schools (DfES, 2001f) identified three main styles of dissemination in use by them. The models are as follows:

Style 1   Offering what you know your school is good at in set-piece events

This mode may be called '*Dissemination: a solution looking for a problem*' (DfES, 2001f, p15).   As a method, it is product-oriented. That is, it is based around what the beacon school wishes to offer, with an emphasis on written or electronic materials. The issue here is that partner schools may not really need what the beacon has to offer. Support is not customised to the needs of individual schools and there is little follow-up. Demands on the beacon school are kept to a minimum.

Style 2:   Offering what partners have identified that they need

This is a '*consultancy' or customised approach to identified problems*.   The approach focuses on the needs of the receiving school and the beacon is seen as having the 'answers' to others problems. Support is differentiated according to partners needs. Using this model, sustained partnerships may develop over time and these may assist in bringing about longer term school improvement. This mode of operating is very demanding on the time and resources of beacon schools and it may lead to dependency in partners.

Style 3:   Working with a focused group of schools on joint projects

The DfES refer to this as '*improving together model*'. In this mode the beacon school does not set itself up as 'the leader'. Instead the focus is on a group of schools and the aim is reciprocal learning and capacity-building together. This is quite a different model to reacting to one-off requests, and the focus is on working together to improve, rather than on the beacon school providing. This method can encourage sharing without creating dependency.

These are simplified ideal models of beacon activity. In practice, beacon schools may use a mix of models. Some may not operate on the basis of any pre-conceived model and some may adopt a type of model not covered by these categorizations. Table 15 below shows the main models of dissemination declared by the survey schools.

Table 15: Dissemination activities undertaken by beacon schools

Models for beacon work	Main model used by schools: Percentage
Offering what you know your school is good at in set-piece events	31
Offering what partners have identified that they need	39
Working with a focused group of schools on joint improvement projects	26
Other model:	4

One third of beacon schools reported using set-piece events based on what they know they are good at as their main method of dissemination. Just under forty percent of the schools offer a bespoke service based on what partner schools say that they need, whilst just over a quarter are working in partnership with a focused group of schools. It is useful to compare this practice to the research literature on effective professional development.

Joyce et al (1999) identify three criteria for successful professional development. These criteria are:

- Staff development, embedded in the workplace, which increases inquiry into new practices and the implementation of school improvement initiatives.

- Staff Development, structured as an enquiry, which both fuels energy and results in initiatives that have greater effects.

- Building small work groups connected to the larger community but responsible for one another will increase the sense of belonging that reduces stress, isolation and feelings of alienation.

Consequently, operating a 'product based' dissemination model, as a third of beacon schools do, is least likely to lead to successful professional development because it fails to address any of the three criteria above. The consultancy approach adopted by nearly forty percent of beacons can be conducted in the workplace, but usually takes the form of 'receiving' an answer rather than being engaged in a collaborative enquiry. Furthermore this approach is a high-intensity mode of operation requiring beacon schools to lead and provide all of the solutions for others. Because this model is not based on a mutually collaborative partnership, it relies for its effectiveness on client schools being able to identify accurately the support they require. It seems reasonable to presuppose that the more likely a school is to be in need of external support, the less likely it is going to be able to accurately identify the kinds of support that it needs (Stoll and Fink, 1996). This reduces the effectiveness of this method of dissemination.

Working in a collaborative group of schools focused on improvement and mutual learning, as a quarter of respondents do, does address all three of the criteria posited by Joyce et al. This third dissemination style is the most likely to have an impact on professional practice if adopted by beacon schools. Table 15 above, shows that a number of beacon headteachers have experienced success with this technique. The problem is that so few beacon schools use this model. This implies that opportunities for high quality professional development which makes a difference to learning in the classroom are being lost. This is not to suggest that the other kinds of dissemination models are not having a positive impact on partner schools and on the beacon schools themselves in terms of morale and resourcing. It is instead to suggest that there is an opportunity cost involved in not using the focused group model.

One headteacher expanded on why she had indicated that this model was most effective, but also why her school had not adopted it as their main mode of operation as follows:

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> Extended partnership is not used because it is very difficult to co-ordinate efforts between schools due to competition between us, low morale and over-work. Offering one-off courses is clear cut, but negotiation between groups of equal partners is very time consuming. It is difficult to get people to respond and to keep the show on the road when they do. Although this would be better for other schools, it is not better for us and we must gain from beacon status to make it worthwhile.

This statement illustrates the tension that exists for beacon schools between helping others and maintaining their own performance.

Do Beacon Schools Learn To Disseminate More Effectively Over Time?

It is possible that schools might move through the three models of beacon work as they grow in experience. It might also be expected that those schools operating with a 'dissemination model' might be newer beacons which are in their first phase of operation.

It is plausible that beacon schools might begin by identifying what they are good at and then offer this to other schools and so grow in confidence. They might then move to negotiating provision with partners and finally develop a focused and equal partnership for mutual learning underpinned by beacon resources. The DfES found some evidence (in just two of their twenty-four case study schools) that as schools became more experienced they changed their emphasis towards more longer term and sustained relationships (DfES, 2000g). There is no evidence to support such progression in my survey.

It is possible to examine whether there is a correlation between length of time served as a beacon school and the mode of dissemination declared by responding schools. This shows that both groups of schools operating either 'dissemination' or 'consultancy' modes of sharing good practice had been working as beacons for an average of seventeen months. Those schools operating in 'focused group mode' had been operating as beacons on average for twenty months, a longer period, but not significantly so. Therefore, there seems to be no correlation between mode of dissemination used and length of experience as a beacon school.

This suggests that once beacon schools commence operation with a particular style of dissemination, it is not easy for them to change it. The impetus to develop more effective styles of dissemination may have to be provided by external sources, for example from LEAs. It may be that LEAs are likely to be as parochial as schools and will not necessarily have any better access to research about effective modes of dissemination and the construction of teachers' professional knowledge, than do schools. Early DfES research (DfES, 2000g) suggested that LEAs, rather than the DfES, might fulfil this role. Yet the DfES is in a much stronger position to work with educational researchers, to commission further research in this area, to disseminate it, and also to encourage beacon schools to use it than are LEAs.

The implication for the DfES is that there is a need for it to provide more advice on models of dissemination and guidance on what makes for successful dissemination to beacon schools. Similarly, there is a need to provide staff in potential partner schools with advice on how best to gain from working with beacon schools. This strongly indicates a real need for further research into the features of models of dissemination and their impact under particular conditions on the ability of teachers to bring about better learning in the classroom.

Positive Aspects of Beacon Schooling Expressed By Headteachers

Headteachers expressed overwhelmingly positive views about Beacon School Policy. Within this positive context, the most frequently recurring advantages and disadvantages given are explained below. Positive responses tended to group into six categories as follows:

- Improved morale and self esteem of beacon school staff.
- Improved staff performance in the beacon school.
- Additional resources received through beacon designation.
- Enhanced staff development opportunities for beacon staff.
- Improved links and partnerships with other schools.
- Useful opportunities for marketing the school.

Each of these is considered below.

Improved Morale and Self Esteem

The single advantage of beacon status most frequently reported by headteachers in the survey questionnaire was improved morale and self esteem for teachers, pupils and parents. For example, headteachers made comments like '*beacon status provides proof to staff that they are doing a super job,*' and '*morale and motivation of staff is raised as they feel they have something positive to offer*'. Headteachers clearly see beacon status as affirming the good work of their staff and therefore as being good for morale.

Headteachers believe that this growth in confidence has benefited not just their teaching staff, but also pupils and the community as well. For example, one comprehensive school headteacher reported that,

> Staff are empowered and respected, pupils expectations of themselves and of the school are enhanced. Children are now more confident and the community is proud. The teaching staff and classroom assistants have gained in confidence and developed expertise.

Headteachers claim that this growth in confidence has given some schools the self confidence needed in order to shape nationally imposed curriculum developments to suit their own needs. For example, one headteacher reported that

> Beacon status has given us the confidence to shape the literacy and numeracy strategies to suit us, and we would not have considered attempting this before.

Thus beacon status, according to claims made by some headteachers, seems to be empowering schools not only to improve others, but also to improve themselves.

Improved staff performance in the beacon school

Many beacon headteachers believed that the status had improved practice in their own schools. A number of headteachers reported that beacon status had required staff to reflect on and codify their own practice in order that they could disseminate it to others. This reflection had often led to a clearer identification of strengths and weaknesses and

understanding of what was needed in order to further improve. For example, one headteacher reported that, '*my staff are now very keen to explain and then analyse their own actions, we are now more reflective*'. Another said '*we are thinking through more clearly what we do and why we do it*'.

Some headteachers felt that regular lesson observation by visitors was having a very positive impact on the quality of teaching in their own beacon schools. For example,

> We are kept on our toes by continuous observation and teachers
> soon realized that it is easier for them to teach well if they do it
> every day, rather than just when observed.

Many headteachers also reported that their staff were learning from talking with teachers in partner schools about teaching and learning. One headteacher reported that,

> We gain as much from working with partnership teachers as they
> do from us, nobody has all of the answers. Having to discuss and
> explain what we do is not a one way dialogue, we learn from
> others too.

This spin-off for beacon schools in terms of their own self improvement was considered by Keith Andrews to be one of the biggest unexpected and unintended surprises of the beacon experiment.

Additional Resources

The financial gains from beacon status were considered to be very important by many headteachers. Comments such as '*More money*' and '*better funding for staff and equipment*' were very common. Approximately twenty five percent of those headteachers making written comments at the end of the questionnaire mentioned extra funding as being a key positive feature of beacon status. Headteachers were very clear that this funding was having direct benefits for their own schools. For example, '*funding has allowed us to set up a web site*' and '*we make creative use of funding to help ourselves as well as our partners*'.

Headteachers reported that they were using the money to fund recruitment and retention allowances for their own staff, to employ permanent or contracted supply staff, to cover for teachers engaged in beacon work, to purchase computers and to buy-in professional development. Nearly all of the things given as items of expenditure were clearly of direct benefit to the beacon schools as well as to partners.

Schools welcomed the freedom and autonomy given by the DfES in the use of beacon funding and they considered this *'freedom for creativity'* to be a significant strength. One headteacher summed this up by saying,

> Beacon status has given us the opportunity to work in partnership
> with others and it has given us a free hand in using funding. This
> must surely be the way forward for the government.

Staff development

Many beacon headteachers believe that professional development has improved for their staff because of beacon status. These gains arise through staff preparing for and engaging in beacon activities. For example, *'staff have been given opportunities to develop skills eg presentation, training courses, giving advice, providing information to visitors, making videos and writing documentation'*. Teachers have gained new and valuable skills in becoming providers of professional development.

Headteachers claim that beacon status has also provided an impetus towards improvement and a desire to keep up to date. For example one headteacher said:

> A sharing of expertise and blossoming of confidence amongst staff
> is evident. A desire to use staff development in order to keep track
> of new initiatives is growing.

According to responding headteachers, teachers have also developed professionally by interacting with colleagues from other schools. This was expressed as

> Having to answer difficult questions provides an incentive to be
> well prepared and to understand some theory as well as practice
> relating to our work.

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Thus it is claimed that beacon work provides a forum and focus for discussion about teaching and learning and a peer pressure on beacon staff to keep up to date.

Improved Links and Partnership with other schools

Beacon schools are required to work in partnership and many beacon headteachers report that their work is changing the relationship between local schools from being competitive to one of co-operation. For example, one headteacher reported that *'useful links have developed with other schools in the area who we previously only had nodding acquaintance with'*. Another primary headteacher said *'beacon work has become a symbiotic process where we gain a great deal from our partners as well as them gaining from us'*.

Headteachers have been at pains to point out that this has occurred because they have been careful not to 'set their own schools up as having all of the answers'. As one headteacher put it:

> I have found that sharing projects with other schools is an effective means of involving them in worthwhile activities. The notion of setting this school up as an example is foreign to us.

Marketing

The marketing potential of beacon status, rather than an altruistic desire to help others, was the most important advantage of the policy for many headteachers. One headteacher reported *'we have a high profile now thanks to beacon status'* and *' it is an excellent marketing opportunity'*.

Many headteachers are clearly proud of the status. Schools see beacon status as making it easier for them to recruit pupils and staff. They report a desire to use it to further the self-esteem of their stakeholders. They also wish to enhance the position of their schools both in terms of recruitment of teachers and pupils and in relation to other schools. This fact

illustrates a clear paradox in Beacon School Policy. The rhetoric of beacon schooling claims that the policy is designed to foster partnerships between schools and so bring them closer together. Yet at the same time the policy divides schools hierarchically by identifying them as either beacon schools or as non-beacon schools.

Negative Aspects of Beacon Schooling

Negative responses tended to group into the following:

- Difficulty in maintaining standards whilst diverting energy to beacon school work.
- Difficulties on finding supply cover to allow beacon work to go on.
- Additional workload.
- Difficult relationships with partners.
- Insufficient funding.
- Dissatisfaction with the DfES (see Chapter 9, p 143).

These are explained below.

Difficulty in Maintaining Standards in Beacon Schools

Maintenance of high standards of academic achievement is a necessary precondition set by the DfES in order for schools to be able to continue as beacons. Yet operating as a beacon school does divert energy away from the classroom towards other activities. Headteachers are aware of the tension between these two competing demands and they indicated that they were feeling the pressure. For example, one headteacher commented that he felt *'pressure in keeping up the excellent practice and standards in the school while at the same time ensuring that beacon activities are worthwhile and of good quality'*. Beacon activities were also often found to be causing disruption to the teaching schedules in schools as teachers were taken out of lessons to co-ordinate and deliver beacon activities.

Some headteachers reported that these pressures were particularly on their *'best staff'*. These problems were mainly identified by headteachers of smaller schools, including nursery and primary schools. In these schools (and unlike in secondary schools) the headteacher was often the only person with the non-contact time to co-ordinate and manage beacon activity. As a result, a number of headteachers reported that they faced significant overload and were being distracted from monitoring and raising standards in their own schools. One headteacher said:

> Hard decisions have to be made to prevent good staff from leaving
> their classes. We have had to limit the number of visiting teachers
> as they wish to speak to the teachers that they have observed and
> this means that the teacher is not focused on their class.

This was supported by primary and nursery headteachers who were aware that standards of academic performance in small schools, with few staff, can change very quickly. They felt pressurised by this. One primary headteacher reported *'we may have been a beacon school yesterday but today two lead teachers go off on maternity leave and we no longer have beacon performance.'*

Operating as a beacon school demands time and energy which could otherwise be used in order to maintain standards. This tension is clearly generating stress and particularly so in smaller schools.

Difficulties in Finding Supply Cover

A commonly identified difficulty was the very practical problem of finding supply cover in order to facilitate operation as a beacon school. Staff engaged in beacon activities need time to plan, meet visitors and visit teachers in their own schools. All of this activity requires that the classes of beacon teachers are covered. Similarly, staff in beacon partner schools need to be released in order to engage in beacon activity and they too need supply cover. Those partner schools in most need of assistance are those likely to be in the most challenging circumstances and they, in general, find it much harder to obtain reliable and quality supply cover. One beacon headteacher said *'One of the main obstacles to the*

whole thing is the difficulty in employing supply teachers. This is a real problem for our partner schools with challenging pupils'. With the current teacher shortage, finding suitable high quality cover is very difficult indeed. In some cases, schools had found supply cover but had subsequently discovered that the quality of people available meant reduced standards of discipline in the school.

Additional Workload

The single biggest disadvantage of beacon status identified by headteachers was the additional workload involved. Over half of all respondents making additional written comments on the questionnaire mentioned the problem of workload and more comments were made about this than any other disadvantage or advantage of beacon schooling. It is worth noting that these were not comments made by disaffected headteachers. Many of those complaining about workload also made very positive comments about the benefits of being a beacon school. One headteacher summed up the problem by saying *'the heavy workload preparing for seminars outside of schools hours is too much'.* Comments made focused on the time taken for beacon work and the bureaucracy and paperwork involved.

Workload was identified as a particular difficulty by small schools where the additional work was usually done by one teacher, often the headteacher. As one of them explained, *'it means lots of hard work, especially for a small school. As Headteacher lots of work has fallen on me as the 'booking agent'* and it causes *'serious overwork for a small number of key staff. As a nursery school with relatively few teaching staff this burdens us'.* Schools of all sizes noticed the extra work and the fact that this impacted on a small group of key staff disproportionately.

Difficult Relationships With Partners

The DfES evaluation of beacon work (DfES, 2000g) suggests that suspicion and mistrust of beacon schools was an initial phenomenon which was soon overcome. Evidence from my survey suggests that *'difficult'* responses from neighbouring schools have been

commonplace and long lasting. For some headteachers, becoming a beacon school has led to resentment and suspicion from their neighbours. A typical response was as follows:

> There is a need for me as headteacher to develop a thick skin when dealing with colleagues. Other headteachers resent the title. I think there is some bad feeling towards beacon schools because people think they are in leafy suburbs, I have heard other teachers say they could do great things too, with middle class kids.

Headteachers also suggested that their colleagues found the notion of beacon status, coupled with extra resources, to be divisive.

These responses illustrate that there is still significant suspicion and misunderstanding about beacon schools. The whole notion of a 'beacon' is a difficult one because it implies that other schools are less 'bright' and it is clearly difficult for neighbouring schools to accept this and seek help from their DfES designated 'betters'.

The comment made above about beacon schools being in 'leafy suburbs' also illustrates public misunderstanding about the urban location of the majority of beacon schools and points to the need for the DfES to raise awareness about Beacon School Policy nationally. This would include dispelling the myth that beacon funding is just for beacon schools (DfES, 2000g).

Headteachers also commented about lack of support and even hostility from local education authorities. One put it in these terms: *'the LEA has not been proactive enough so it is sometimes hard for us to meet needs when we don't know what the needs are'* and *'there is a lack of LEA support and even a complete lack of interest'*. Headteachers feel that beacon work could be far more successful if local authorities provided a brokerage role putting beacon schools in contact with partners with specific needs.

Insufficient Funding

Some headteachers, whilst positive about the beacon experience, believed that the funding was not enough to be able to make a real difference. This was clearly expressed by a primary headteacher as follows:

> I think the DfES wants to change the world on a peppercorn rent. The money pays for a member of staff and some admin time. They cannot expect miracles for £35,000. It is an excellent initiative but the budget is too small and demand exceeds our capacity to provide.

This comment makes the point that it may not be realistic to expect beacon schools to bring about school improvement at a systemic level with the resources made available to them.

Summary

The majority of beacon school headteachers see the policy primarily as a means to improve their own schools. The overwhelming opinion of these headteachers is that Beacon School Policy is a great success. This is because it has been used by beacon schools for their own improvement, to gain extra resources and to market their schools, in addition to assisting others.

The kinds of activities with which beacon schools report greatest success are unlikely to be those which will lead to new skills development amongst partner school teachers. Furthermore, the styles of working typically reported by the majority of beacon schools are unlikely to promote effective dissemination of best practice. Although headteachers of beacon schools are pleased with the policy this is more likely to be because of its benefits to the beacon schools themselves, rather than because of their perceptions of any long term gain to partner schools.

These issues are further explored in the detailed case studies which follow this chapter.

Section 3

The Policy in Practice: Four Case Studies

Chapter 5   **'Fairlawn' - A Privileged Secondary Beacon School**

Chapter 6   **'Appledore' - A Highly Effective Primary Beacon School**

Chapter 7   **'Highcrest' - An Exceptionally Well Led and Managed Special School**

Chapter 8   **My Experience of the Policy - 'Valley High School' and 'Wells Field School'**

Chapter 9   **An Overview of the Case Studies**

Chapter 10 Conclusion

Introduction to Section 3

The Policy in Practice

This section comprises of a series of case studies (chapters 5 to 8) of a group of schools in different phases of education, including my own school, which have achieved beacon status. The case studies are followed by an overview in chapter 9. The cases are initially presented in a descriptive way and no attempt is made to analyse them systematically until the concluding chapter of this section.

Following the case studies and overview, chapter 10 reflects on the experiences of the schools and attempts to draw out convergences, divergences and commonalities between them. Chapter 10 also relates the experiences of the case study schools to the survey results in Chapter 4.

The case studies are based on two-day visits to schools, involving extensive audio-taped interviews with headteachers, beacon co-ordinators, key teachers involved in delivering beacon activities and also teachers at the schools not involved in beacon work. The cases draw on scrutiny of documentation, including annual returns to the DfES, and re-bids for renewal of beacon status.

Chapter 5

'Fairlawn' - A Privileged Beacon Secondary School

Fairlawn is an 11-18 voluntary-aided Church of England school with eleven hundred pupils including three hundred in the sixth form. The school had previously opted out of local authority control to become Grant Maintained and it now possesses Foundation status. It is located in a suburban part of north London. Fairlawn was named as 'outstanding' by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools and was, as a consequence, one of the first seventy-five beacon schools designated in September 1998. Additionally the school became a specialist Sports College in September 1999.

As a Foundation School, Fairlawn is its own admissions authority. It operates a distinctive admissions criteria which is 'parental commitment and involvement in a place of mainstream Christian worship'. The most recent OFSTED report in 1996 said of the school that:

- the majority of pupils come from relatively affluent homes, which are supportive of the school.
- the standard of pupils on entry to the school is consistently above the national average.

Both of these characteristics suggest that Fairlawn possesses a privileged pupil population. This is further illustrated by Table 16 below.

Table 16: Fairlawn School: Comparison with National Benchmarks

	Fairlawn	Comparison with other schools*
Number of pupils on roll in January 2001.	1100	Fairlawn is bigger than other secondary schools (average national size is 983).
Percentage of pupils with statements of Special Education Need (SEN).	0.8%	The percentage of pupils with statements of SEN is only one third of the national average (2.5%).
Percentage of pupils with SEN without statements.	6.4%	The percentage of all pupils with special educational needs is only a third of the national average (19.5%).
Percentage eligible for Free School Meals (FSM).	2.7%	The intake is highly advantaged compared to other schools as measured by FSM (national is 17.8%).

*Source for comparison with other schools is (2001d) OFSTED Performance and Assessment Data Report (PANDA)

As seen from Table 16, Fairlawn has an advantaged intake as measured by the low percentages of pupils eligible for free school meals and the low percentage of pupils on the special educational needs register. The advantaged nature of the intake is greater than these figures suggest because families must actively apply to the school and compete for places. Thus pupils are not only from affluent backgrounds, they are also highly motivated because they have chosen to be at the school.

Table 17 shows that GCSE examination results are far above both LEA and national figures. This examination performance is unsurprising given the characteristics of the school intake. Using Ofsted benchmarks (Ofsted 2001d) this performance is in the top five percent compared to all schools.

Table 17: Examination Performance at Fairlawn School, GCSE Percent 5 A*-C

	England	LEA	Fairlawn
1998	46%	50%	72%
1999	48%	50%	83%
2000	49%	52%	84%
2001	50%	53%	86%

A 'Privileged' Beacon

Fairlawn is a prime example of the kind of school selected by the DfES in the first wave of beacon schools in 1998. Keith Andrews explained that at the time, Ministers were 'stung' by the strength of criticism levelled at the selection of schools like this (p16). The perception of the critics was that these so called 'outstanding schools' were in leafy suburbs with advantaged intakes and so of course they would be good, but they were atypical of the majority of schools. It can be argued that the inclusion of these 'elite' schools at the outset of the beacon initiative very nearly undermined it, because critics rightly asked how other less advantaged schools could (or would wish to) learn from them.

The Beacon Offer

The headteacher of Fairlawn offered two main reasons for seeking beacon status:

> It was something we wanted to do in terms of putting Fairlawn on the map and giving our staff the opportunity to shine and get some acknowledgement.

and

> We wanted to establish professional relationships with local schools and I think we felt very strongly that the budget we would be given would help us to do that in a way that perhaps schools hadn't had a chance to do so before.

In addition, the headteacher felt that beacon status would be a good way of overcoming perceptions amongst local schools about Fairlawn being elitist.

In choosing its areas of beacon focus, the school was careful to choose those departments that were successful and which contained '*good ambassadors who would be able to communicate effectively with other teachers*'. This was, as the beacon co-ordinator explained, because '*good teachers are not necessarily good beacon teachers*'.

Care was exercised by the school, not just in terms of selecting their 'best' subject areas, but also in terms of considering the suitability of particular staff for beacon work. This issue was considered essential because of the perception of hostility towards Fairlawn from local schools. The approach adopted by Fairlawn in identifying beacon foci recognised the vital point that the ability to teach well is an insufficient criteria for a teacher (or indeed for a whole school) to be necessarily effective at dissemination of best practice. Yet, in the questionnaire survey, in contrast to this case study, perceptions of the ability of particular staff to disseminate best practice was not considered to be important by the majority of headteachers when determining their areas of focus for beacon work.

Using this approach, Fairlawn offered the following areas of beacon expertise:

- Initial Teacher Training (ITT).
- Information and Communications Technology (ICT).
- Sport.
- Performing Arts.

Beacon work in each focus area developed in the following ways:

Initial Teacher Training

Before becoming a beacon school, Fairlawn had already established partnerships with higher education institutions in teacher training. This had developed into a School Centred Initial Teacher Training Scheme. The school further developed this into a beacon activity, by offering its newly qualified teacher induction programme to other schools as an after school activity.

The outcome of this was that between 1999 and 2001 thirty four student teachers were trained. The director of the scheme and the head of music were co-opted by a university to interview prospective students for their PGCE courses, advise other schools receiving student teachers and deliver workshops for graduate teachers about 'A' Level music.

Part of the funding for the involvement of Fairlawn staff in the scheme is paid for from beacon funds. This activity is of direct benefit to Fairlawn as well as to its partners because it provides a ready supply of new teachers.

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)

The school identified ICT both as an area of its strength and also as an area of need in local primary partners. The original beacon intention was to provide a forum for ICT staff to meet and discuss issues of common interest and concern, such as creating and managing ICT networks, developing web sites and evaluating new software.

This developed in year two of beacon status with the employment of a peripatetic beacon school technician to support partner schools with ICT problems. The cost of this was met from both the Fairlawn budget and also from beacon funds. Fairlawn developed a series of eight week evening sessions for basic ICT training run by staff and the sixth form for primary teachers. This was offered on nine occasions over three years and was always heavily oversubscribed. Fairlawn ICT staff visited local schools to provide practical advice on networking and the purchase of hardware and they also provided training on ICT across the curriculum. The method of dissemination used was through seminars and individual consultancy. This area of beacon work is considered to be a great success by Fairlawn because it allowed the school to establish strong links with key primary feeders.

Sport

Fairlawn School had existing strengths in sport and also links with other schools for coaching and refereeing. In the first year of beacon status it expanded its programme of coaching to include a strong focus on swimming (using the Fairlawn swimming pool) and projects with primary schools. Beacon funding was subsequently used to create a programme of coaching courses for teachers in teaching swimming and life guarding in the school pool.

Fairlawn achieved sports college status in September 1999 and this expertise was also recognised by the award of the Sportsmark. All subsequent sporting activities with partner schools (funded through specialist status money) now count as beacon activities thus potentially freeing up the portion of the beacon budget that would otherwise have been spent on sport for other purposes. Effectively the DfES is double funding these activities.

Performing Arts

Performing Arts, and particularly Music, are seen as major strengths of the school. These strengths have been consolidated by encouraging the Head of Music to become an Advanced Skills Teacher (AST) (DfES, 2001i). He now supports a number of schools with poor standards in Music. Beacon funding is used to pay for a supernumerary teacher to allow the head of department to take one day off per week to undertake this outreach work.

The Head of Music recruits schools for beacon work through his work as a tutor on a university teacher training programme. He explained to me that when visiting student teachers he would sometimes note that a whole music department was in need of support. He would then offer the staff from that school a visit to see his own department at work. This would be accompanied by an offer to pay for the supply cover involved from beacon funds. He explained that experience had taught him to play down beacon status and often he would not mention it at all. This was because he had found that the combination of his being an AST and his school being a beacon school was very intimidating for some teachers, particularly those in need of support. He explained his approach as follows:

> I always try to find something that the other school is good at and which we could learn from. I ask them to help us with this in return for assistance in the Music department. Being humble makes gaining entry much easier.

This statement validates the care taken by the school in identifying not just successful subject areas, but successful areas containing staff suitable for beacon work. The initial musical beacon activities focused on providing management and curriculum support for two partner schools. In one case this involved target setting and monitoring another head of department on behalf of his headteacher. The outcome of this was that the recipient teacher went on sick leave and then resigned. This kind of work represents an unusual interpretation of the meaning of *'sharing good practice'* and of the co-operative and collaborative style of beacon working promoted by the DfES. The example given here has certainly contributed to raising standards in music in the partner school. Yet it is unlikely to encourage other teachers there to wish to engage in similar partnerships with Fairlawn.

This illustrates the difficulties that could be created in future for beacon schools when the boundaries between beacon work and related DfES initiatives (like AST's and Specialist School work) become blurred.

The use of an AST for beacon activities at Fairlawn raises potentially difficult issues. Schools receive twenty per cent of the funding for AST's through Standards Funds grants. These grants are passed on by Local Education Authorities to enable each AST to use one day per week for outreach support in other schools. In Fairlawn, outreach work in Music is also being funded by beacon resources leaving the outreach component of AST funding available to the school to use for other purposes should it wish to. Thus the school is being double funded for the same activities (as was the case with Physical Education activities). This situation highlights an important danger implicit in government policy as outlined in the White Paper 'Schools achieving Success'. Successful schools can now receive multiple funding for sharing best practice under a variety of initiatives. It is possible that some schools might divert large amounts of this money into their own budgets for purposes other than what was originally intended. Furthermore, it is not illegal to do so under current regulations.

Beacon Work at Fairlawn Over Three Years: A Summary

Table 18 below shows that Fairlawn has worked with a total of sixth-four schools in its three year beacon period. According to the beacon co-ordinator, the commonest mode of dissemination used by the school was the consultancy or customised approach. This has involved undertaking an audit of the needs of partner schools and then delivering customised training to meet these needs. This kind of approach was the mode of dissemination most frequently reported as being used by beacon schools in the questionnaire survey (Table 15, p74).

Table 18: Number of schools worked with 1998-2001

Total number of schools worked with	64
Number of schools worked with on:	
▪ ICT	21
▪ Music	9
▪ Teacher Training	6
▪ Sport	10
▪ Various subject areas and issues	12

Source: Fairlawn Beacon Bid Renewal after three years.

Table 19 below shows that the majority of beacon contacts were in terms of visits and workshops rather than extended or deeper partnerships.

Table 19: Type of beacon activities logged by Fairlawn School.

	Sport	Teacher Training	ICT	Music	Other	Total
Visits in	22	18	82	30	24	176
Visits out	17	54	17	76	30	194
Workshops held	20	-	-	-	-	-
Training sessions	45	-	-	-	-	-
Conferences	3	-	-	-	-	-

Source: Fairlawn Beacon Bid Renewal after three years

Senior staff at Fairlawn believed that the school had found it particularly difficult to establish deeper relationships with other secondary schools because they felt these schools perceived Fairlawn was elitist and was 'up to something'. The school only made progress with other secondary schools by putting on set-piece conferences which provided a forum for face to face contact and a means of ice-breaking. This approach led toward the development of some deeper partnerships later on in the three year designation period.

Creating Deeper Partnerships

Towards the end of the second year of operation Fairlawn school started to build some sustained relationships with a focused group of partners. This change in the method of dissemination used as the school grew in experience is not something experienced by

beacon schools as a whole. Responses to the questionnaire survey (p76) indicate that there is no correlation between length of experience as a beacon and mode of dissemination. Yet at Fairlawn regular contacts were built up over a period of time focusing on specific issues and involving follow up on-site and at partner school premises. The nature of these relationships is shown in Tables 20, 21 and 22 below.

Table 20 illustrates that most of the sustained primary links were with established feeder schools. Since these schools also fed other secondary schools in the area, these links were likely to be directly beneficial to Fairlawn in terms of further raising its profile with its potential intake.

Table 20 Sustained Primary Partnerships with Fairlawn School

Partner	Reason for partnership	Main focus for partnership
Two Church of England, 4-11 schools.	Request for support with RE.	RE training, producing and delivering work schemes
Three 4-11 schools.	Established feeder school links.	Cross phase Maths work.
One 4-11 school.	Established feeder school links.	Cross phase PE work.
One 4-11 school.	Established feeder school links.	Swimming training, cross-phase English.
One 4-11 school.	Established feeder school links.	Support in a range of foundation subjects.

Table 21 below shows that half of the deeper secondary school partnerships grew from links existing before Fairlawn gained beacon status. Fairlawn found it very difficult to create sustained partnerships with schools where there were no pre-existing links.

Table 21 Sustained Secondary Partnerships with Fairlawn School

Partner	Reason for Partnership	Focus for partnership
Two 11-16 schools in Education Action Zones.	Pre-beacon consultancy in Music.	Weaknesses identified in Music.
Two 11- 16 inner city schools.	Partnership brokered by Higher Education institute for ITT.	Identified by Higher Education as needing support in ITT.
11-16 inner city school.	Pre-beacon partnership in Sport.	Behaviour management and ICT.
Two 11-16 inner city schools.	Requests received from these schools for support in various areas.	Support across a variety of subjects.

Table 22 Sustained partnerships with Higher Education Institutions

Partners	Reason for partnership	Main focus for partnership
3 HE institutions	Requested the input of school mentors to development of school based teacher training course	ITT providers wished to develop partnerships with schools acknowledged as centres of excellence for mutual support.

One strong partnership developed with a secondary school in North East London, 'Bluehill School'. In contrast to Fairlawn, this school contains many disadvantaged pupils and its intake is below national averages in terms of Key Stage 2 National Curriculum test scores. Thirty two per cent of pupils there are eligible for free school meals, which is significantly above national averages. Twenty seven percent of its pupils are on the special educational needs register and four per cent are statemented. These figures greatly exceed the national average. The school had particular difficulties with its Music department in terms of poor results and poor teaching. The partner school approached Fairlawn for assistance.

Bluehill School asked for specific assistance in helping teachers in Music with classroom management, production of schemes of work and advice on investing in new equipment. The Head of Music at Bluehill visited the music department at Fairlawn to observe lessons, see classroom management strategies in operation and to discuss schemes of work and view the extra curricular music programme. Bluehill School then developed its Music department using adapted schemes and practices from Fairlawn. It also developed a lively extra curricular music programme modelled on provision at Fairlawn School.

According to Fairlawn school, Bluehill staff did not have the expertise or the will to sort out the problems that it faced in Music. Fairlawn provided this expertise. This seems to be an effective beacon activity. In practice, the support was provided by an Advanced Skills Teacher in his outreach time and Fairlawn need not have had beacon status nor beacon funding in order to bring this about.

Staff at Fairlawn view this success as evidence that it is easier for schools that are different to work together because then there are no *'invidious comparisons'* made by staff.

Modes Of Dissemination

Fairlawn school has placed a quantitative emphasis in recording its beacon work, as shown by Tables 18 and 19 (p96). Clearly the DfES were impressed with the number of schools that Fairlawn has worked with and the number of activities it engaged in, because the department extended its beacon status for a further three years. Yet these tables do not record the qualitative impact of these many interactions on the quality of teaching and learning experienced by pupils in partner schools. If the purpose of beacon work is to raise standards of teaching and learning by disseminating best practice, this omission in evidence required by the DfES seems odd.

Monitoring the classroom impact of dissemination work is difficult, if only because proving causal links between particular beacon interventions and subsequent classroom improvement is difficult. Yet before this monitoring takes place, those engaged in

dissemination activities need a clear view as to the kinds of activities which are likely to produce maximal improvement.

In my interview with the beacon co-ordinator, she touched on this issue as follows:

> It has been clear to us, I suppose, from towards the end of the second year of our beacon Status, that although the way we are working is convenient for all parties, it may not necessarily be the most effective in terms of promoting transfer of skills.

Staff at Fairlawn, as measured by results, are high quality practitioners, but this comment illustrates that unsurprisingly, they have not been able to engage with research literature on what makes for effective dissemination. With such able staff there is little doubt that had they possessed this knowledge then their dissemination work might have been even more effective. There is a clear role here for partnership with researchers from institutions of higher education who would be able to help Fairlawn (and other beacon Schools) to explore this theoretical knowledge base to their mutual advantage. For its success, such an initiative would be likely to require DfES brokerage and co-ordination.

Successes Of Beacon Work

Fairlawn claims to have had the following impacts on its partners during the last three years.

- One primary school partner has pulled out of special measures in record time (fourteen months) and has cited the beacon input of Fairlawn as a factor.
- Two secondary schools, identified as having serious weaknesses in 1998, have been considered 'improving' by subsequent Ofsted visits. Fairlawn has provided considerable support to their music departments.
- Eighty two teachers in twenty three schools (mostly from the primary sector) have been given basic ICT training to enable them to use ICT in their classrooms.
- Six primary teachers trained by Fairlawn have taught six classes of Year 6 pupils using Fairlawn designed units to enhance Key Stage 2 Science provision. Fairlawn claims, that a result, Science SAT scores at level 5+ have improved by twenty eight percent.

Even if causality is difficult to prove, these are considerable achievements for one school to have played a part in.

Benefits From Beacon Work

Beacon status has moved the school on from a position of relative isolation to one of partnership with a range of schools. These partnerships are with those schools who have benefited from beacon outreach, but they are also with the growing group of successful secondary schools in the region who have also become beacon schools. Fairlawn is now at the centre of a regional network of beacon schools and it exercises a leadership role amongst them. The co-ordinator pointed out that '*increasingly we spend more time with other beacon schools than with non-beacon partners, we act as a consultant to them, particularly where they are new beacons*'. In this sense, the school has become 'first among equals', that is, it remains in an elite position, but no longer in an isolated one. beacon status has provided a platform to create strong links with other equally successful schools, and this has been just as important to Fairlawn, as its links with those in need of support.

As an ex-Grant Maintained school, Fairlawn enjoyed cool relationships with the local education authority. Things have changed now that the school has a pivotal role amongst beacon schools regionally. The LEA is now keen to seek its support with advisory work linked to priorities expressed in its development plan. This LEA-School relationship has been transformed by beacon status.

Drawbacks Of Beacon Work

Although the beacon co-ordinator was confident that there was no resentment from staff who were not involved in beacon work towards those who were, this was not the perception of all of the staff. One teacher who was heavily involved, reported how other teachers resented his being away for this purpose and resented covering for him. Furthermore, he explained that he had been on the receiving end of disparaging remarks from some very good teachers who had not been chosen to participate in beacon work.

One middle manager who had not been involved said to me that *'we wonder if the fact we have not been selected means the management think we are not good enough'* Staff involved in beacon activities explained that they had to carefully market the benefits of their work to colleagues on a regular basis. They were also acutely aware of the damage to their own classes caused by absence due to beacon work. These points make clear that beacon schools must not only worry about managing external relationships, they must also devote energy to managing their internal micro-political relationships, in order to maintain harmony amongst their staff.

Conclusion

Fairlawn is a very successful secondary school achieving outstanding examination results. Leadership and management are strong at all levels as demonstrated by the entrepreneurial approach taken by the school in identifying and accessing those educational initiatives which are likely to be of direct benefit to the school. Yet, with all of these strengths, this school disseminates its many good practices using a consultancy model (as do nearly forty percent of responding schools in this research) These methods are unlikely to enable teachers in partner schools to develop new skills and transfer them successfully to their own classroom contexts (p 75). If a privileged school like Fairlawn, with so many advantages in terms of leadership, context and quality of staff at all levels, is not in a position to use the most effective means of dissemination then this suggests that it may be difficult for other schools to do so.

The school has developed a very successful model involving an AST supporting partner schools in difficulty, alongside a range of other successful beacon activities. The evidence suggests that this model has worked very well in terms of improving standards. The management of Fairlawn see this as being a way forward in terms of rewarding and retaining talented subject staff and also for raising standards amongst partners. The school intends to encourage other beacon schools in the region to appoint AST's in different subject disciplines and so create a multi-disciplinary team of AST's who could all support a failing school at once. Whilst this may resemble the kind of work undertaken by local

authority advisory teams in recent years, there are two important differences. These are that, the AST staff are by definition, excellent teachers who have passed a rigorous selection procedure to prove that they can assist others (whilst maintaining their own excellent standards and results) and they are also all current and credible practitioners. Fairlawn is clear that neither of these features automatically applies to their local authority staff. It is easy to see from this why Keith Andrews believed some LEAs saw beacon schools *'as an attack on their existence'* (p21). It is also highly likely that a growing number of schools will, in future, seek free advisory support from beacon schools who will be able to offer credible and current practitioners rather than priced support from their local education authorities. This may have serious implications for the future of LEA advisory teams.

There is a clear synergy between the AST initiative and beacon work, which the school intends to exploit for school improvement purposes. The AST strand is seen a central thrust to raising standards, whilst beacon status is seen as providing a general backdrop for continuing professional development, as well as a *'general pot'* of funding and a *'quality mark to legitimate working with others'*.

Whilst beacon schools must possess some level of altruism in order to engage in the necessary work, these schools must also see some pay-off for themselves in order to make the effort worthwhile. In the case of Fairlawn, beacon status has been used very effectively as a vehicle to assist others, but also as a vehicle significantly to improve its own position vis-à-vis its competitors. In this way Beacon Schooling may be seen as supporting the marketisation of education.

Chapter 6

'Appledore' Primary School - A Highly Successful Primary School

The School Context

'Appledore' is a primary school for children aged between seven and eleven. It is located in London serving a council estate as well as areas of terraced owner occupied housing. The catchment covers areas of disadvantage as well as areas of affluence. According to the School Performance and Assessment Data report (PANDA), the immediate wards which constitute the catchment of the school are, of a slightly more favourable socio-economic picture than found nationally. For example, in two of the four catchment wards, the proportion of children from ethnic minority backgrounds matches the national average, yet in the other two catchment wards the proportion of such children is below the national average. To gauge the characteristics of the school, Table 23 below compares key features of Appledore primary school with selected national benchmarks.

Table 23: Appledore, Comparison with National Benchmarks*

	Appledore	Comparison with other schools*
Number of pupils on roll in January 2001.	424	Appledore is very large compared to other primary schools (national average is 270)
Percentage of pupils with statements of Special Education Need (SEN).	0%	The percentage of pupils with statements of special educational needs is below the national average for primary schools (1.7%)
Percentage eligible for Free School Meals (FSM).	6%	The intake of Appledore is advantaged compared to other primary schools as measured by the FSM (national average is 10.5 to 21.5%)

*Source for comparison with other schools is Ofsted (2001f) National Summary Data Report for Primary Schools.

Table 23 above shows that Appledore is a larger than average primary school. It also has no statemented special needs pupils. It has a percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals which is below the national average. Although located in an urban area, the school has no bilingual pupils and few pupils from ethnic minorities. These features suggest that the intake is not typical of other primary schools in similar locations. In overall terms, the intake is more advantaged than might be expected but not exceptionally so.

A Highly Effective Primary Beacon School

Appledore can be considered to be a highly effective school to the extent that it achieves excellent results in the Key Stage 2 national tests in English, mathematics and science. Table 24 below compares attainment over time at Appledore, with attainment in the LEA and attainment nationally. The table shows that aggregate Key Stage 2 national test results between 1998 and 2001 were significantly in excess both of the LEA and the national average.

Table 24: Appledore National Test Performance Improvement Measures*

	Measure of Improvement**	LEA Average	National Average	Difference between school and National Average	Difference between school and LEA Average.
1998	280	212	193	+87	+68
1999	278	234	218	+60	+44
2000	280	244	231	+49	+36
2001	289	247	233	+56	+42

*The Improvement Measure is the sum of the percentage of pupils reaching the expected government standard of national curriculum level 4 in each of English, mathematics and science. This measure is used in the DfES Key Stage 2 Performance Tables.

**Source : DfES Performance Tables (2001j).

Standards of attainment at the school are so high that the Office for Standards in Education rated performance in these three core subjects, benchmarked against similar schools, as being in the top five per cent nationally. In addition, levels of absolute performance are sufficiently high that, when no adjustment is made for intake

characteristics, the school is still amongst the top five percent of performers. Thus, in terms of examination results, the school can be said to be very highly achieving.

The most recent inspection report for Appledore in 1998 identifies the reasons behind this high performance as being due to *'consistently high standards of teaching, underpinned by very positive attitudes amongst pupils and an ethos of sustained hard work supported by friendly and respectful relationships'*. The report made it clear that these very positive features had been created and maintained by the *'excellent quality of leadership and management at all levels at the school'*. Unsurprisingly, leadership and management is a central part of the Appledore beacon offer. Appledore achieved beacon status in September 2000. The school was in its second year as a beacon school at the time of writing this case study.

The 'Appledore' Beacon Offer

The headteacher of Appledore explained that all of the staff were involved in the decision to seek beacon school status. He reported that:

> We spent considerable time as a whole staff discussing beacon. Staff and governors considered it for a long time, including the view that it could impact negatively on standards in the school. In the end, we saw many benefits and reasoned that any negative impact would be minimal compared to the advantages.

Appledore had existing and strong links with a university department of education in teacher training and viewed this as a central plank of beacon development. The headteacher was clear that this link should be strengthened to the benefit of Appledore staff in terms of improving opportunities for certificated continuing professional development and using beacon funding to underpin this. Because Appledore had been so successful in developing new teachers, most of its staff had been newly qualified teachers there and they had only ever had experience of this one school before. As a result, the headteacher believed that Appledore staff would broaden their horizons by visiting other schools, particularly a linked designated City Partner school as required under Beacon Policy. He felt that *'at a minimum this would make staff appreciate their own school even*

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more'. Therefore Appledore entered into beacon status with a clear view that it was a means of further developing itself.

The school identified five areas of beacon expertise as follows:

Development Of Writing

Improving writing at Key Stage 2 is a DfES priority arising from the National Literacy Strategy. This is a competence offered by three quarters of all primary beacon schools and just under half of all beacon schools (p 62). In the first year of operation as a beacon this area of expertise was progressed with a local secondary school in order to enable teachers at that school to better cope with pupils entering Key Stage 3 with achievement below the national average. Appledore undertook relatively little work in this area because local primary schools felt they knew as much about it following the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy as Appledore did.

School Leadership and Team Building

Strong leadership and management by staff at all levels was recognised in the Ofsted inspection report of 1998. It therefore seemed logical to identify leadership as an area of expertise. When Appledore became a beacon school it was a requirement that beacons would identify a relatively disadvantaged City Partner school to work with (p22). Appledore linked with a partner in a nearby authority with significantly different intake characteristics, including a very high proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals, high numbers of special needs pupils and ethnic diversity. This City Partner had already been placed in special measures because of its poor performance.

The headteacher of Appledore became a regular visitor to the partner school in an attempt to provide management support. The relationship between the two schools was problematic to begin with. The headteacher from Appledore found that the City Partner initially resented input from a beacon school. He explained this as follows:

> At first they said what does a school like Appledore know about a school like us, how can their teaching practices be of any use to us? It took a long time at the start to overcome this suspicion.

In this context, the beacon label was found to be quite unhelpful because it emphasised the 'inferiority' of the partner school. This comment mirrored the feedback received by the DfES when the first group of beacon schools chosen by HMCI for their 'outstanding performance' were designated in 1998 (p16). It took a full year before the partnership had reached a stage where Appledore staff could develop a meaningful relationship. By the start of the second year of beacon status the headteacher of Appledore had begun to act as an advisory headteacher for one day per week in the failing school. The intention was to move the City Partner out of special measures by using a current headteacher to support it on a part time basis, rather than to rely on LEA advisory support.

The DfES published a code of conduct regulating LEA and School relationships in February 2001 (DfES, 2001k). This code made it clear that LEAs should only intervene in the work of schools in inverse proportion to their success. It removed the right previously enjoyed by LEAs to regulate successful schools, but at the same time required them to intervene heavily in failing schools. The code makes it clear that it is the responsibility of LEAs to work with schools in difficulty to ensure that they make progress, using their powers of intervention where necessary. Thus the City Partner School LEA had a statutory duty to ensure that its failing school was supported. That it chose not to use its own advisory staff to assist its school showed either a strong belief in the potency of the beacon model or a lack of capability on its part. Using a practitioner on loan, rather than using LEA advisory support, is an example of the 'site based' approach to school improvement outlined in the White Paper, *Schools Achieving Success* (DfES 2001g*).

In this case the headteacher of Appledore did not believe that it was a realistic model to use to bring about improvement. He reported that, although he felt his input had been valuable, he could only do so much in one day a week. He said that:

It is frustrating because I can see that there is much to do, but I have no time to do it or see it through because it is impossible to run two schools at once.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Staff at Appledore believed that their management style was effective because teachers at all levels regularly engaged in focused and highly effective monitoring and evaluation of the curriculum. The school felt that it was good at training new managers in how to operate in a similar way and that this promoted consistency. Therefore monitoring and evaluation were offered by the school as an additional area of beacon expertise.

During the first year of operation as a beacon, this skill was not offered in any systematic way to partners. This was, according to the beacon co-ordinator, '*because Appledore had not found an effective means of marketing and disseminating its expertise to others*'. The school did host a number of middle and senior managers on one-off visits to discuss approaches to monitoring with the Appledore deputy head teacher. Yet senior staff at the school recognised that this was unlikely to be very effective in terms of transferring their practices to elsewhere.

Initial Teacher Training

Appledore felt it had particularly successful experience of working in partnership with higher education in order to develop newly qualified teachers and it wished to offer this expertise as an area of beacon activity. The school already ran a series of induction courses for newly qualified teachers and it wished to build upon this in a way that would provide direct benefit to its staff in terms of accreditation of professional development.

As part of beacon activity, Appledore set up a support programme for primary school newly qualified teacher (NQTs) induction tutors, jointly organised by a university and two other primary schools. The purpose was to enhance the quality of mentoring of NQTs in participating primary schools and provide a support network for their induction tutors. The scheme was designed so that staff acting as induction tutors could earn credit points towards a Masters degree. This has led to a monthly meeting of staff involved in NQT

induction across the schools, organised and funded by Appledore primary school from their beacon budget.

Professional Development Of Staff

Appledore offered general professional development as area of expertise, as a 'catch-all', to indicate that the school would be willing to engage in tailor-made consultancy with partner schools. This matches one of the three most popular styles of dissemination used by beacon schools identified by early research by the DfES (p73). The approach is one where the beacon school sets itself up as 'having the answers' to problems identified by partners. In the questionnaire survey undertaken as part of this research, this consultancy mode of dissemination was the single most popular method used with thirty-nine percent of responding schools claiming to use it (p 74).

First Year Experiences

On becoming a beacon school Appledore expected to be overwhelmed by contacts from potential partner schools and the headteacher was initially concerned about how the school would manage this. The reality was quite different. The headteacher explained the situation as follows:

> Initially, we were very disappointed because we had been led to
> believe that we would be overwhelmed, the silence that followed
> was strange.

Appledore was very surprised by the lack of interest shown by other schools in its beacon offer. The headteacher believes that the fault for this lies largely with the local authority which provided little co-ordination of the initiative. More importantly, they did little to counter misconceptions amongst local schools about beacon schools. At one point the LEA did ask if Appledore would be willing to lead training for others. The school agreed to do this, but it was never followed up by the LEA. Appledore feels that its LEA simply *'forgot about it'*. Management in the school clearly felt very bitter about the perceived lack of support for their work.

The headteacher felt this support to be necessary because he believed there was:

> A strong undercurrent in the primary sector that schools don't want
> to be linked to a beacon school because, by definition, they would
> feel second rate, it would imply they were not as good.

This mirrors the comments made by David Jackson (p40), who as an ex-beacon headteacher, believes the title 'beacon' to be alienating to the rest of the profession. The deputy head teacher highlighted the lack of sensitivity to this situation by the LEA in recounting a meeting she attended for deputies where at the end of the meeting a senior LEA officer introduced her to participants and informed them that *'if they had any problems then Appledore would have the answer because it was a beacon school'*. She felt that this way of presenting the school would alienate everybody present at the meeting.

In order to manage the initiative, Appledore chose to free up one of its deputy head teachers to become beacon co-ordinator. This involved using beacon funding to release her from classroom duties for two days per week. The arrangement meant that she would be free to meet visitors and also that she would be able to cover for other teachers who were engaged in beacon work. The school felt that this way of managing beacon activities would enable management to further improve monitoring and evaluation by allowing the deputy head teacher to see the work that had been covered by pupils. As a consequence, Appledore does not pay teachers for their involvement in beacon activity, instead teachers receive release time to do the work.

The main advantage of beacon status identified by the headteacher and deputy is the freedom given to them by the DfES to work as they feel appropriate. This appreciation of being trusted is similar to the responses from the questionnaire survey schools (p 78). The headteacher of Appledore explained this in the following way:

> We are trusted to use the money and the school has benefited from the resources made available. We don't have to ask the DfES for permission to do things so we don't need to worry about them saying no.

He explained that, as a consequence of this trust, the school had become much more confident in attempting curriculum innovation.

The teaching staff at the school identified the single biggest benefit of beacon work as being in the increased opportunities made available for their own continuing professional development, particularly in being able to participate in the beacon funded NQT Induction Tutor course. Once more, this advantage matched responses from survey questionnaire schools (p 80). The benefits in the case of Appledore are less to do with gains made from the sharing of ideas and interaction with partners (a benefit identified in the questionnaire survey) and more to do with the gains from participation in the NQT Induction Tutor course paid for from the beacon budget.

Appledore staff also felt that working with a more disadvantaged City Partner School had been of advantage to it indirectly in terms of the retention of its own teaching staff *'because teachers appreciate what they have got at Appledore'*.

A Self-Critical Beacon School

The annual beacon return required by the DfES asks schools to indicate the frequency of use in the previous year of a variety of dissemination activities. Twelve possible dissemination methods are suggested by the DfES which could have been used across the five areas of beacon competence offered by the school. This gives a total of sixty possible types of dissemination activity which Appledore could have engaged in, plus the possibility of specifying 'other' methods which may have been identified by the school. Appledore reported that it had not used fifty-three of the dissemination possibilities and that of the remaining seven which it had used, these were undertaken at a frequency of once per term, at most. Most of the possible types of dissemination activity had not been used by the school at all. The headteacher at Appledore reflected that the school had not been as successful in its first year as he had hoped.

The DfES annual return and interviews with the headteacher and deputy revealed that the school had experienced little demand for its services. This may have arisen because management at Appledore had the quite reasonable expectation that the LEA would broker its expertise to needy partners. Instead, the LEA took little interest and the school experienced hostility from other local schools. In contrast to Fairlawn school, which was proactive because it wanted to use beacon as a means to improve relationships between it and local schools (Chapter 5), Appledore had taken a more relaxed stance towards its beacon activity. On reflection, the staff feel that they misunderstood the policy in the first year and they had not considered that their LEA would fail to support them. In hindsight, they feel they should not have waited so long before challenging the LEA about its lack of support for their work.

By the end of the year Appledore was left with an embarrassment of beacon resources. It had received a beacon budget from the DfES of £24,000 for the 2000-2001 year and had only used £16,000 by the end of the year. The balance of £8,000 was returned unspent to the DfES. In the first year of operation, of the nine teachers in the school only two had been involved in beacon work. Approximately £9,400 or sixty percent of the budget was spent on staffing costs, mainly freeing up the deputy head and providing administrative support.

Appledore reported that the relationships between it and its City Partner school had been slow to develop because *'supporting staff in a school in special measures requires diplomacy and therefore the partnership has proceeded slowly and steadily'*. Rather than linking with a school in different circumstances, the headteacher at Appledore thought that it might have been better to have linked with a partner school in similar circumstances and with similar socio-economic features, but which was doing less well. He suggested this because of the initial resistance that he encountered from the partner school, whose staff, he believed thought *'What can we learn from there? Our kids are more disadvantaged and teaching in our school is a much tougher job than it is at Appledore. What can they know that would be useful to us?'*

Yet even if schools in future were to work with others in a similar situation, this does not mean that dissemination efforts will be unproblematic.

Unsatisfactory Modes of Dissemination

The dissemination activities Appledore did engage in were mainly one-off beacon activities, involving teachers from other schools visiting to talk to the deputy head teacher about monitoring processes and the style of management at the school. On reflection, the deputy felt that these were ad-hoc discussions which had often been unfocused and they were not a particularly successful means of disseminating best practice. This is strongly supported by the available research literature as discussed in chapter 9 (p 142).

Conclusion

Appledore is a highly effective primary school, but it has not experienced particular success as a beacon school. This case study illustrates the point that, because a school is academically successful, this does not mean that it will necessarily understand how best to disseminate its good practices. Even if a school does have this understanding, it is unlikely to have the necessary resourcing, as a beacon school, in terms of money and staff to be able to disseminate effectively. The ability to disseminate good practice is a related but different skill to teaching pupils to perform well in examinations. It is theoretically possible that a less academically successful school could be better at dissemination. To the extent that this is the case, the DfES might be able to improve the quality of the beacon network by introducing an additional selection criteria focusing on the ability to disseminate for would-be beacon schools

Appledore had learned from its first year experiences. As the headteacher explained:

> By the end of the year we were not overwhelmed with interest, we had all of this money, the school felt it had not given value for money and we decided if the LEA cannot provide for us, we will do it ourselves.

As the school enters its second year of beacon status the school has adopted a different, less steeply hierarchical and more collaborative approach to its beacon work. Appledore approached a group of local schools and simply offered to fund a joint project, to be collectively identified, which might be of benefit to all of the schools involved, including Appledore itself. The group of schools together identified a need to develop expertise in improving pupil writing skills across the curriculum. The result was a series of meetings between teachers in Art, Music and Drama across participating schools were planned to develop materials to support this aim. This is quite a different approach to the initial stance adopted by Appledore which involved the school offering its beacon areas of expertise for others to learn from.

Other schools have experienced more immediate success than Appledore in their beacon work. Yet even these schools might have been more effective if they had received better guidance from the DfES. One such school is considered next.

Chapter 7

'Highcrest House' - An Exceptionally Well Led Special School

The School Context

Highcrest House is a special school located in inner London catering for one hundred and twenty pupils aged between two and nineteen. The school was created in 1995 from the amalgamation of two special schools, one of which was for pupils with physical difficulties and one for delicate pupils with learning difficulties. Today many pupils at Highcrest have multiple learning difficulties including medical, sensory, speech and/or emotional and behavioural problems. Additionally, three quarters of pupils at the school have severe problems with communication. Highcrest House contains a nursery for fifteen pupils who have complex and severe difficulties and about a third of pupils overall have profound and multiple learning difficulties. The school comprises seventy staff and is one of just three hundred and sixty five special schools in England for pupils with severe learning difficulties (Ofsted 2000d).

Because of the nature of the intake, pupils at the school come from a wide variety of London LEAs. Although from a geographically dispersed area, the majority of pupils come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Some sixty percent of pupils are eligible for free school meals and nearly half possess English as an additional language. This compares to an upper quartile figure for percentages of bi-lingual pupils in similar schools of just twenty percent (Ofsted, 2000d, p16)

Highcrest House was last inspected in 1998 when Ofsted described it as an *'excellent'* school, primarily due to its high quality leadership and management.

The reasons why this endorsement from Ofsted is of particular significance is explained below.

A Very Special, Special School

In his 1997/1998 annual report, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools reported that an increasing number of special schools were being placed in special measures (Ofsted 1999). HMCI explained that this was because special schools were more likely than other schools to display weaknesses in their leadership and management. Such weaknesses had been found in one third of all special schools inspected. More significantly, weaknesses in leadership and management had been found in forty-three percent of all special schools catering for pupils with severe learning difficulties. This compared very poorly with the eight percent of secondary schools found that year to have weaknesses in management (Ofsted, 1999). This situation was similarly poor in the following 1998/99 year when half of all schools placed in special measures were special schools (Ofsted 2000c).

HMCI explained that this weakness in the management of special schools arose mainly because of the desire by LEAs to promote inclusion by closing special schools and merging the remaining schools (Ofsted, 1999). These mergers led to the creation of special schools containing a huge diversity of pupils with vastly differing needs from emotional, to behavioural to severe learning difficulties. Ofsted suggested that this diversity was simply too difficult to manage.

These difficult circumstances are the very same circumstances under which Highcrest House was formed and it is unsurprising that having been judged by Ofsted to possess *'excellent leadership and management'*, it was awarded beacon status. The school became one of just thirty special school beacons in September 2000.

Based on its inspection report and on-going work, Highcrest House identified three broad areas of beacon expertise as follows:

Leadership and People Management

The headteacher explained that both of the schools from which Highcrest was formed had been considered to be unsatisfactory by the local authority. The LEA wanted the merger because they preferred to have one special school potentially go into special measures

after inspection rather than two. It was under these inauspicious circumstances that Highcrest House was created. The new headteacher was given the job of replacing disaffected and de-motivated teachers from two schools with highly motivated and energetic practitioners. This difficult job was achieved within three years as confirmed by the subsequent Ofsted inspection. Furthermore, leadership at Highcrest House achieved this outcome under the very same circumstances which led to so many special schools being judged as failing by Ofsted during the previous five years. The school clearly has expertise in leadership and management to share with others.

The headteacher explained that the key to this success was the school's use of a tightly prescribed set of systems and expectations for staff management which are used at all levels so that everyone knows what is expected of them. She explained that the school is good at supporting teachers, but also at *plain talking* when things are not right.

The school turned these procedures into a series of interactive seminars which could be shared with partner schools. During its first year as a beacon, Highcrest House worked with six local primary and secondary schools in disseminating this work. Senior staff from the partner schools continue to meet with staff from Highcrest House where they bring along details of their current management and staffing problems for discussion. Beacon evaluation forms completed by partners indicate that they greatly value this training. The main advantage identified by participants is that because the training is offered by another school, they do not feel that it is judgemental in the way it would be if offered by their LEA.

Promoting Discipline, Good Behaviour and Welfare

Many of the pupils at the school are very hard to manage. As a consequence the school has developed an excellent behaviour management policy based around consistency of approach, ownership of the policy by all parties (including pupils), and assertive discipline. Both the Ofsted report and observation of pupils around the school support the view that behaviour is very good indeed.

Local primary and secondary schools have looked to Highcrest for support in producing their own behaviour management policies. This beacon activity is led by one of the school's deputy headteachers who regularly works with other schools in developing policies for managing their pupil behaviour.

She gave an example of how she was approached by a local secondary school which was having problems at lunchtimes with disruptive behaviour. As a consequence of this poor behaviour the school found that it could not retain its mid-day supervisors. The Highcrest deputy responded by refusing to give the school a copy of its own policy because this method of dissemination would *'simply not transfer good practice to a different context'*. This response matched the general perception of the questionnaire survey headteachers, that providing documentary evidence of good practice to partners is the least effective method of dissemination (Table 14, p70). Instead, the deputy offered to work with a representative group of staff from that school to revamp their behaviour policy using assertive discipline rather than punishment. Subsequently, the evaluation form completed by the partner school reported a transformation in pupil behaviour.

Special Educational Needs (SEN)

Most of the mainstream schools near Highcrest House educate some pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties, including pupils with attention deficit disorders, dyspraxia and mild forms of autism. Staff at Highcrest possess detailed and specialised knowledge in managing these kinds of pupils and they have been very successful in providing training as a beacon activity to mainstream partners.

Expertise has been disseminated in an innovative way by organising teacher exchanges with special educational needs staff from other schools. Teachers switch roles for half term blocks of time and gain intensive on-the job experience. Additionally, the school offers regular two day taster courses in special educational needs for mainstream staff, commencing with a pre-visit presentation at Highcrest House. This approach allows

teachers to hear about the theory underpinning particular teaching techniques, to watch demonstrations, then to practice the techniques and to do so within an environment where they will receive feedback and be coached on their work. Research evidence suggests that this style of dissemination, particularly when experienced during extended periods of time should make for very effective transfer of skills (Joyce & Showers, 1982, 1988, 1995). This mode of dissemination contrasts strongly with the kind of one-off dissemination events used by over a third of schools responding to my questionnaire survey (Table 15, p 74). Using teacher exchange as a model for dissemination activity may provide a means for other beacon schools to achieve better dissemination in the future.

Experiences as a Beacon School

During its first year as a beacon, Highcrest House had engaged in a wide range of activity. This included personnel management training for six partner schools, training in managing pupil behaviour for another three schools, a number of teacher exchanges with mainstream schools, assisting four schools in bidding for *Investor In People* status and mentoring two new headteachers. The school felt that it had been inundated with requests for beacon support and thus had to turn down many of them.

Highcrest used its beacon budget creatively so that beacon funds were used to support activities which were of benefit both to partner schools and also to itself. The headteacher felt that it was important for Highcrest to benefit from its beacon work, '*as the school was diverting its energies to helping partners*'.

The school achieved this by spending most of its beacon budget on employing additional staff in order to free others to engage in beacon work, rather than on paying existing staff extra. The beacon budget was used to employ a literacy consultant to work with pupils in raising standards of reading and writing, even though literacy was not part of the beacon offer. This consultant was used to free up other staff to undertake beacon work. An administration manager was also employed using a combination of beacon funds and school funds in order to '*manage the bureaucracy of beacon*'. This manager also oversees

all of the school finances. As a consequence, by the end of the first year, all £35,000 of the beacon budget had been spent.

The headteacher's desire for her school to benefit directly from beacon activities was shared by the majority of headteachers in the questionnaire survey, where nearly three quarters of headteachers identified the benefits to their own school as being the driving force behind wishing to become a beacon (Table 13, p66).

Staff, including those who had not been involved in beacon work, were very proud that their school had been awarded beacon status. They said that they were particularly proud to see a special school given such recognition. There was a general feeling that beacon had been good for morale and this feeling matches the headteacher survey questionnaire responses (p78). One teacher said that '*it was the first time in my career that mainstream colleagues had not considered me to be a second class citizen but instead see me as someone with valuable skills and expertise* '.

One of the deputy head teachers felt that demand for the services of the school had been very high because it's staff were seen as '*credible practitioners*', which was not a perception that teachers held about LEA personnel. She suggested that beacon work involved a paradox because '*the more beacon activities staff undertook, the less contact they would have with their own school, and the less credible they would become as practitioners*'. A similar concern was voiced by headteachers in the survey questionnaire who worried that engaging in beacon work might reduce their own school performance (p 82).

The headteacher of Highcrest House felt that her school had been very successful as a beacon in comparison with other beacon schools that she knew of. Highcrest seemed to have generated more demand for its services than many other beacons. She believed that this was because mainstream schools did not perceive her special school to be a competitor and therefore did not feel threatened or undermined by its beacon status. She felt that potential partner schools might have responded quite differently if they had been

in the same sector, '*because then beacon status would imply that partner schools were not as good*'. In being a special school, Highcrest House had avoided some of the relationship problems that had hindered other mainstream beacons (p 84).

Given the difficulties reported by Ofsted (1999) with the leadership and management of some special schools in the late 1990s it is particularly interesting that Highcrest House had not worked with other special schools to disseminate its expertise in leadership. The headteacher explained that Highcrest simply had received no request for help from other special schools. Furthermore, the DfES had not indicated that this was a priority. This lack of interest from special schools may underpin the point made above about the tensions caused by Beacon Policy in terms of attempting to engender collaboration between schools in the same sector who are in competition.

Chapter 8

'Valley High School' and 'Wells Field School'

My Own Beacon School Experience: A Reflection

In this chapter I reflect on three years experience as headteacher of a beacon school. To minimise the dangers inherent in acting as a practitioner-researcher (p 55), my experience will be compared and contrasted with that of the headteacher of another beacon school, who also began his headship, like me, by seeking beacon status for his school. The chapter is based on my own experience, as well as interviews with senior staff in both schools, scrutiny of annual returns to the DfES and also the results of a anonymous questionnaire sample of ten staff involved in both schools.

My School Context

Valley High School is a large multi-ethnic comprehensive school located in East London. The school serves a catchment area that is highly multi-ethnic. The characteristics of the school are shown in Table 25 below.

Table 25: Valley High School: Comparison with National Benchmarks

	Valley	Comparison
Number of pupils on roll	1250	Valley is bigger than other secondary schools (average size is 983)
Percentage of pupils with Special Education Needs (SEN)	2.8%	The percentage of statemented pupils is near to the national average (2.5%)
Percentage of pupils with SEN without statements	9.8%	There are more pupils at Valley High with special needs than is average elsewhere (average 6.4%)
Percentage of Bi-lingual pupils	68%	The percentage of pupils with English as a second language is significantly in excess of the average (8.2%).
Percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals	25%	The intake is disadvantaged compared to other schools as measured by FSM national is 17.8%)

*Source for comparison with other schools is (2001d) Ofsted Performance and Assessment Data Report (PANDA).

The pupil intake at Valley High is relatively disadvantaged, as shown by the high percentage of pupils eligible for free meals. Valley is also highly multi-ethnic with the majority of pupils speaking English as a second language (Table 25). Between them, pupils speak over fifty different languages at home. Six percent of pupils are refugees, often with no ability to speak English. Furthermore, the Department for the Environment, Transport and Regions ranks the local ward (using an index of multiple deprivation) as being amongst the two hundred most deprived in London and in the top fifteen percent most deprived in England.

In spite of this deprivation, Valley High School has been a relatively high achieving school during the last six years. During that time its intake has changed from comprising primarily second generation Indian pupils to first generation Pakistani pupils. The parents of many of these pupils have a rural background and have received little formal education themselves. In the United Kingdom as a whole, Pakistani pupils are the lowest achieving ethnic group as measured by percentages achieving 5 A*-C grades at GCSE. This ethnic intake characteristic combined with other features of the school means that Valley High shares many characteristics with underachieving schools in urban areas.

Yet, in all cases at Valley High, the achievement of different ethnic groups is greater than national averages. This is illustrated in Table 26 below. This high achievement of different groups in a relatively disadvantaged context is rare in metropolitan areas, and it is this main strength of the school that was emphasised when it bid for beacon status.

Table 26: GCSE 5A*-C grades by ethnicity at Valley compared to National (2001)

	VHS 5*A-C	National*	Difference	Sample Size
Black	47%	37%	+10%	19
Pakistani	50%	30%	+20%	30
Bangladeshi	30%	25%	+5%	4
White	56%	50%	+6%	43
Indian	65%	62%	+3%	65
Other	50%	43%	+7%	8

*Source: (DfES 2000).

Uncertain Beginnings

I became headteacher at the school in June 1999. Prior to my appointment the school had been without a permanent headteacher for a year and a half. During this time the school was led by a deputy headteacher who was supported by a depleted management team. This was a very difficult time for Valley High because the school had lacked leadership and the impact of this had started to show. Valley High was beginning to display signs of serious underperformance on a number of key indicators. In the year before I took up post, fixed-term exclusions were significantly above the national average and vandalism and graffiti were evident around the school buildings. Furthermore, authorised and unauthorised absences of pupils were worse than the national average and, significantly, worse than that of neighbouring schools. Valley High had lost fifty-five teacher weeks in the 1998–1999 academic year through teacher absence. There had also been a great deal of staff turnover. A few months before I arrived, the school had discovered it had a £150,000 budget deficit and resolving this problem was to be my first task. Valley High school displayed many of the features of a 'stuck' school (Rosenholtz, 1989, p209) where a sense of mediocrity and powerlessness pervades.

It was into this set of unfavourable circumstances that I was appointed in February 1999. It was also clear, that against this backdrop, examination results were unlikely to be particularly good in the Summer.

As headteacher, my first task was going to be to 'unstick' the school, and then to begin a process of improvement toward recreating a 'moving' school (Rosenholtz, 1989). But first I had to tackle the culture of 'fragmented individualism' at Valley High, where teachers were isolated behind the 'sanctity of their classroom doors' and where they were insulated from positive feedback and support (Hopkins, Ainscow and West, 1994).

I knew from my prior experience as a deputyhead teacher in a school that had rapidly improved, and also from my EdD studies, that a key feature of improving and successful schools is that they share a reflective and collaborative culture (Rosenholtz, 1985, Hopkins, Ainscow and West, 1994). It seemed to me that a culture which facilitated teacher development through mutual support, joint working and reflection on practice

could foster a broader agreement on values and vision (Hargreaves, 1991, 1992, 1993). This, in turn could re-energise Valley High School. To achieve this I needed a focus for staff to 'kick start' a process of enquiry, reflection and the implementation of new ideas. This was to be beacon status.

A Lack of Altruism in Seeking Beacon Status

Past examination performance seemed to meet the necessary criteria for beacon status. Furthermore, the internal difficulties within the school had not yet had time to impact on these results. Results did dip, but not until the set of results published a few months after beacon status was awarded. Fortunately, for me, beacon selection criteria did not (and still do not) include issues like staff morale, staff turnover, exclusions etc. At the time of receiving the letter of invitation the situation at Valley High School was far from beacon-like, although there were no publicly available external indicators to show this.

Although still four months away from taking up headship the school governors asked me to write the beacon school bid. This was difficult because I did not know the school and morale amongst those who did was poor. At the same time, representatives of the local authority asked to meet with me in order to make it very clear that they did not feel that Valley High would cope with beacon status and that we should not get involved. I also received hostile communications from some local headteachers who expressed their anger about how unfair it was that Valley High had been invited to become a beacon school and that their schools had not. In at least one case a neighbouring school had achieved higher results but with a more advantaged intake and the headteacher concerned felt it was unjust to use free school meals as a relevant measure of disadvantage. I received these comments both directly and through the LEA advisory service. Worse still, I received them via staff within Valley High who knew the headteachers concerned. On some occasions it seemed that some of my own staff agreed with them.

I overcame hostility from the LEA by seeking support from councillors on the school governing body who exerted pressure on the LEA so that they eventually did write a letter of support to go with the school bid. Resentment from some local secondary schools

continues, but has little impact on Valley High because most of our secondary partners are from outside our LEA.

I saw beacon status as a vehicle for professional development, to be used in raising morale and in regaining the momentum that this previously successful school had enjoyed. It seemed to me that beacon status would promote professional development because teachers in a beacon school would have to reflect on and codify their practice if they were to be able to share it with others. I also believed that such reflection would have a significant impact on pupil achievement (Joyce and Showers, 1988).

Valley High School had lost ground compared to its competitors in terms of marketing. Very little was heard about the school in the local press and media. Beacon status would confer marketing advantages in that it would provide a basis for good press coverage. Additionally, Valley High had few curriculum links with its main primary school partners. Neighbouring secondary schools had developed strong links with primary schools which meant that Year 6 pupils were familiar with these schools and were more likely to make these their first choices for secondary transfer. Through beacon I would be able to target local primary schools as beacon partners and so use the initiative to regain lost ground.

The projected school budget deficit of £150,000 was arrived at only after drastically cutting every other budget, including budgets for professional development and learning resources. I knew that I would have to make staff redundancies and that there would be very little money available for learning resources or training during the first year. Beacon status was desirable because it would provide a budget which could be used to purchase equipment and materials, which, although for use with partner schools, could also be used by my own.

These budgetary problems led to the redundancies of over three staff. This was not the ideal start for a new headteacher before taking up post. It was therefore going to be very

important for me to be able to make a positive announcement about future developments which would bring in enhanced funding. Beacon status suited this purpose.

Therefore my main reasons for seeking beacon status were not altruistic; they were all to do with improving my own school.

The Valley High School Beacon Offer

Analysis of published performance data and the last inspection report indicated that the achievement of pupils from different ethnic groups was a strength. This was particularly important given that many schools in urban areas with similar intakes were in serious weaknesses or special measures. I saw this as a 'market niche' which I could use to differentiate my school from other would-be beacons. Most pupils entered Valley High with English as their second language, but left it achieving results in excess of the national average. It was therefore obvious that the school had strengths in working with bi-lingual pupils and in developing Literacy in this context.

This was another strength to be used in the beacon bid. It was also clear from the hostility expressed by local schools that we would be unable to work with them and so the bid needed to focus on partners further away. As an active Ofsted inspector, I had contacts with a number of schools that I had inspected or worked with which were in difficulties in London and I was confident that Valley High would be able to develop working links with them. On this basis the strengths initially identified in the beacon application were:

- Primary to Secondary School transfer

- Raising the achievement of students with English as an Additional Language.

- Raising achievement in a multi-ethnic context

Following submission of the bid to the DfES, Valley High School gained beacon status just before I took up the headship. Initially, many staff at the school were incredulous on hearing that Valley High had gained beacon status. As a result, I held a number of whole staff meetings where I explained why Valley High was considered to be successful. I stressed the relatively high achievement of different ethnic groups and the strong achievement of bilingual speakers compared to other schools. Staff had not been aware of these facts and once they were my impression was they started to gain a sense of pride. This was the beginning of a revival.

Teacher Perceptions

I saw beacon as a vehicle for change and, on reflection, other staff also seem to have used it in a similar way. The school beacon co-ordinator felt that before beacon status there had been little interest in discussing issues relating to teaching and learning. She said:

> A culture had developed where staff did not attend meetings to discuss teaching. It needed something new to start debate and overcome what had become a negative peer pressure.

She related how she was able to encourage others to attend a reconstituted teaching and learning group by using beacon status as the incentive. The group started by investigating what was successful in the school and why. The co-ordinator felt that an important by-product of this was that it also led to a shared understanding of areas in need of improvement.

Two less experienced staff who joined the group at the time reflected that they did so because they '*saw beacon as a way in which they could have a significant influence on the school and also assist in their own career progression*'. They recount that the initial process of investigating what the school was good at and why was very valuable for their own professional development because it gave them a '*whole school perspective*'.

In this way a small and cohesive school improvement group was formed from beacon staff. The group grew in status so that, as one member said, '*it became quite a thing to be*

involved in the group because there was a sense that we were moulding the future of the school'

Primary to Secondary School Transfer

Beacon status provided a good basis for me as the new headteacher to visit local primary schools, both to introduce myself and also to identify potential beacon activities which would be mutually beneficial. Give the recent history of my school there was nothing to be gained in suggesting that we had 'the answers' to disseminate to others. Instead, it seemed logical to look at what we could explore together, funded by beacon money. I asked what each primary school thought of Valley High and, in particular, what they thought our weaknesses were. I made it plain that as a new headteacher I would not take criticism personally. In response, some primary headteachers made it very clear that their staff had much more expertise than did mine or indeed other secondary schools in the areas of numeracy and literacy, and that we needed to recognise this. I was quite prepared to accept this point and in some cases my approach surprised and disarmed primary colleagues.

From small beginnings this led to a group of Valley High English teachers who met on a regular basis with primary literacy co-ordinators to investigate how to improve the transfer of pupils between primary and secondary school. This soon developed into links between Art, Music, Drama and Mathematics teachers. Within a year these links were developed into a bridging project between Key Stage 2 and 3 with a focus on literacy across the curriculum. Further bridging projects were created in Mathematics and Science. As a result, pupils from primary schools came to Valley High for lessons using specialist facilities in Science and Design Technology and primary and secondary staff observed each other at work. This led to the production of guideline booklets for primary and secondary teachers in core subjects designed to clarify the expectations of teachers in each sector. Common marking schemes between Key Stage 2 and 3 were developed and joint moderation meetings between Year 6 and 7 teachers were held so that pupils could transfer more easily. More importantly Valley High staff learned a great deal about the Key Stage 2 Literacy initiative and then used this in their own teaching at Key Stage 3.

The deputy of a local primary school reported that beacon has been a major factor in getting secondary teachers to *'understand and respect the expertise held by their primary colleagues'*. The Valley High beacon Co-ordinator agrees and is clear that Valley staff have benefited as much as anyone from the partnership.

Raising the Achievement of Students with English as an Additional Language

Valley High has a department made up of minority ethnic achievement teachers funded by special grant from the DfES. Staff involved in this provision often have a very low profile and status amongst their secondary school colleagues, usually because their tenure is insecure, being based on a renewable grant. These staff were highly motivated by the fact that the school claimed their area as one of its beacon competences. I asked them to codify what it was they did and why it worked. Their work led to the development of an induction pack for schools to use when working with refugee learners. It also led to the development of common transfer procedures for bilingual pupils across the LEA and the creation of a community language teacher network.

Raising Achievement in a Multi-Ethnic Context

Following achievement of beacon status, Valley High School improved its results and also significantly improved the attainment of some of the ethnic groups with the lowest achievement nationally. The school developed community liaison programmes employing minority ethnic adults as Education Welfare officers. These were not simply to chase attendance, but also to undertake outreach work to meet with difficult to reach parents and encourage them into the school. Additionally, links were made with local Mosques where representatives were brought into give assemblies and to mentor Year 11 and Year 8 pupils. These processes were of great interest to other schools wishing to develop strategies to raise ethnic attainment.

A Catalyst for Self Improvement?

During its three year beacon designation period, Valley High School has worked with twenty-seven other partner schools, both primary and secondary. The school has also supported a national inspection agency in providing update training in current school developments for inspectors. It has also worked closely with the Technology Colleges Trust in developing specifications for new types of specialist schools.

The initiatives described above were more than I had dared to hope would happen. It soon became apparent that beacon was acting as a *'Trojan horse'* and catalyst to bring improvement about. An increasing number of teachers asked to be involved in beacon work so that by the end of the second year, thirty percent of staff had volunteered to undertake some beacon work.

One year after gaining beacon status the Valley High year 2000 GCSE performance had increased by six percentage points so that the school scored in the top five percent compared to similar schools nationally. Year 9 National Curriculum tests improved dramatically. Pupil attendance also improved significantly so that levels of unauthorised absence fell by fifty percent leading to the Minister of State for Education, Estelle Morris using the school as an example of 'what can be achieved' in a major speech on tackling truancy. In 2001 GCSE results were again in the top five percent nationally for similar schools and the Year 9 test results were also in the top five percent. Pupil attendance had improved dramatically once again with unauthorised absence falling by fifty percent for the second year in succession. The school gained specialist status from September 2001 as a Technology College.

Although it is possible to argue that these improvements were a consequence of other factors, my perception is that beacon status provided me, with a ready-made focus and ideal platform to galvanise the school and to move it forward. But, as the person ultimately responsible for the success of beacon work at the school, there is a danger that I

would be tempted to say this anyway. In an attempt to overcome this difficulty anonymous views were elicited from Valley High staff.

Questionnaires were completed by ten staff selected by the beacon co-ordinator (appendix 8). Responses indicated that the only negative feature identified by one teacher was missing his own classes in order to engage in beacon activities. Teachers overwhelmingly indicated that they felt valued and proud of the school because of its beacon status. Teachers also felt that they had gained in confidence by working with their peers. Those involved in collaborative groups with partner schools felt that they had become better teachers and that their pupils had benefited as a result. These teachers clearly saw beacon status primarily as a vehicle for their own improvement and for that of the school.

As the beacon co-ordinator said:

> Beacon has provided a means for dialogue and reflection with others. We are no longer subordinates at the feet of the advisory service. Beacon recognises our professional status and values our knowledge and experience.

This statement illustrates how beacon can motivate teachers. This need not necessarily be the case, however. If beacon work is not carefully controlled it can overload and ultimately de-motivate teachers.

From the outset it was agreed that we would only take on beacon work where it was mutually beneficial. The easiest dissemination strategy would have been to put on one-off courses and to pontificate about our own best practice. This would not have improved Valley High School and it was necessary at the beginning for me to take a tough line on vetting the activities that Valley undertook. The model adopted was one of identifying areas for joint exploration funded by the beacon budget. Partnerships would only commence if staff could demonstrate that there could be a measurable outcome for Valley High as well as for partners.

By the end of the first three years Valley High School had used beacon status as a catalyst for its own improvement and as a means to help partners. This is not because the school has attempted to give other schools the 'answers', but instead because Valley High has adopted a non-hierarchical partnership approach where both parties have explored the issues together.

'Wells Field' School

Wells Field is an 11-18 secondary modern school located in a rural area to the north of London. The local authority operates an 11+ selection system. The measured ability of pupils at Wells Field is below that of neighbouring schools due to the school being selected against by local grammar schools. Yet in spite of this Wells Field was named by HMCI as an *'outstanding school'*. In September 2000 Wells Field was one of the top twenty most improved schools in the country.

Table 27: Wells Field GCSE Performance compared to LEA and National

	LEA	England	School
1998	50	46	58
1999	52	48	67
2000	52	49	75
2001	53	50	77

Table 27 above shows that GCSE results at Wells Field are far in excess of the average for its LEA. They are also in excess of the average for England. This is quite an achievement for a secondary modern school. These improvements had been led between 1995 and 1998 by a very dynamic and successful headteacher who was eventually headhunted to run another school. The deputy at Wells Field was then promoted to be headteacher. She explained to me that she felt pressurised by the expectations of success held by everyone associated with the school because her predecessor had been so successful. She saw beacon status as a way of *'making her mark'*.

The Wells Field Beacon Offer

Wells Field identified 'Ambrose Lane School' as its main partner. Ambrose Lane is an 11-16 mixed ability school in the same LEA which had just emerged from special measures. It needed particular support in improving its failing maths department.

Wells field staff began by putting on one-off courses and other stand-alone events for Ambrose lane. The headteacher at Wells Field quickly realised that this kind of approach was unlikely to be successful. She explained that Ambrose staff did not seem to be able to put the training into action and appeared 'confused by it'.

Instead, Wells Field organised a teacher exchange with an NQT from Ambrose Lane allowing him to spend two weeks working in the Wells Field maths department. Wells Field paid for the supply cover involved. The school also paid one of its part-time maths teachers to work as a consultant at Ambrose Lane for one day per week. The aim being to use this time to observe lessons, help develop workschemes, design teaching materials and write up detailed reports for the department. Wells Field also purchased ten laptop computers for its partner to use in teaching mathematics. Thus Wells Field moved to a more intensive mode of support which in many ways matches the style of coaching and feedback which research suggests should lead to effective skills transfer (Joyce et al 1995).

In spite of this, the headteacher and beacon co-ordinator at Wells Field felt that the link with their partner school had been unsuccessful because it had not led to improvement in the teaching of mathematics. They explained that the head of maths at Wells Field '*almost had to beg the staff at Ambrose Lane to borrow the computers that had been purchased to share*'. Furthermore, the link with the teacher consultant led to little change. She felt that she would agree future action with the maths staff but when she returned at the designated time they would have forgotten or simply would not have actioned any of the agreed points. The department came to resent being pressurised and clearly felt saturated with advice and unable to cope.

The headteacher at Wells Field rationalised this by saying there was *'simply too much going against the department for beacon activities to make a difference'*. Thus, whilst Valley High experienced success with its partner school, Wells Field experienced a great deal of difficulty, even though they adopted a more focused approach in line with available research evidence. This was because their partner school seemed to be not only devoid of the features of effective schools, it had, in common with some other ineffective schools (Stoll & Fink, 1996) certain features which were inimical to success. This illustrates some difficulties with the beacon model of improvement when used with those schools in the greatest difficulty an issue explored in Chapter 9 (p 141).

Synergy With Beacon Initiatives

The headteacher at Wells Field felt that it was important to utilise Government initiatives, particularly where there was a synergy between them in order to benefit her school. As a result, Wells Field successfully applied to create an Advanced Skills Teacher (AST) post in Dance. This has involved teaching partner school pupils how to dance, working with teachers in creating schemes of work and giving demonstration lessons. This AST work, funded separately by the DfES, also counted as beacon work. This in turn led to other Arts subjects taking a higher profile in beacon work. The staff involved grew in confidence, so much so that their beacon work evolved into a successful bid for specialist status. The headteacher felt that teachers had been energised by beacon and had *'grown'* because of it. In this way beacon status became a catalyst for self-improvement.

Staff Development at Wells Field

The curriculum deputy at Wells Field believes that beacon has provided a very important vehicle for the development of younger staff. She reports that a number of young teachers took on beacon work to earn extra income and have developed much improved interpersonal skills and self confidence as a result.

The headteacher at Wells Field felt that beacon status was not a good model for the improvement of non-beacon schools. Instead, she felt it was a model for *'background professional development'*. She believed this because of her unsatisfactory experience

with Ambrose Lane School which needed much greater external support than Beacon Policy could provide.

On the other hand, the staff at Wells Field School felt strongly that Beacon Policy was a success. Although they had struggled to help their partner school, they felt that it was unreasonable to expect a beacon school to be able to improve a failing school without significantly enhanced resources and additional expertise. The perception of all involved was that this kind of work was beyond the scope of Beacon School Policy. Yet they felt it had succeeded in terms of motivating their own staff and in providing a focus for self-improvement.

These and other issues experienced by the case study schools are drawn out in the following chapter.

Chapter 9

The Policy in Practice: An Overview

This chapter considers the commonalities and divergences between the case studies and compares and contrasts these with the results of the questionnaire survey.

Beacon Policy for Self Improvement

All of the case study schools discussed their beacon work primarily in terms of the benefits of beacon status to themselves. This corresponds with the outcomes from the questionnaire survey where three quarters of headteachers identified the potential benefits to their own schools as being the initial driving force behind their seeking beacon status.

The case study schools, including my own, identified raised morale amongst their staff as being a major advantage of beacon status. This matches the results of the questionnaire survey where improved morale was the single most frequently quoted advantage of beacon status (p 78).

All of the case study beacons also identified benefits to themselves in terms of gains in their own professional development. This was either through the reflection on good practice needed in order to codify and disseminate their current work, or through the use of beacon funds to pay for joint inset activities. Again, this was also seen as a significant benefit by the survey schools (p 78 & p80).

Evidence from both the case study schools and the survey respondents indicates strongly that beacon schools see the status primarily as a vehicle for self-improvement, rather than as a means of improving others. This is neither unsurprising nor necessarily a bad thing. Beacon schools gain their status through high performance, and achieving this takes a great deal of effort and dedication. It does not seem unreasonable that beacons should wish to use the policy to improve themselves in return for expending the effort necessary to disseminate and share their good practice with others.

Good Schools Need Not Be Good Beacons

The headteacher of Fairlawn School took great care to ensure that the subject departments used for beacon work were selected on the basis of comprising staff considered capable of empathizing and working with other teachers. Therefore, at Fairlawn, being identified as a '*good*' teacher alone, was not considered a sufficient condition to be successful in dissemination work (p 92). In contrast, the questionnaire survey and the other case studies demonstrated that headteachers did not really consider the ability of staff to disseminate their good practice as being particularly important. It seems that many headteachers assume that because a school or department is good at a particular aspect of its work, then it will be good at transferring this to others.

The difficulties with dissemination experienced in the Appledore case study illustrate the point that being a good school is not sufficient on its own to make a good beacon school. When selecting beacon schools in future, the DfES might wish to consider not just evidence of the effectiveness of these schools academically, but also evidence of their ability to disseminate good practice effectively. This might include examples of previous dissemination work as well as a detailed plan of action with a clear focus on implementation and planned evaluation mechanisms for the work to be undertaken.

Problematic Partnerships

Staff at Fairlawn school felt that it was advantageous to partner a completely different type of school in order to '*avoid invidious comparisons*' (p99). Yet Appledore, Highcrest, Valley High and Wells Field schools experienced quite the opposite. In these cases teachers believed that it was better to partner similar schools (with similar intakes and proportions of pupils eligible for free school meals), in order that common experiences could be shared between staff. The headteacher at Appledore reached this conclusion when he was faced with hostility from teachers at his 'partner' school who doubted the relevance of his experience to their context (p 113). My experience at Valley High School also supports this latter view. Teachers participating in beacon work at Valley High believe the main advantage that they have in working with others is their credibility as

classroom practitioners. They feel that this credibility arises from their being able to demonstrate success in similar circumstances. Fairlawn School may have felt differently simply because it would have been very hard to find a school with similar features which was in need of support.

Some beacon schools, like Appledore and Wells Field, have not been as effective as they might, simply because they have chosen partners where the daily experience of school life is sufficiently different for there to be a credibility gap. It may be that Beacon Policy could become more effective if the DfES were to consider issuing guidance on how beacon schools could identify partner schools with similar characteristics. This would help to ensure that the experiences shared might have more meaning to both parties.

'Moving Schools' Make Better Beacon Partners

Finding a similar partner school with a similar intake may be a necessary but not sufficient condition for successful beacon work. Ultimately, whether a partnership works will still depend upon the ease with which good practice can be transferred. While School Effectiveness research is good at describing the features of effective schools, it is less useful in terms of explaining how to transfer these characteristics to less effective schools. This problem is compounded because less effective schools often possess features which are inimical to success (Stoll & Fink, 1996)). Wells Field School found this when attempting to work with the science department at Ambrose Lane School. The chasm between that department and Wells Field was so great that staff at Ambrose were simply overwhelmed with the information that they had received, so much so that they ceased being able to respond to it. Ambrose Lane was a 'stuck' school (Rosenholtz, 1989). This case supports the view that improvement effort focusing on classroom practice works well with improving schools where there is a readiness for change, but it is less successful with struggling ones (Mortimore, 1998).

The different experiences of the case study schools highlights a central difficulty with the use of the site-based catalytic agency approach to school improvement advocated in the

White Paper, *Schools Achieving Success* (DfES, 2001g). The path to success for any particular school is contingent upon its particular history and circumstances (Louis and Miles, 1990, Stoll and Myers, 1997). For their success, beacon partnerships might need to be based not just on pairings of 'similar' schools, but also on an analysis of the readiness for change within potential partners. Schools exhibiting a 'stuck' culture may need forms of intervention which are of an intensity and nature quite different to the laissez-faire style of beacon work.

Double Funding of Site-based Dissemination by the DfES

A central thrust of *Schools Achieving Success* is that in future there will be a drive to spread best practice through delegation of funds from government directly to schools under a range of different initiatives. Thus beacon schools, specialist Schools, Advanced Skills Teachers and advanced specialist and advanced beacon schools will be funded separately in order to spread best practice. Each of these schemes carries enhanced funding. For example, specialist schools must spend £165,000 of their £550,000 additional funding on partners, beacon schools must spend most of their £35,000 to £40,000 on partners and twenty percent of the salary of an Advanced Skills Teacher must be similarly spent. There is no stipulation anywhere in DfES guidelines that these different pockets of funding must be spent on different things. Thus a school which is both specialist and a beacon school could, if it wished, claim its community activities (paid for by specialist school funding) as meeting beacon criteria and so divert its beacon money in to its own budget. Similarly, an AST undertaking outreach work in specialist school subjects could also meet beacon criteria. This would also allow the enhanced resources for AST outreach work to be diverted into the main school budget. There is no suggestion here that the case study schools have done this, but more than one was in a position to do so.

In the context of *Schools Achieving Success*, and a planned massive growth in the numbers of schools involved in various site based initiatives, the DfES may wish to consider whether it might be advisable to issue statutory guidelines in order to prevent schools double and triple counting the same funding under different headings.

Popular Modes of Dissemination May not be the most Effective

The consultancy mode of dissemination of good practice (p 73) featured highly amongst the case study schools. The difficulty with this model is that it relies on partner schools being able to identify correctly the support they need. It seems reasonable to presuppose that the more a school is in need of external support, the less likely it is going to be able to accurately identify the kind of support that it needs.

This widely used approach may not be the most effective means of dissemination. The research literature suggests that, in order for teachers to improve their skills and to learn new approaches to teaching, they need to do more than attend off-site stand alone courses (Joyce et al, 1995). For example, the approaches to dissemination adopted by Appledore school, which stress one-off courses, are highly unlikely to lead to the development of new skills amongst teachers. The approach to dissemination used at the school matches results from the questionnaire survey of beacon school headteachers, where over half of those responding perceived their 'most successful' dissemination activities to be stand-alone in-service courses and visits from partner school staff (p70). Yet Joyce and Showers (1982) argue that it is necessary to study theory and, observe demonstrations and practice with feedback before most teachers can develop their skills to the point where they can use new techniques easily.

The implication for beacon schools is that staff development for the most effective transfer of skills ought to occur over an extended period of time and involve sustained effort. This model of activity is quite different from the ad-hoc consultancy approach adopted by many beacon schools, including some of the case study schools. In practice, it is unclear how beacon schools would be able to sustain this intensity of work within the constraints of the resources made available by the DfES for beacon work. Even if additional resourcing were made available, beacon schools may need further support from the DfES on the kinds of activities that make for effective dissemination of good practice.

Lack of LEA Support for Beacon Policy

Nearly all of the case study schools expressed disappointment or frustration at the lack of support offered to them by their LEAs. In the case of Fairlawn school, the LEA had a '*cool relationship*' with it. The LEA only became interested in what the school was doing once it had successfully established its beacon role, without LEA support. The headteacher at Appledore felt that the LEA had '*simply forgotten about it*'. At Valley High School the LEA had initially tried to dissuade the school from becoming a beacon.

Similarly, many of the survey schools felt that they could have been far more successful in their beacon work if their local authorities had been proactive in brokering links between beacons and other schools in need of support (p 85). These results are in contrast with those produced by the DfES (2001f, p20) which reported that sixty-three percent of beacons considered that their LEA had been either 'helpful' or 'very helpful'. It is possible that these differences are explained by the fact that the DfES figures came from official annual beacon returns which schools may have feared their LEAs could have been given access to. In contrast, the results from my research were based on information provided to the author as a fellow beacon headteacher.

The DfES research did point out that a number of LEA representatives were concerned about the lack of clarity surrounding their role in the beacon school initiative (DfES, 2001f, p22). It may be that the effectiveness of Beacon Policy could be further improved through the provision of more detailed guidance from the DfES to LEAs on Beacon Policy. This guidance would cover what beacons are and how they are expected to work, as well as *how* local authorities should support them.

The Role of the DfES in Beacon Policy

Staff at Highcrest House School explained that they were unclear as to what the DfES Beacon Unit wanted them to achieve as a beacon school. Whilst the school was aware of the national need for leadership support among other special schools, there had been no suggestion from the DfES that Highcrest should work in the special schools sector. The headteacher valued the freedom given to Highcrest as a beacon, but she was still

concerned that the DfES might at some future point judge the school against criteria which had not yet been made clear.

This attitude is in contrast with the overall responses to the questionnaire survey shown in Table 28 below. In the survey, sixty-eight percent of beacon headteachers reported being either very satisfied or satisfied with the level of support provided by the DfES Beacon Unit. Only seven percent claimed to be dissatisfied.

Table 28: Level of Satisfaction with DfES support for beacon schools

Level of satisfaction with support	Percentage of responses
Very satisfied	22
Satisfied	46
Fairly satisfied	24
Not satisfied	7.3

The majority of survey respondents expressing satisfaction focused on the lack of interference and prescription from the DfES. For example, one headteacher said *'for once they are letting us get with it and do the job we know best'*. This desire for freedom was not simply for its own sake but was also seen by a number of headteachers as a vehicle for further improvement in their own schools.

Nevertheless, there were other headteachers, like the headteacher of Highcrest House, and particularly those in infant and junior schools, who felt uncertain about whether they were meeting DfES expectations as to performance and also about how they might objectively evaluate their performance. For example, one headteacher said:

> The DfES has a trusting positive view of beacons which is refreshing, however the lack of guidance and accountability is somewhat disconcerting.

and another said:

> Some individual contact from the DfES would be nice, we have very little contact with the Beacon unit, so we don't know if we are doing the right thing.

These concerns are similar to those identified in research commissioned by the DfES (DfES 2001f, p42) which claimed that beacon schools were dissatisfied because they wished to receive more information from the Beacon Unit making clear their expectations. That research also suggested that beacons needed more feedback on their own performance and information about what other beacons were doing. However the DfES research is based on detailed interviews with just two headteachers and may therefore by overstated. The majority of comments received from the two hundred and thirty-nine respondents to this survey indicated that they perceived the freedom given by the DfES to them as an overwhelming advantage of the initiative. Within this overall satisfaction level, it is true that there was more dissatisfaction expressed by smaller schools, particularly primary and junior schools. It may be that further non-statutory guidance and contact from the Beacon DfES Unit may be required for these schools in order to alleviate their concerns.

The lack of central prescription is one the biggest advantages perceived by many beacon headteachers of being part of the initiative. This lack of guidance may conceal dangers, however.

Uncertainty in Quality Assurance Arrangements

Staff from the case study schools had met with colleagues from other beacon schools in a regional beacon network established by the DfES. The headteacher at Highcrest found this to be a salutary experience. She said:

> It is good to recognise good schools, but are all beacon schools equally good? Some schools may claim competence and not necessarily be very good at all. I have worked with some beacon schools and feel they are not up to speed.

She explained this by saying that in her view some beacon schools had joined the network primarily because they had a relatively advantaged intake compared to their surroundings and this led to good results. She had also encountered other schools which were clearly educationally effective but which were not very not very interested in, or good at dissemination. The implication of this was that some beacons might not be very

good examples for others and that if this was the case it would undermine the work of 'good' beacons and also undermine the whole policy.

Senior staff in the case study schools believed that an important role for the DfES was in quality assurance. This was both in the selection of new beacons and in ensuring that only those beacons that performed well stayed as beacons. They were not convinced that the DfES had a reliable system of quality assurance to enforce this.

For the purpose of re-designation as a beacon after three years the DfES defines success in terms of the establishment of effective partnerships and networks. In order to renew their status, beacon schools are required to provide evidence of how many partnerships have been established over the three year period, how many came to a successful conclusion and how many are on-going (DfES, 2000a, p1).

Therefore, it is important for beacon schools to gather evidence both of their work and of its effectiveness. Yet, it is unclear, as is illustrated by Table 29 overleaf, whether the kinds of evidence being collected by schools is sufficiently reliable to enable the DfES to monitor the work of beacons and so ensure that the schools are performing well.

Table 29 shows that the most popular methods of evaluation of dissemination activities used by beacon schools are those undertaken by their partners. These often use a proforma sheet. Although it may be argued that the 'customer is always right', there can be little objectivity in the measurement of the effectiveness of beacon work using this method of evaluation.

Table 29: Evidence of Beacon work being collected by Schools

Evidence of beacon activities:	Percentage gathering this type of evidence
Written or verbal evaluations by partners	90
Evaluation sheet for partners to fill in after an event	89
Number of schools which have benefited from beacon services	87
Number of visits logged by staff	78
Evidence of raised standards or other improvement in partner schools	42
Informal evaluations by telephone	32
Longer term evaluation of the work implemented by partners as a result of beacon work	38
Use of consultants to evaluate activities	16
Number of pupils in schools affected by changes resulting from beacon work	16

Eighty seven percent of beacons keep evidence of their work in the form of records of the numbers of schools that they have worked with. Over three quarters of schools log numbers of visits made. These methods provide little useful information to the DfES on the *quality* of dissemination that has actually taken place. Just under half of beacons claim to look for evidence of raised standards in partner schools, but this is not the same as evidence of raised standards as a direct result of beacon work. Within the timescales used for dissemination work it is highly unlikely in most cases that beacon schools will be able to demonstrate improvement in their partners.

Just sixteen percent of schools reported using an external consultant to provide an objective view as to the impact of their beacon work. This method seems to have potential in comparison to the other methods in terms of providing an objective view of beacon activity. To do this reliably schools would need to use the same pool of consultants so that they could rely on them having experience of a big enough sample to make comparison meaningful.

In summary, Table 29 shows a high level of superficiality in the methods of evaluation used by beacon schools towards their work. It is arguable that the levels and types of evaluation used by beacons are superior to those often used by local authorities in their traditional role as providers of professional development. Even if this is true, these methods are not rigorous enough to inform the work of beacon schools so that they can improve their practice. The kind of data being gathered do not provide sufficient detail to enable the DfES to ensure, as the headteacher of Highcrest House put it, '*that all beacons are equally good*'.

Yet beacon schools have a view as to what it is reasonable to expect from them and this could potentially inform DfES thinking about quality assurance systems.

How Beacon Schools Might be Judged

At present the most rigorous quality assurance check on beacon schools is provided through the Ofsted inspection process. Ofsted has produced specific guidance for inspectors on how to inspect beacon schools (Ofsted 2001c). This makes it clear that inspectors should consider very closely how schools are evaluating their work within the context of a clear expectation that beacon schools should have a measurable impact on their partner schools.

For a beacon school to have such an impact it would need to work in a focused and sustained partnership over a period of time. This is not consistent with much of the work of beacon schools as seen from Chapter 4. In my questionnaire survey, the vast majority of headteachers disagreed with the Ofsted emphasis on using evidence of improved examination results in partner schools as a means by which to judge the effectiveness of their work (see Table 30 below). Only nine percent of headteachers agreed with this measure. The majority (eighty-seven percent) felt that positive evaluation by partners was the most appropriate method of evaluation of the success of beacon school work.

Table 30: What is it reasonable for Ofsted to expect in terms of the impact of beacon schools

Types of evidence	Percentage of schools agreeing that this is a reasonable approach
Improved examination results	9
Improved classroom practice in partner schools	61
Positive evaluations of contact with your school by partner staff	87
Records showing that the beacon school has offered a range of inset and other activities	72
Records of take-up of a range of activities offered by the beacon school	70

Therefore, the issue of quality assurance in Beacon work is problematic. Senior staff in the case study schools may be correct when asserting that variations in quality between beacon schools could undermine the policy. Much of the evidence of work kept by beacons schools reported here is impressionistic and could not be used by the DfES to assure quality. Yet headteachers rightly realise that within the scope of this policy, it is unreasonable for Ofsted to expect that beacon work can raise results or in most cases have a measurable impact on partners.

In summary, it may be that headteachers understand the potential for Beacon Policy as it is currently specified better than does the DfES. Government rhetoric sets the expectation that improvement on a system level is possible through the agency of beacon schools. Yet headteachers, as shown in my case studies and questionnaire survey, are clearly concerned about their ability to deliver this type of improvement. Their daily experience of dissemination shows them that this kind of hard and measurable improvement is not one of the many benefits of their work. School leaders are therefore naturally concerned about their accountability for the policy and so seek more guidance from the DfES on their expectations. The assurances that headteachers seek are unlikely to lie in still tighter specification of the outcomes expected by the Beacon Unit. This is because these kinds of outcomes desired by the DfES may not be possible within the limited resources made available through this policy. Instead, the answers that headteachers seek may lie in changing the aims of Beacon School Policy so that policy rhetoric recognises that beacon status can provide a positive and motivating backdrop to school improvement work rather than a direct means of bringing about measurable improvement.

Chapter 10

Conclusion

This chapter draws out reflections on the policy itself and on the significance of it for me as headteacher of a beacon school.

Reflections on the Policy

The questionnaire survey results and case studies indicate that Beacon Schools Policy is considered to be a success amongst those schools involved in it. Yet whether the policy has fully realized its potential to date, is debatable.

Beacon Schooling had a difficult start because the DfES and the Downing Street Policy Unit did not take the time to agree a clear definition of what constituted a 'successful school'. This opened the policy up to accusations of elitism and led to tensions within government (Chapter 1). A longer period of policy formulation might have enabled schools to contribute to the debate with the result that broader definitions of 'success' might have been used from the start. This would also have improved initial understanding of, and empathy towards the policy.

The notion of schools sharing best practice is a powerful one because, perhaps for the first time, educational policy acknowledges the expertise possessed by classroom practitioners. As part of a wider site-based improvement strategy, Beacon Policy is potentially very powerful. This is because in its decentralized and 'bottom-up' approach to change, it strongly contrasts with teachers' experiences of change in the last twenty years.

Many headteachers feel that the beacon approach to school improvement is a good idea. Yet headteachers also feel that this policy cannot seriously be used to bring about systemic school improvement because it is not resourced to do so. The problem is both in terms of finances and just as importantly, in the time that can be made available by beacon school staff who have their own schools to run. It can be argued that the policy is under-conceptualised and therefore naive. This is not just because of under-resourcing. It is also

because the DfES operates what can be described as a 'black box' approach to improvement via site-based improvement initiatives. That is, the DfES designates and funds schools to transfer their good practices. It encourages them to do this and then expects transfer to happen successfully, but without paying attention to the means by which this might best be achieved. Because of this lack it could also be said that the policy is unfair because it allocates additional resources to some schools without ensuring that these funds are used in the most efficient way to help others not designated as beacons.

There is strong evidence that beacon school teachers are highly motivated by the status and freedom that the policy gives them. Headteachers approve of the policy because they see it primarily as a means by which they can improve their own schools. This is either through marketing, gaining additional resources, improved self esteem for their staff or better professional development. The DfES's own research is much more definite about the gains to beacon schools than it is about the gains to partner schools (DfES 2001f). Beacon School Policy has been a success for beacon schools.

Evidence from beacon school evaluations of partner school perceptions also suggests that the policy seems to be popular amongst partner school teachers. This is because beacon school staff are often seen as having a credibility lacking in LEA advisory staff. For these reasons Beacon Schooling can be seen as providing a positive *backdrop* for school improvement work rather than being a leading edge tool for improvement in itself. Beacon schools have undertaken a wide range of useful activities with partners. Unsurprisingly, these activities are more successful when the partners are willing and able to improve themselves, that is when they are 'moving' schools. For those 'stuck' schools in serious difficulties, beacon is not the answer because it cannot provide the intensity and level of support needed in order to bring about the improvement required.

The strategy of LEA intervention in inverse proportion to success underpins the drive towards site based improvement. Less successful schools will find themselves subject to tighter control through the variety of centrally prescribed curriculum strategies being rolled out at the same time as the new freedoms. These schools will become the remit of

LEAs, whose activities could increasingly be confined to working with those schools in most difficulty. Critics suggest that this will create a two tier system of more advantaged and less advantaged schools. This criticism is legitimate, but it could be argued that there are already 'good' and 'bad' schools. Beacon School Policy would be unfair if it did not improve upon this situation. To avoid this criticism policymakers would need to ensure that additional resourcing was being used to bring about lasting change and improvement in partner schools. As the policy stands this is not necessarily the case.

Suggestions for Improvements to the Policy

Judgments about whether schools are successful or not tend to be based on aggregate measures of attainment at the end of key stages. These average measures can smooth out significant variations in the performance of particular subject areas or of particular kinds of pupils. Schools are loosely coupled organizations so that even successful schools can possess weak subject departments and unsuccessful schools can possess effective subject departments or be effective for particular kinds of pupils. Thus parts of schools may have very effective practice to share with others. It may be that the DfES could further promote site-based improvement by using departments or parts of schools as the appropriate unit of analysis rather than whole schools.

The approach taken to site-based improvement by the DfES is atomistic in that a variety of overlapping initiatives are available for schools to engage in and these make little reference to each other. Because of this, there is scope for schools to be double and triple funded for providing the same activities. This aspect of site based policy potentially represents very poor value for money. The DfES might be able to achieve better value for its investment if new guidelines were issued to schools making it clear that double counting of activities is not acceptable. This guidance could require schools to show how additional funding leads to additional activities. Furthermore, there are a range of different DfES initiatives relating to Professional Development which make little reference to each other. These include a DfES national steering group for Professional Development, beacon schools, specialist Schools and Training Schools. The overall potency of government

policy towards the professional development of teachers could be improved if a more holistic approach to policy making and implementation were adopted.

A central part of the policy is that each beacon school must link with a specific 'City Partner School'. The evidence presented here shows that beacon schools have taken differing approaches to identifying and working with these City Partners. In general, these focused partnerships have tended to work best when the named partner has similar intake and socio-economic characteristics to the beacon school. This is because teachers in the partner school see beacon staff as having more credibility if they work in a similar context. It could be that partnerships might be even more effective if new beacons were to be issued with further non-statutory guidance by the DfES on how to identify partner schools. This guidance could also explain the benefits from identifying partners as being schools with similar characteristics.

Although the majority of beacon schools are located in urban and multi-ethnic areas, analysis of competences offered by all beacon schools reported in chapter 4, (page 62) shows that few of the schools explicitly offer expertise in raising the attainment of ethnic minority students. Given the significant disparities between the achievement of different ethnic groups in England and as a result, the recent focus by the DfES and Ofsted on issues relating to improving social inclusion, this omission seems odd. It is highly likely that beacon schools do possess expertise in this area. The education system as a whole would be likely to benefit from the DfES placing a renewed focus on encouraging beacon schools to emphasise this area of expertise in their offer.

Both the survey questionnaire and case studies make clear that beacon schools use a variety of methods of dissemination. At the same time, the majority do not yet engage in focused work with a group of schools over a period of time. Most dissemination is either in the form of one-off events or in offering partners a consultancy service based on what they have identified that they need. The research evidence is clear that this style of dissemination is unlikely to enable participants to develop new skills and transfer these to a different context. Furthermore, the evidence presented here suggests that there is no

tendency for beacons to develop a more in-depth and focused style of dissemination as they grow in experience. My research therefore suggests that Beacon Policy is not yet being implemented in a manner which is as effective as it could be in terms of facilitating the transfer of best practice and thereby improving teaching and learning. Beacon Policy has the potential to achieve this, but to do so its implementation would need a different approach from the DfES. This would involve the use by schools and DfES of existing research on effective transfer to inform the generation and use of models for school improvement through classroom based partnership working. It would also require significantly enhanced resourcing.

Headteachers in my research suggest that a significant strength of Beacon School Policy is the freedom that it gives them to work without central direction. While this may be best for the beacon schools, it may be that this approach is not best in terms of promoting equity by maximising improvement in less effective schools. The desire by headteachers for freedom from DfES intervention may be more a comment on the prescriptiveness of government policy as a whole, rather than a prerequisite for the success of Beacon School Policy. Without improvement in the way in which beacon schools transfer their good practices, the policy may legitimately be considered to be one which promotes inequity between schools. Such improvement requires both better support for beacons and better funding. Without this, Beacon Schools Policy may never be more than a backdrop for school improvement activities.

Many of the beacon schools involved in this research reported that they were either frustrated with or ambivalent with the support offered by their LEAs. The experiences of headteachers and the findings of research undertaken by the DfES themselves (DfES, 2001f) all suggest that LEA staff are uncertain about their role in relation to beacon schools. The work of the beacon network could be further improved through the provision by the DfES of clear guidelines and examples as to how LEAs should work with beacons. Simply requiring that they include beacon schools in their Education Development Plans has not been enough.

Reflections on My Experience of Beacon Policy

At the beginning of this thesis I was relatively uncritical of Beacon School Policy. I was pleased that my school had gained the status and I believed that dissemination would be unproblematic. I saw dissemination in terms of running courses and putting on events for grateful participants. My studies have shown me how naïve this was. One of the key things that I have learned is that effective dissemination requires that participants change their practice in the classroom and that this requires a carefully planned series of stages. For success, Beacon Policy requires a focused approach with a small group of schools. I continue to be surprised that I progressed to the level of headteacher, and acquired the government sponsored 'professional qualification' for headteachers, and yet was not aware of the research literature relating to how teachers learn. This highlights the need for the DfES to provide some means for teachers to engage with relevant research literature on this topic and in particular, to make beacon schools aware of it.

Survey results from this research and my experience of the policy in operation have highlighted that it is best to downplay the beacon epithet when working with other schools. Learning together is a much more powerful means of making progress than is attempting to present one school as having the answers, which other less knowledgeable schools need to be taught. This suggests that an approach to dissemination based upon sharing resources between groups of schools, co-operating together in a local network, could be more effective than single schools acting as beacons.

I have also gained a better understanding of the policy making process. Previously, I believed that, whilst I might disagree with particular Government policies, these would no doubt have been carefully thought through at Ministerial level. My experience of researching the origins of Beacon Schooling surprised me by showing that this is not necessarily the case, that indeed policy need not be well thought out at all before it is implemented. This has given me a more critical stance to policy than I would otherwise have had.

I saw beacon status as a vehicle to improve my own school, and this turned out to be a fair assumption. On reflection, it is not necessarily this particular policy that has led to improvement. It now seems clear to me that almost any initiative which leads to a focus on classroom practice and reflection on this would probably achieve the same result. Beacon has the advantage that it achieves these things whilst raising staff morale, which is an added bonus. Beacon status can provide a vision by which a school can move forward and also a general backdrop for improvement. Yet the policy as currently conceived for the reasons explained in this thesis is unlikely, on its own, to lead to systemic level improvement.

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Appendix 1:

Interview Schedule for Senior Civil Servant

Semi-structured interview with Mr Keith Andrews:

Director of DfES Beacon Schools Unit

What is the nature of your remit for beacon schools?

- How long have you been doing this?
- What is the structure and work of the beacon Team within the DfES?
- Does the beacon Team have working links with other initiatives (e.g. EiC, School Leadership Development)?

Where did the Beacon Schools Policy emanate from?

- Is any particular individual the main instigator of this policy?
- Were Magnet Schools or new American High Schools an influence on early development?
- What basic organising ideas inform the policy and its implementation?
- Any thing else influenced its development?

Which specific aspects of Beacon School Policy have been most successful?

- Do these areas differ from those the department initially expected might be a success?
- Are there any areas which the department feel have been less successful?
- If the department was to introduce the policy again, what would it do differently to help its adoption and implementation?

Since the inception of the policy, what major challenges has the DfES had to overcome in order to secure its successful implementation?

- Any resistance from LEAs?
- Any resistance from the Teachers Organisations?
- Any feedback from Higher Education?

Some research (and experience from KS2 Literacy Strategy) suggests that for teachers to learn new techniques well enough to sustain them in the classroom requires theory, demonstration, practice and feedback. The beacon model often uses just demonstration. Does the department have any views on whether this research will influence future beacon policy?

- Evaluation report says 'developing beyond theory and demo to practice and feedback may be very time consuming but without it real professional development may simply be rhetorical.' Any views by dept on this?
- It could be that those most in need of this professional development are least likely to seek it out. Any views on this?

Building on Success' talks of 1000 beacon Schools, including 250 secondary beacons. With such a growth in the number of beacon schools, how do you see the policy developing in future?

- Currently beacon schools work alone –with such a large group an effective network could develop. Does the dept have any views on this?

Building on Success talks of new beacons in skills relevant to the 'emerging economy'. If half of all secondary schools will become specialist schools, with an emphasis on sharing practice, critics might say that the expansion of beacon schools will simply further reward specialist schools already funded for sharing How would the dept respond to this concern?

- How do you see the difference between the expanded network of specialist schools and beacon schools?

- Does the department feel there are any particular lessons to be learned from Specialist schools who are already involved in sharing good practice? If so what kinds of things?

Government talks of modernising the comprehensive principle, others, like Nigel de Gruchy of the NAS/UWT, have talked about schools using beacon status to attract greater parental interest and covertly select. How does the department respond to the criticism that beacon status will further widen differences between schools and thus undermine the comprehensive ideal?

John Bangs of the NUT has suggested that the beacon policy entails "bullying schools into being better". Bangs suggests this is top down pressure for reform, while evidence suggests bottom up pressure is needed also for a change strategy to work. How would the department respond to this?

- David Blunkett in his North of England speech in 2000 talked of giving schools more responsibility for improving themselves and delegating as much as possible to these schools. Initial NFER research suggests that beacon schools are doing a good job in school improvement. With 1000 beacon schools planned is there really a role for LEAs in school improvement?

- Professor Barber said in Washington that LEAs are criticised from the school end for being interfering bureaucrats and from the centre for not being sufficiently effective in implementing reform. If schools increasingly turn to practitioners, surely heads of successful schools, including beacon schools will start to demand for themselves the resources that go to LEAs for school improvement?

End

Is there a typology of beacon schools available eg size, sector, urban-rural etc? Is there any other unpublished research held by the dept on beacon schools that I can access? I would be keen to interview other people in the department who might have views on this area, can you please identify any for me?

Appendix 2:

Interview Schedule for David Jackson of NCSL

Semi-structured interview with David Jackson: Director of Research and School Improvement at NCSL

What is your experience of Beacon Policy on the ground?

- When you were a head, did you find that beacon status was an engine for improvement within your school as well as within others. How in practice did this work?

- Sharnbrook School has undertaken a good deal of work using the IQEA system. Do you see any synergy between this approach and the Beacon Schools policy?

- Beacon School Policy and practice and its philosophical underpinning represent an under-researched area. What kinds of theoretical underpinnings do you see, in existing literature?

- What do you consider to be the main organising ideas, if any underpinning the beacon schools initiative?

- Possible underpinnings are knowledge sharing, learning from best practice, mutual learning, the power of network partnerships. How do you see some of these working on the ground? Eg sharing of best practice? Mentoring? How would they work?
- Are there in your view any lessons that the Beacon School policy could learn from related improvement initiatives elsewhere, for example New American High Schools, Magnet Schools etc?

How do you envisage the NCSL approach and programmes making effective use of beacon schools?

- Beacon schools work loosely and are not in any kind of network. Do you see the NCSL providing some kind of co-ordinating device so that the schools add to more than the sum of their parts?

- NFER report talks about beacons having poor links with HEI and this being an area which in tandem with accreditation for continuing professional development could be explored further.

Research by Showers et al (and evidence from KS2 Literacy Strategy) suggests that for teachers to learn new techniques well enough to actually use them in the classroom requires 4 components, that is, theory, demonstration, practice and feedback. Beacon activity usually uses the first two. NFER evaluation of beacon schools makes this point and talks of the need to develop a more explicit conceptualisation of the beacon initiative relating to professional knowledge creation. Is there a role for NCSL here?

- Do you think professional development needs to consist of more intensive and interactive approaches than dissemination?

Hargreaves in his 1996 lecture to the TTA talked about teachers learning from models of evidence based practice in medicine. Beacon Schools could assist with this but staff would need to have some theoretical understanding to support their practice if this model were to be used. Do you see IQEA type networks as a solution, is there a possible NCSL role?

- Moving beyond professional development by explanation of theory and dissemination to classroom practice and feedback, in practice could be excessively demanding on time. Is it possible?

In your paper 'The school improvement journey: perspectives on leadership' you differentiate 3 different types of approaches toward improvement: tactical attempts – which are short term and superficial. More strategic approaches which can lead to more substantive but ultimately limited improvement, and improvement which operates at a level of improving the capacity of a school for sustained development. Do you see Beacon School Policy resonating with one of these in particular?

- How in your view might beacon schools need to work in order to maximise the capacity of partners for sustained development?

- The IQEA approach outlined in your paper rightly stresses the need for a focus on classroom practice. IQEA strategies attempt this, but beacon schools need not. Does NCSL or you have a view about this?

An advantage of beacon schools for partners is the voluntary nature of participation. A disadvantage is that some who might need the benefit of focused school improvement work will not take it up. In order to maximise the gain from this initiative do you think that should it be linked in with other initiatives or altered in any way?

When half of all secondary schools (according to the recent Green Paper) are specialist schools with a brief for sharing and there are 1000 beacon schools- do you feel that this will present NCSL with any particular issues in designing provision for the 'unfortunate' 50%?

- The unlucky 50% are likely to contain a number of 'unsuccessful schools'-research suggests that improvement paths for these kinds of schools are quite different for more successful schools. In your judgment, will beacon experience be transferable?

Appendix 3:

Areas of Competence Offered By Responding Beacon Secondary Schools

Table 31: Secondary Beacon Schools: Areas of Activity Offered

Area of Activity offered

	No' of schools	Percent of all
Teacher Training	91	50.0%
Continuing Professional Development	91	50.0%
Curriculum Subjects (other than Literacy& Numeracy)	82	45.1%
ICT	76	41.8%
School Leadership	70	38.5%
Behaviour Management	54	29.7%
Monitoring and Evaluation	51	28.0%
Literacy	46	25.3%
Target Setting/pupil tracking	44	24.2%
Gifted and Talented pupils	43	23.6%
Curriculum Development	42	23.1%
Extra Curricular Provision	42	23.1%
Raising standards & School Improvement	39	21.4%
SEN	35	19.2%
Parents/Home-School/Community	27	14.8%
Primary-Secondary liaison	27	14.8%
Teaching and Learning	24	13.2%
Inclusion	22	12.1%
Thinking Skills	20	11.0%
Attendance and Truancy Management	19	10.4%
Assessment and Recording	17	9.3%
Finance and Resources	17	9.3%
Support for schools in difficulty	14	7.7%
Vocational Education	14	7.7%
Sixth Form	12	6.6%
Ethos	10	5.5%
Development Planning	10	5.5%
Spiritual, Moral, Social, Cultural education	9	4.9%
Self Evaluation	9	4.9%
Data use of	9	4.9%
Numeracy	8	4.4%
Boys Achievement	8	4.4%
PSHE	6	3.3%
Performance Management	6	3.3%
Homework	6	3.3%
Governors	5	2.7%
Learning Support Assistants	5	2.7%
Reducing Bureaucracy	5	2.7%
Citizenship	4	2.2%
Health Issues	4	2.2%

Table 31 continued: Secondary Beacon Schools: Areas of Activity Offered

	No' of schools	*Percent* of all
Multi-cultural Education	3	1.6%
Differentiation	3	1.6%
RE	2	1.1%
Individual Education Plans	2	1.1%
Student Councils	2	1.1%
English as an Additional Language	1	0.5%
Business Links	1	0.5%

Source:

Individual web pages of 182 Secondary beacon schools from DfES web site as at Summer 2001.

(www.standards.dfee.gov.uk/beaconschools)

Appendix 4:

Areas of Competence Offered by Responding Beacon Primary, Nursery and Special Schools.

Table 32: Infant, Primary, Nursery and Special Beacon Schools:

Areas of Activity Offered

	Infant, Nursery Primary & Special	Percent of all
Development of Writing	270	73.4%
Literacy	221	60.1%
School Leadership	204	55.4%
Numeracy	189	51.4%
Teacher Training	133	36.1%
Continuing Professional Development	132	35.9%
Parents/Home-School/Community	119	32.3%
ICT	117	31.8%
Curriculum Development	116	31.5%
Monitoring and Evaluation	106	28.8%
SEN	106	28.8%
Behaviour Management	79	21.5%
Target Setting/pupil tracking	74	20.1%
Early Years/Nursery/Reception	69	18.8%
Curriculum Subjects (other than Literacy& Numeracy)	67	18.2%
Support for schools in difficulty	59	16.0%
Raising standards & School Improvement	52	14.1%
Gifted and Talented pupils	44	12.0%
Inclusion	41	11.1%
Teaching and Learning	39	10.6%
Assessment and Recording	36	9.8%
Extra Curricular Provision	34	9.2%
Ethos	30	8.2%
Spiritual, Moral, Social, Cultural education	27	7.3%
Primary-Secondary liaison	20	5.4%
Science	18	4.9%
Severe Learning Difficulties	16	4.3%
Finance and Resources	15	4.1%
Boys Achievement	15	4.1%
Governors	14	3.8%
Self Evaluation	13	3.5%
Thinking Skills	11	3.0%
PSHE	11	3.0%
Learning Support Assistants	11	3.0%
Citizenship	11	3.0%
English as an Additional Language	8	2.2%
Attendance and Truancy Management	7	1.9%

Table 32 continued:
Primary, Nursery and Special Beacon Schools.

Performance Management	6	1.6%
RE	6	1.6%
Support for small schools	6	1.6%
Development Planning	4	1.1%
Reducing Bureaucracy	4	1.1%
Multi-cultural Education	4	1.1%
Individual Education Plans	4	1.1%
Differentiation	3	0.8%
Data use of	2	0.5%
Health Issues	2	0.5%
Student Councils	2	0.5%
Ofsted	2	0.5%
School Policies	2	0.5%
Ethnic achievement	1	0.3%

Source:

Individual Web pages of 368 Primary, Nursery and Special Beacon Schools on the DfES Beacon Web Site as at Summer 2001.

(www.standards.dfee.gov.uk/beaconschools)

Appendix 5:

Questionnaire for Headteachers of Beacon Schools

Dear

A Questionnaire for Headteachers of Beacon Schools

I am headteacher of a secondary beacon school and am writing to seek your participation in a general survey of headteachers of beacon schools. This survey is part of a doctoral thesis on beacon schools.

I hope through this research to establish the perspective of a large sample of headteachers on Beacon Policy, its advantages and disadvantages and the way in which they believe the policy should develop in the future. Your school is part of a survey of all 587 beacon schools established before September 2001.

I will produce a brief summary report of responses to send to all headteachers who reply, giving an overview of the views of other beacon headteachers and of how beacon work is developing in their schools.

If you are able to assist, and feel that it would be appropriate to count your assistance with this research as part of your own beacon activities, I would be very pleased to fill in an evaluation form or other evidence that you might require.

Any information you provide will be confidential, which means that neither you nor your school will be identified in anything I write subsequently. Although the DfEE have undertaken some research I hope you will agree that it will be interesting and useful to establish the views of headteachers directly.

I would appreciate it if you were able to complete the enclosed questionnaire and return it in the enclosed pre-paid envelope on or before the end of September.

If you require any further information please do not hesitate to contact me on the above number.

Kind regards

Dan Moynihan

Background Information

1a. School name

1. Please give the following information about your school:

1b. *Type of school:* **(Please tick)**

Nursery school		Middle deemed secondary	
Infant school		Comprehensive	
First school		Modern (non-selective)	
First and middle school		Grammar (selective)	
Infant and junior school		Technical	
Junior school		City Technology College	
Middle deemed primary school		Specialist Technology College	
Special		Specialist Arts College	
		Specialist Sports College	
		Specialist Languages College	
		Other secondary	

1c. *Category of school*

Community
Foundation
Voluntary aided
Voluntary controlled
Community special
Foundation special
Non-maintained special

1d. *Is your school?* **(please tick one box only):**

Mainly rural		Mainly urban		Inner urban	

1e. Number of pupils on roll

1f. Age range of the pupils in your school

1g. Gender of pupils

Boys   Girls   Mixed

1h. Ethnic background of pupils (please give percentage of school roll).

	%			%
White – UK heritage		Black - Caribbean		
White – European		Black - African		
White – other		Black - other		
Pakistani		Indian		
Bangladeshi		Others		
Chinese				

1i. Pupil characteristics (Please use percentages)

	%
Eligible for free school meals	
English as an additional language	
English as an additional language (early stage of acquisition)	
Pupils with Special Educational Needs	
Pupils with a Statement of Special Educational Needs	

1j. Is your school involved in the 'Excellence in the City' initiative? (delete as appropriate)   **YES/NO**

1k. Is your school participating in an Education Action Zone? (delete as appropriate)   **YES/NO**

Beacon Activities in Your School

2a. When was your school first designated as a

beacon school?

Month	Year

2b. What were your original reasons for seeking beacon status for your school? (tick all responses that apply)

Using it as a vehicle for school self improvement
Using it to market the school
A desire to influence the practice of other schools
To gain extra resources

If there were other important reasons, please enter these in the box below

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2c. List below the main areas of expertise that you identified in your beacon application?

I.

II.

III.

IV.

V.

VI.

2 d.   Are your responses to 2c the areas that your beacon work has actually focused upon? If not, please comment in the box below

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2e. Which types of beacon activities have you found to be most successful?

Activity	Attempted? (Tick)	Success Rating High		(circle) Low	
Disseminating documentary exemplars of good practice		1	2	3	4
Organising INSET courses/events on areas of your school's expertise		1	2	3	4
Paying for consultancy Advice/training and sharing this with partners		1	2	3	4
Visits from partner school staff and demo lessons for colleagues from other schools		1	2	3	4
Activities involving extended partnerships and follow up in the classroom at partner schools.		1	2	3	4

2f. Initial DfES research into beacon schools has identified three main models for beacon work. Which <u>one</u> of these most closely represents the beacon work at your school

Model for beacon work	Tick
1 Offering what you know your school is good at in set-piece events.	
2 Offering what partners have identified that they need.	
3. Working with a focused group of schools on joint improvement projects	
4. Other model: (please give details)	

2g. How satisfied are you with the structure and support provided by the DfEE on how beacon schools should operate? (please tick one)

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Fairly satisfied	Not satisfied

2h. What kinds of evidence of your beacon work are you gathering for the DfEE (tick any that apply)

Types of evidence	Tick if appropriate
Informal evaluations by telephone	
Written or verbal evaluations by partners	
Evaluation sheet for partners to fill in after an event.	
Use of consultants to evaluate activities	
Number of visits logged by staff	
Number of schools which have benefited from beacon Services.	
Number of pupils in schools affected by changes resulting from beacon work	
Longer term evaluation of the work implemented by partners as a result of beacon work.	
Evidence of raised standards or other improvement in partner schools	
Other (if so, please say what?)	

2i. What do you feel it is <u>reasonable</u> for OFSTED to expect in terms of the impact that your beacon work can make?

Types of evidence	Tick if appropriate
Improved examination results	
Improved classroom practice in partner schools	
Positive evaluations of contact with your school by partner staff	
Records showing that the beacon school has **offered** a range of INSET and other activities	
Records of **take up** of a range of activities offered by the beacon school	

2j   What positive consequences of beacon status have you found?

What negative consequences of beacon status have you found?

Any other comments?

Thank you for completing this questionnaire which should be returned using the pre-paid envelope. If you have mislaid the envelope please send the questionnaire to

Appendix 6:

Summary of Characteristics of those Beacon Schools responding to the Questionnaire

Characteristics of Questionnaire Respondents

Types of schools replying

Table 33 below shows the breakdown of questionnaire respondents by type of school

Table 33 Questionnaire Responses by Type of School

Type of school	Number of responses
Nursery	13
Infant	27
First School	5
First & Middle	1
Infant & Junior	95
Junior	15
Middle deemed Primary	2
Special	15
Comprehensive	48
Modern	4
CTC	1
Specialist Technology College	12
Specialist Arts College	1
Specialist Languages College	1
Total	**239**

Table 34 below shows that with the exception of Nursery schools (which had a 100% response rate), there was a similar rate of response from the other categories of school.

Table 34 Questionnaire Response Rate by Type of School

	No' of respondents/Total no' of beacon schools in category	Percentage response rate
Nursery	13/13	100%
Primary	145/365	40%
Special	15/31	48%
Secondary	67/178	38%

Table 35 below shows the legal designation of responding schools.

Table 35 Legal Status of Responding Schools (Question 1c)

	No of respondents	Percentage of all respondents
Community	124	52
Foundation	17	7
Voluntary Aided	61	26
Voluntary Controlled	19	8
Community Special	12	5
Non-maintained Special	3	1

Tables 36 to 40 suggest that the survey respondents constitute a balanced sample of the full beacon schools network.

Table 36: Respondent Context: Urban or Rural (Question 1d)

	Number of respondents	Percentage of all responses
Mainly rural	55	23
Mainly urban	112	47
Inner Urban	72	30

Table 36 illustrates that seventy seven percent of respondents considered themselves to be urban or mainly urban in their school characteristics. This compares to a DfES estimate of 59% of beacon schools being located in urban areas (Table 7, page 27). Therefore the sample of survey respondents is skewed toward urban areas when compared to the full population of beacon schools. The sample is very significantly skewed toward urban schools when compared with schools nationally. This is because of the emphasis given by the DfES to Excellence in Cities areas in the location of new beacons.

Table 37 illustrates that schools responding to this survey in both the primary and secondary sectors are on average slightly, but not significantly, larger than similar schools nationally. Answers to question 1g on gender of pupils reveal that ninety two percent of responding schools were co-educational, seven percent were girls schools and only 2 percent were boys schools.

Table 37:   Average Size of Responding Schools by Pupils Numbers.

	No' of respondents	Average number of pupils in respondents schools	Average number of pupils in this school type nationally*
Nursery	13	194	N/a
Primary	145	277	193-271
Special	15	101	N/a
Secondary	67	1076	805-1060

*Source: Ofsted Secondary and Primary National Data Report 2000

Table 38 below shows that across responding schools, approximately eighteen percent of pupils were of backgrounds other than White UK. Nationally only eight percent of secondary schools (Ofsted 2000a, p39) and 4 percent of primary schools (Ofsted, 2000b, p32) had a similar pupil constitution. These responding beacon schools are therefore significantly more multi-ethnic in their intakes than schools nationally.

Table 38:   Ethnicity of Pupils in Responding schools.

Ethnic Group	Percentage of pupils in ethnic group
White-UK heritage	82
White-European	2
White-Other	1
Pakistani	3
Bangladeshi	1
Chinese	1
Black-Caribbean	2
Black-African	2
Black-Other	1
Indian	2
Others	3

Free school meals are used by Ofsted as a broad proxy measure for social disadvantage. This is because take up of free meals is strongly correlated with subsequent examination achievement. Nationally Ofsted report that a free school meal range of between 9.41 percent and 19.2 percent is broadly average for secondary schools (Ofsted, 2001a, p 39). From Table 45 below it is clear that secondary respondents to this survey are at the higher end of being broadly average. Similarly Ofsted report that for primary schools a free school meal range between 9.41 and 19.2 percent is average nationally. Table 45 shows that the primary respondents to this survey are towards the top end of this range. Given the predominance of responding schools in urban areas (see Table 7, page 27) it would be expected that their free school meal proportions would be very high or at least higher than average. Yet the figures are instead at the higher end of average. This suggests that these schools may be relatively advantaged schools in urban areas.

Table 39:   Pupil Background Characteristics amongst Responding Schools

	Eligible for Free School Meals	English as an Additional Language	Early stage of acquisition- of English as an Additional Language	Pupils with Special Educational needs	Pupils with a statement of Special Educational needs
Nursery, First ,Junior and Primary Schools	17	27	3	16	3.2
Secondary Schools	18.33	14	2.4	19	4.6
Special Schools	30	4	2	100	77
Average	17.26	9.8	2.6	20.8	8.7

Ofsted comparators (Ofsted, 2000a) show that eighty percent of secondary schools in 2000 had fewer than the 14 percent of pupils with English as an Additional Language as those responding in this survey. Similarly eighty seven percent of primary schools nationally had fewer English as additional language pupils than the responding schools. As would be expected for urban schools, the proportion of pupils with English as an Additional Language amongst survey respondents was high.

Secondary schools responding to the survey had 4.6 percent of pupils being fully statemented. These schools possessed nearly twice as many statemented pupils as secondary schools in England as a whole. The national figure was 2.5 percent in 2000 (Ofsted, 2000a, p36). Similarly the proportion of statemented pupils in responding nursery and primary schools was high at 3.2 percent compared to a national figure of 1.6 percent (Ofsted 2000b, p27). Percentages of statemented pupils amongst respondents may be high compared to national figures but are not particularly high for urban schools.

Membership of special educational zones

Questions 1j and 1 K established that fifteen percent of responding schools were in Education Action Zones, whilst twenty-three percent of respondents were in Excellence in Cities zones (EiC). The latter compares to thirty seven percent of beacon schools in EiC zones overall.

Table 40:   Length of experience as a beacon school

Length of experience as a beacon school	Percentage of the 239 respondents
Less than one year	4 percent
One year or more	88 percent
Two years or more	77 percent
Three years	15 percent

Table 40 shows that more than three quarters of respondents to the survey had at least two years experience as beacon schools. Fifteen percent of responding schools had three years experience as beacon schools. Thus the sample includes a large number of the most experienced beacon schools in the UK.

Appendix 7:

Case Study Schools: Semi-Structured Interview schedules

Letter to Case Study Headteachers

3 December 2001

Dear

Beacon School Research

Thank you for agreeing to allow me to visit you on XXX to talk about your beacon school work. This is part of a doctoral thesis on an evaluation of Beacon School Policy. I hope my visit will be of use to your school by counting as a beacon activity for XXXX and also because I will be very happy to share the full outcomes of all of the research when it is completed with you.

As part of the study, I am undertaking three case studies on beacon schools. The aim is to look at the reality of operation, the problems and possibilities of beacon work etc. All information received would be confidential and schools would remain anonymous.   My visit would involve interviewing key staff involved in beacon work, getting a flavour of the kinds of beacon activities and modes of sharing being used in the school etc. I have a series of questions attached which I would like to ask and would like to be able to audio-tape the answers (because I cannot write both legibly and quickly!). I would also like to be able to take copies of the annual returns sent to the DfES giving an overview of activities and some evaluation forms. If you were able to send these in advance that would be most welcome. The key ethical principles underpinning this work are as follows:

- All participants will remain anonymous.
- All information will be treated with the strictest confidentiality
- Case Study interviewees will be given the opportunity to verify statements when the research is in draft form. Provided those involved are satisfied with the fairness, accuracy and relevance of accounts which pertain to them and that these accounts do not necessarily expose or embarrass them, the accounts should not be subject to veto.
- Participants will receive a copy of the final case study. The research is an attempt to explore Beacon Policy in practice. It is hoped that the final report may be of benefit to the schools involved and to those in them who took part.

So far the research has included interviews with the senior Civil Servant in charge of the policy as well as the Director of Research and School improvement at NCSL (who have quite different views about it all!). I have also undertaken a postal survey of all 550 beacons in existence before September 2001 to which there was a good response. This has thrown up some very interesting results in terms of how schools are disseminating good practice and managing the significant extra workload.

I attach the questionnaire and am very happy to provide any other information that you might need.

Wishing you a happy and restful break.

Yours sincerely

Dan Moynihan

CASE STUDY: SCHEDULE 1

Schedule 1:
Semi–Structured Interview Schedule for Head teachers/ Leadership Group in Case Study Schools

Documents to be collected:

- Logs, files etc relating to beacon activity –gain a summary of types of activities over the past year.

- How many schools? How many teachers involved.

- Have you key partners? If so who?

- What was the focus of the activities?

- What dissemination method was used?

    Documentary or other dissemination –'a solution looking for a problem'
    Consultancy' a customised approach to an identified problem
    Improving together: creating a network of mutual support

- Any written agreements with partners

- Evaluations made by school or partners, plus any evidence

- Any other relevant documents

What motivated you to bid for Beacon status?

- How did you identify what you are good at and what makes you good at it?

- Did this pose any difficulties amongst different staff in terms of recognition of their work?

- Has this been as issue any ways of managing this?

Beacon activities

- What are the aspects of good practice that you identified for your beacon activity?

- How have you disseminated your good practice?
  (Documentation, INSET, consultancy, one-off events, partnerships in depth etc)

- What is your perception on how successful this has been?

- Would you change anything if you were starting again?

- Has the focus for beacon work changed during the time you have being doing it? How and Why?

- Do you need to be proactive in gaining partner schools ? if so how?

- Do your newer beacon partnerships work in a similar way to the previous ones?

- How is your beacon activity managed/staffed?

- Has the workload been an issue? Have has this been managed? (eg disruption to classes etc)

Partnerships

- How would you say that your partnerships have developed with non-beacon Schools, LEAs and/or HEIs etc?

- Has your LEA helped to find partners or have you done this largely yourselves?

- Have your relationships with your LEA changed in any way over time?

- What kinds of things in your view make for effective partnerships and what makes for poor partnerships?

- Is there scope for DfES to provide more guidance on how to go about partnership activities?

- Some concrete examples of partnership work needed

Positive and negative impacts of Beacon work

- Do you think that beacon work will raise standards in your own school in your partner schools/organisations?

- Have beacon activities changed upon teaching and learning?

- Any examples?

- How has this worked in your own school, in partner schools?

- How effective do you feel you have been in transferring your good practice?

- How are you evaluating your beacon work or keeping records for the DfES?

Conclusions

- What, do you feel are the positive aspects/benefits of being a Beacon School

- Have you encountered any difficulties? If so, how have they been resolved?

- Do you think the beacon initiative is a good way to raise standards? If so why

- Can you think of any draw backs?

- How could the beacon schools policy be improved?

CASE STUDY: SCHEDULE 2

Semi –Structured Interview Schedule for staff (other than leadership group) delivering beacon activities

Gaining beacon status

- How did the school know what it was good at?

- Is beacon work open to those outside the designated subject areas?

- How was it decided who would be involved in beacon work in your school?

- Do you think beacon work is a good use of public money? Prompt for reasons?

- What impact if any has beacon work had upon professional development in the school?

Impact of being a Beacon

- Do you feel that beacon work will raise standards in your own school and in your partner schools?

- If yes, how-what impacts have they/might they have in future?

- If no, why and if this because you feel disruption might result and lower standards?

- What other impacts has beacon status had on the school.

- How do you think staff as a whole perceive beacon work? What about parents and governors.

- How do you think that beacon status has impacted on relationships with the LEA?

Conclusions

- What are the positive aspects of being a beacon school and of the beacon initiative

- What are the disadvantages of beacon status?

- Do you have any recommendations to make to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the initiative?

Appendix 8:

Case Study Staff Beacon Questionnaire

Beacon Questionnaire

1   What kinds of beacon Activities have you been involved in?

Please tick

Meeting visitors from other schools	
Giving demonstration lessons	
Sharing paper based teaching materials and schemes of work	
Offering one-to-one training sessions	
Being involved in sharing of good practice events	
Delivering INSET courses	
Other: please explain	

2   How do you feel beacon work has affected you?

High			**Low**
My classes have lost teaching time through my involvement in beacon and so pupils have been disadvantaged	1	2	3	4
beacon activities have prevented me from carrying out my normal duties	1	2	3	4
I feel proud of my school because of its beacon status.	1	2	3	4
I have learnt new skills by engaging in beacon work	1	2	3	4
My pupils have benefited from my involvement in beacon Activities	1	2	3	4
In working with others I have gained in confidence	1	2	3	4

3.   What overall impact do you think beacon work has had on your school?

4. What impact do you think your beacon work has had on partner schools?
    Please explain

5.   Any other comments?