

## Frequently Asked Questions

### **GENERAL**

#### **What research evidence is there to show the impact that specialist schools have had on raising pupil performance?**

Three main reports are outlined below:

1. 'Educational outcomes and value added by specialist schools', Specialist Schools Trust, January 2005; Jesson, D and Crossley, D

Summary: This report reviews the achievements of the 1,360 specialist comprehensive and modern schools which were in operation in the summer of 2004. Key findings include:

- Specialist schools outperformed non-specialist schools in 2004 by a margin of 10%.
- Specialist schools add more value when prior attainment scores at Key Stage 2 (age 11) of the pupils in all specialist schools are compared with those in non-specialist schools.
- Pupils at every ability level performed better in specialist schools than in non-specialist. Pupils with average or below average ability, however, benefit particularly from attending a specialist school.
- The average point score per pupil at GCSE is higher in all specialist schools, with those in specialist schools achieving an average point score of 43.6 versus 38.0 in non-specialist schools.
- Post-16 students in specialist schools outperformed those in non-specialist schools.
- The longer schools are specialist the greater the specialist school dividend.

2. 'A study of the Specialist Schools Programme', Institute of Education, University of Warwick, October 2004; Harris, A

Summary: The Institute of Education at the University of Warwick, on behalf of the Department for Education and Skills, carried out a study of selected Specialist Schools in order to identify examples of best practice and the key components which make a Specialist School successful. Key findings include:

- Specialist School status has a strong reinforcing and positive effect upon school ethos and enhances the school's kudos and appeal within the local community.

- Schools benefited most from Specialist School status when the change process has been well managed (all staff involved, good communications throughout, clear vision, time dedicated to the process, etc.).
- Specialist School status is a powerful lever for school improvement and there is evidence to suggest that it is associated with raising academic performance.
- Specialist School status raises expectations of school performance both within the school and the wider community.
- Achieving Specialist School status has a positive impact on teaching and learning in the target subject area but also enhances the transfer of good practice to other subject areas both within the school and with partner schools.
- Specialist School status has a positive effect upon partner secondary and primary schools. Relationships, communications, collaboration and sharing of good practice are enhanced between schools as a result of Specialist School status.
- Schools that successfully forge community links tend to have partners who are receptive and enthusiastic about working together.
- While the majority of schools forge firm links with business at the application stage, these links are not always developed or extended further.
- Specialist School status is considered by partner schools (primary and secondary) to be a positive influence upon their performance and attainment through partnership and collaborative arrangements.

3. 'Evaluating the effectiveness of Specialist Schools', Centre for Economics of Education, Institute of Education, London September 2004; Levacic, R and Jenkins, A

Summary: A statistical analysis of the effectiveness of specialist schools carried out by Rosalind Levacic and Andrew Jenkins of the Centre for Economics of Education, London. It is an extensive analysis of students' performance from 2995 specialist and non-specialist schools who took GCSEs in 2001 and for whom KS2 data is available from 1996. It uses detailed regression analysis to compare the probability of pupils achieving 5 or more, higher grade passes in a non-specialist school with that in a specialist school.

#### OFSTED

In addition, OFSTED benchmark evaluations of school performance (TES 21 November 2003) show specialist schools clustered more heavily in the A/A\* category (36% of specialist schools compared to 23% of non-specialists) and fewer specialist schools in the lowest E/E\* category (14% of specialist schools

compared to 27% of non-specialists). Prof Jesson argues that this shows that a lot more specialist schools are moving forward than other schools.

More recently still, the school performance tables published by DfES in January 2005 showed that specialist schools are performing better in terms of GCSE/GNVQ results than non-specialist schools: 56.7 per cent of pupils in specialists achieved five good grades compared to 49.2 per cent in non-specialists - a difference of 7.5 percentage points.

### **How far geographically can schools link to partner schools?**

It will be for each individual school to determine "community" and for different schools it will mean different things. It will be for each school to demonstrate that worthwhile and meaningful links can be made with partner schools, though it is reasonable to assume that this will become more difficult as distance between them increases. For the purpose of the Community Plan aspect of the application, schools outside Northern Ireland will **not** be considered suitable for partner schools, though, if it is particularly valuable, work with such schools may be referred to in the General Case.

### **How wide a focus should my Community Plan have?**

Again, it is for each school to determine its own community. However, given the short timescales involved, it is likely that a Community Plan that contains a focused project with realistic deliverables will be more manageable than one that includes a relatively wide range of objectives and a broader focus.

### **Is a schools performance based on actual examination results or value added?**

Performance of schools will be based on both examination results and value added.

The Department's evaluation of the pilot schools will take into account how schools have been able to meet the targets set during the application stage. A range of factors other than examination results will also be considered when assessing the impact of the programme on individual schools.

### **Is there any flexibility on the proposed time scale for application forms?**

The timescales for completion of the applications are to facilitate the decision making process in time for designation in September 2008. The Department does not envisage changing these timescales.

## **Is STEM a separate specialism?**

No. The guidance states that Maths, Maths and Computing, Technology and Science are all specialisms under the STEM heading and are particularly welcomed. **The Department will expect such applications to come under one of these 4 specialisms, not under “STEM” as a separate specialism.**

Schools may wish to note that, as with other specialisms, the Department has not prescribed which subjects contribute to the STEM specialisms and schools may combine such subjects as they see fit (NB All specialisms must comprise a minimum of two, and up to a maximum of three, contributory subjects).

Schools should also be aware, however, that a key aspect of how their application will be assessed will be how well the contributory subjects link together to drive improvement across the school and with their partners. **This assessment will ultimately be made by the independent assessment panel and schools are advised to present as strong and coherent an application as possible based on genuine subject linkages with a strong team in place to take forward the specialist plans.** The Department does not encourage schools to create new or artificial linkages between subjects in order to fit a perceived outside agenda or policy.

## **Are there logos for Specialist Schools here to use?**

The Department has worked with RTU to develop official **logos for those schools currently designated as specialist schools**, which the schools can use on letter heads, prospectuses etc. These are now available for issue via the Department. If you are interested in using one of these Specialist Schools logos, please contact the 14 -19 Team at [14-19 team@deni.gov.uk](mailto:14-19_team@deni.gov.uk) to arrange for the appropriate logo to be forwarded to your school via email along with the terms and conditions of use.

## **If we only teach double award science, can we set objectives for “science” or does it have to be biology, chemistry and physics?**

The targets and objectives should be set in relation to the subject specialism for the school in question. It will therefore be for each school to decide what is appropriate in relation to the targets set taking account of the audit.

**Over and above the individual subjects there is the huge and difficult to measure contribution that the specialism makes to the overall culture of the school and its place in the community. The application form in its style and focus, does not easily measure or take account of this curricular dimension. Any comment/advice?**

The objectives and targets outlined in the School Plan should include enrichment targets. The (optional) objective can also be used by schools to cover issues arising from the audit, (though these must be accompanied by outcome-based targets).

**Will C2K 'fast track' any of our needs – either to allow primary school pupils to come into and logon to our equipment or to install software we buy?**

Schools are free to deploy their C2k equipment in whatever way they wish, so could use it for community use.

If the "community use" would be in an area separate from the "normal school" (i.e. regular classrooms or library etc) the school would need to pay installation and implementation costs for any additional servers and/or switches needed to facilitate this use. This cost could be included in the outline of use of the annual specialist grant for 1<sup>st</sup> year of the plan.

School users (i.e. those with C2k passwords) can use the full C2k service while "community" users would have more limited access. They would, however be able to use the PCs for Word, Excel etc as well as for filtered Internet access. The C2k team would need to be involved in setting up the equipment for these two separate functions and the schools can contact them via the helpdesk. How this could best be delivered would depend on the specific circumstances in the individual schools. The key point is, however, that access to the equipment without a C2k username can be granted during specific hours (e.g. 6pm to 11pm); these sessions are configured to ensure that any files created by an external user are removed after the session (to guard against any unsuitable material being left).

Extending access to community use may increase the dangers of theft and accidental or malicious damage. During the school day teachers and classroom assistants are able to supervise where necessary, after-hours use may not be quite as well patrolled. Although the Service Provider insures the C2k equipment against malicious damage and theft a police incident report is normally required to verify that such a situation has arisen (a forcible break-in being the typical scenario). The service provider is not liable through its insurance where a school has been negligent in securing the equipment against theft/malicious damage and the insurance does not cover accidental damage. Specific insurance is therefore likely to be needed for these periods.

**Can we appoint people to ‘innovative’ posts or will we be constrained by existing ELB job descriptions?**

Schools should make use of the existing arrangements with their Managing Authorities (i.e. Education & Library Boards, Council for Catholic Maintained Schools and Boards of Governors of grant-maintained integrated, and voluntary grammar schools) for the recruitment and employment of staff. However, schools will be free to discuss their needs and the innovative nature of any posts they require and should not be constrained by existing job descriptions.

**SPONSORSHIP**

**Are there any plans for greater publicity for this venture so that others in Northern Ireland are aware that they might be contacted for sponsorship?**

The Department will consider what it can do to raise awareness of Specialist Schools amongst the business community. However, it will still be a matter for schools to make contact with the business sector in order to secure sponsorship.

**Can we have examples of how the business community could be involved in a specialist school?**

Raising educational standards and ensuring young people have the necessary skills to progress into the employment is crucial for the long-term economic success of Northern Ireland. The Business sector has an important role to play in this process. Schools and businesses working together can secure benefits for both parties. Sponsors developing long-term relationships with their schools may be asked to:

- Appoint a governor to be co-opted on to the Board of Governors of the school;
- Provide work placements and mentoring both for teachers and pupils; and
- Provide careers advice for students.

Schools can access further information on business and sponsor involvement through the RTU.

**Are the private sponsorship donations deductible against tax?**

It will be for each individual sponsor to contact the Inland Revenue to determine the position in relation to their particular circumstances.

**Does the £25,000 sponsorship have to be raised totally in the first year or can this be collected over the four years?**

The £25,000 sponsorship has to be committed by the completion deadline. However, if applicant schools can make a convincing case that the sponsorship would be better spent in years other than the first financial year of designation, and in support of the School Development Plan, we do not envisage ruling these out.

**Can an offer of technical consultancy be counted as a contribution towards the £25,000 sponsorship?**

Where a private sector firm makes an unconditional offer of providing technical consultancy to a school in support of the School and Community Plan and is not charging for any part of these services, then this may count towards the sponsorship contribution. Please contact the Department for further clarification on this issue.

**If a private sector organisation makes a contribution of equipment, can this be counted towards the £25,000 sponsorship?**

If a private sector organisation makes an unconditional offer of providing equipment in support of the School and Community Plan, then this can count towards the sponsorship contribution.

**If a private sector organisation offers discount in relation to goods purchased from them, can this be counted towards the £25,000 sponsorship.**

Although schools are free to explore the possibility of negotiating discount on any purchases they make, any discount cannot be counted towards the sponsorship contribution, as this would be conditional on certain purchases being made.

**Does the company involved in my school's PPP contract fall under the definition of “companies who have or may have a commercial interest in the school” and thus ineligible as a sponsor?**

The guidance permits the private sector operator to contribute sponsorship, should they wish. This is a matter entirely for the operator.

**The Specialist schools application form asks for schools to set targets for the next 4 years for Whole School Improvement with a focus on English and Mathematics. At KS3 should these targets focus on the levels of progression in the cross-curricular skills, with emphasis on Communication and Using Mathematics?**

Levels of progression are not statutory until 2009/10 and schools will not have to report on them until that school year. In the meantime schools are being asked to report on the levels of attainment as in previous years, so for the period of specialist designation, there will be an overlap between these arrangements. Schools are encouraged to set their targets based on the levels of progression which are currently available in draft (from the NI curriculum website if they don't already have them), however, if schools wish to set targets for 08/09 based on the previous levels, this would be acceptable.

**Q. Will my Specialist Schools funding be affected by the Entitlement Framework support funding?**

A. The Community Development Plans for Specialist Schools may include KS4 and Post 16 courses delivered in collaboration with their partner schools. These arrangements will also have been recorded on the Online Audit. In order to avoid duplicate funding of these courses Specialist Schools should ensure that their Specialist Schools Funding reflects that fact that these courses are funded through the EF Support Arrangements. DE will continue to monitor and evaluate the interconnections between the programmes.