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Every school a great school

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Introduction

By background and temperament I am a school improvement activist.

Over the past thirty years or so I have self consciously located myself at the intersection of practice, research and policy. It is here that I felt I could best contribute to the process of educational reform.

Reflecting back over this time, the work I am most proud of is that which I undertook with the *Improving the Quality of Education for All* (IQEA) school improvement project – where we collaborated with hundreds of schools in England, and elsewhere, in developing a model of school improvement and a program of support. The IQEA approach aims to enhance student outcomes through focusing on the teaching–learning process, as well as strengthening the school’s capacity for managing change.

More recently, however, I have found myself as a national policymaker, concerned not just with regional networks of schools but with a part-responsibility for transforming a whole system.

These two sets of experiences have convinced me that not only should every school be a great school, but that this is now a reasonable, realisable and socially just goal for any mature educational system. This is the argument I pursue in this paper.

Every school a great school

Ask any parent about the goal of educational reform and the answer is simple – why can’t every school be a great school? It’s a no-brainer. But this aspiration, although easy to articulate, has implications that challenge the resolve of many national and local governments:

- First, this is an avidly social justice agenda redolent with moral purpose, and needs to be communicated as such. Sadly many of our leaders feel uncomfortable talking about values that have concrete outcomes yet, without this, one cannot build a consensus for social change.
- Second, it places the focus of reform directly on enhancing teaching quality and classroom practice, rather than structural change. Government policy implementation has mostly commonly used the school as the unit of intervention,

yet international research evidence shows that (a) the classroom is key in raising achievement and (b) the range of variation within any school dwarfs the difference between schools in the UK by a factor of three or four times.

- **Third, it requires a commitment to sustained, systemic change because a focus on individual school improvement always distorts social equity.** The evidence from the Charter School movement in the United States, and Grant Maintained Schools in England, suggests that although such initiatives may raise standards for those involved, they depress standards in surrounding schools. This is not at all to argue against school autonomy, but rather to caution that it should be done within inclusive and collaborative settings.

With these key implications in mind, the purpose of this paper is to outline an approach to large-scale, long-term reform that has the potential of realising high standards for all students in all schools.

In elaborating the argument, I will set out

- the crucial policy conundrum in achieving sustained improvement;
- the four key drivers that can build system capacity to deliver on standards;
- the system leadership necessary to sustain such an approach; and
- the overarching implications for national policy.

Prescription or professionalism – the crucial policy conundrum

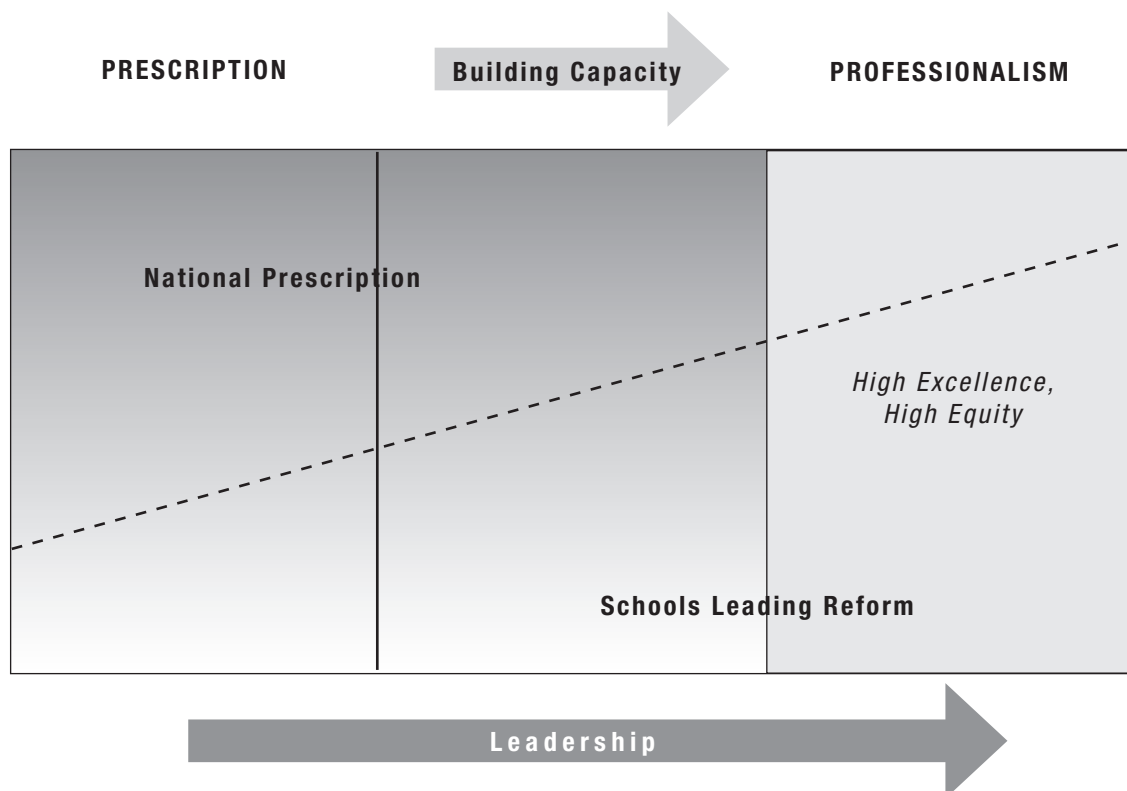
Despite the political boldness required for an explicit focus on large-scale reform, it was an agenda enthusiastically adopted

in the UK by New Labour in 1997. Most agreed that standards were too low and too varied in the 1970s and 80s and that some form of direct state intervention was necessary. The resultant ‘national prescription’ proved very successful, particularly in raising standards in primary schools – progress that was confirmed by international comparisons.

But progress plateaued in the second term of the Labour Government. Whilst a bit more improvement might be squeezed out of prescription nationally, and perhaps a lot more in underperforming schools, one has to question whether it still offers the recipe for sustained large-scale reform in the medium term. There is a growing recognition that schools need to lead the next phase of reform. But if this hypothesis is correct (and this is much contested terrain), it must categorically not be a naïve return to the not-so-halcyon days of the 1970s when a thousand flowers bloomed and the educational life chances of too many of our children wilted.

Large-scale reform is neither only nationally led nor only schools led. Necessarily both support each other, within a system committed to raising the bar and to narrowing the gap. For instance, in increasingly dynamic policy contexts schools must use external standards to clarify, integrate and raise their own expectations. Equally, schools by themselves and in networks, must be enabled to lead improvements and innovations in teaching and learning, with the support of highly specified, but not prescribed, best practices.

This implies a transition from an era of Prescription to an era of Professionalism – in which the balance, between national

Figure 1. Towards large-scale sustainable reform

prescription and schools leading reform, will change. However, achieving this shift is not straightforward. As Michael Fullan once said it takes capacity to build capacity and, if there is insufficient capacity to begin with, it is folly to announce that a move to ‘professionalism’ provides the basis of a new approach. The key question is ‘how do we get there?’, because we cannot simply move from one era to the other without self consciously building professional capacity throughout the system. It is this progression that is illustrated in Figure 1.

Four drivers for system reform

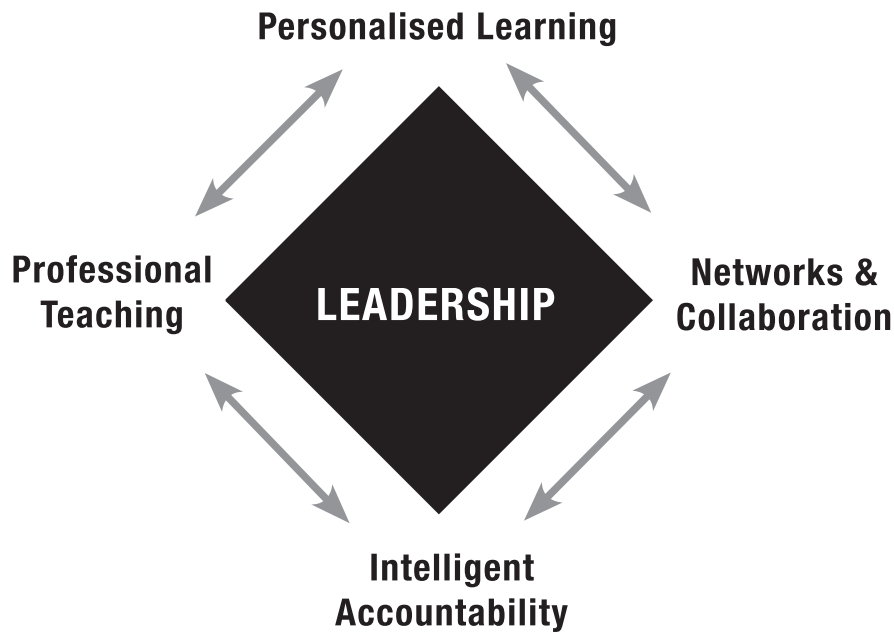
Building capacity demands that we replace numerous national initiatives with a

national consensus on a limited number of educational trends. There seem to me to be four key drivers that, if pursued relentlessly and deeply, have the potential to deliver every school a great school. These are

- personalised learning;
- professionalised teaching;
- networks and collaboration; and
- intelligent accountability.

As shown in the ‘diamond of reform’ diagram (see Figure 2), they coalesce and mould to context, through the exercise of responsible systemic leadership.

Together, these key trends provide a core strategy for improvement. It would, of course, be tempting to provide instead

Figure 2. The diamond of reform

more immediately digestible answers or implementable initiatives. For instance, I am sometimes asked ‘would more teaching assistants and/or greater use of ICT ensure learning is tailored to student need?’ Although questions such as these are legitimate, they are actually second-order questions. We must first pursue the core trends, because with these in place teachers will best be able to decide how to deploy more teaching assistants or use ICT (funded overall by the centre, but determined by informed professionals).

On this I believe it is important to remember Jim Collins’ argument in his book *Good to Great* (Collins, 2001):

None of the good to great companies began their transformations with pioneering technology, yet they all became pioneers in the applications of technology once they grasped how it fit [with their core improvement strategies] and after they hit breakthrough. (p 162)

The comparison companies frequently tried to create a breakthrough with large, misguided acquisitions. The good to great

Figure 3. Personalised learning

companies, in contrast, principally use large acquisitions after breakthrough, to accelerate momentum in an already fast spinning wheel. (p 186)

This is the approach being advocated here, it is the relentless focus on these four trends that lays the foundation for every school being great.

Building capacity demands that we replace numerous national initiatives with a national consensus on a limited number of educational trends. There seem to me to be four key drivers that, if pursued relentlessly and deeply, have the potential to deliver every school a great school.

Key driver 1: Personalised learning

The current focus on personalisation is about putting citizens at the heart of public services and enabling them to have a say in the design and improvement of the organisations that serve them. In education, as can be seen in Figure 3, this can be understood as personalised learning, the drive to tailor education to individual need, interest and aptitude so as to fulfil every young person's potential.

In addition to the importance of curriculum entitlement and choice, both to provide the basics and to engage and inspire, there are two key components. These are:

(a) Metacognition/learning how to learn

'I know what good work looks like and I can help myself learn'

Metacognitive skills enable students to develop the capacity to monitor, evaluate, control and change the way they think and learn. There is clear evidence that the acquisition of these skills can significantly increase achievement. To ensure more students gain these skills we need

- teaching strategies that consistently and strategically develop students' learning skills. For example, instead of simply presenting information for knowledge acquisition, teachers can ensure that in tandem with learning new knowledge students also extract ideas, memorise information, build hypotheses and theories, use metaphors to think creatively, and work effectively with others;
- a framework of common learning skills, as there is currently a lack of clarity for students on the skills they should

acquire and how they can develop these as they progress. These skills would need to be identified and taught coherently across the curriculum.

(b) Assessment for learning

'I know what my learning objectives are and I feel in control of my own learning'

Personalised learning also depends upon knowing, in a deep way, the strengths and weaknesses of individual students. A key means of doing so is formative assessment for learning, and the use of data, evidence and dialogue, to identify every pupil's learning needs. This may be organised differently in different schools, but the rationale must always be the same. It will be based on

- clear evidence about how to drive up individual attainment;
- clear feedback for and from students, so there is clarity on what they need to improve and how best they can do so;
- clarity for students on what grades/levels they are working at, with transparent criteria to enable peer coaching; and
- a clear link between student learning and lesson planning.

Key directions, related to the above, are as follows.

- Learning to learn should be built into frameworks of both curriculum and assessment.
- Innovations in, for example, New Technologies, may contribute to higher standards but to do so they must be focused on helping teachers design and deliver classroom learning tailored to need and aptitude.

Key driver 2: Professionalised teaching

To personalise learning, teachers must focus increasingly on how they use data and evidence to apply a rich repertoire of teaching strategies to meet their students' needs. This, in turn, implies radically different forms of professional development, with a strong focus on coaching and establishing schools as professional learning communities. The key elements are:

(a) Enhanced repertoire of learning and teaching strategies to actively engage and stretch students

This includes

- an ability to use a range of whole-class, group and individual teaching, learning and ICT strategies to transmit knowledge, to instil key learning skills and to accommodate different paces of learning;
- curriculum planning and pedagogy tailored to particular student groups: in particular, to tackle underperformance (eg, amongst boys); to provide catch-up (eg, for those entering secondary school without the expected performance at age 11); to provide stretch (eg, for Gifted and Talented students);
- understanding that teaching behaviours also have a big impact on student achievement. Students learn more when teachers: allocate available class time to academic activities; spend most of their time actively teaching; ensure students are **on task** for a high proportion of class time; ask frequent and answerable questions.

(b) Continuous professional development (CPD)

In order to maximise the teacher effect on learning we need to ensure that professional development impacts directly on teacher behaviour. This demands

- opportunities for teachers to engage newly learnt skills in the workplace through: immediate and sustained practice; collaboration and peer coaching; studying development and implementation;
- performance management systems that focus explicitly on learning and teaching in the classroom. These are currently far less developed than those focusing upon the school itself (with, for example, a Performance Management Observation System that does not report on how well pupils are learning, their time on task etc).

Achieving these goals would go a long way towards ensuring consistency of practice in all classrooms – creating a truly whole-school effect (ie, with **no place to hide**).

Key directions related to the above are the following.

- These approaches to teacher quality should be put at the heart of workforce reform, and inform decisions about the deployment of support staff.
- The triumvirate of performance management, Continuous Professional Development (CPD) and performance-related pay, need to be employed more effectively by school leaders to impact directly on standards.

Key driver 3: Networks and collaboration

Networks support improvement and innovation by enabling schools to collaborate on building curriculum diversity, extended services and professional support and to develop a vision of education that is shared and owned well beyond individual school gates. There are two key components:

(a) Best practice captured, highly specified and transferred

Our leading schools and teachers already employ best practices. In the 1970s and 80s such practices remained isolated innovations, with other schools reinventing the wheel every time they set out to improve. Some were successful, many were not. In the 1990s, attempts were made to universalise best practices through prescriptive guidance to all schools. The result was fairly rigid pathways to improvement, which many schools either chose not to implement or implemented in ways that did not significantly improve student learning.

The alternative is, firstly, the development of highly precise models of best practice that distil and specify processes of improvement into meaningful toolkits. These would help all schools and teachers to

- establish their own approaches in relation to the needs of their students;
- learn and improve themselves in the process of doing so; and
- most importantly, start from an advanced position, knowing the basic principles of best practice and how they can increase achievement.

Secondly, facilitated networks are needed to spread best practice and ensure it generates improvement across the system. Networks of schools provide the capacity (i) to discipline and transfer innovation and (ii) to create a cultural willingness within the profession to re-examine existing practice, so as to ensure consistency and tackle within-school variations.

(b) Partnerships beyond the school

This is key to

- developing high expectations, especially in not allowing socioeconomic disadvantage to determine aspirations, interests or success;
- enabling the parental voice to co-construct improvement through, for instance: regular information about pupil progress; an open-door policy for new parents; and consultation on new developments;
- building parental responsibility, to support their child's educational and behavioural development. There is the potential for significant cultural change. If it were the norm that parents did 10 basic things to support their child's education our society would already be highly numerate, literate, and e-literate. The close connection between health care and, increasingly, more healthy lifestyles, is a case in point.

Key directions, related to the above, are as follows.

- A Commission of Best Practice is needed – creating models of best practice

developed by leading heads and schools, and disciplined by international research. (It is particularly striking that, while medical doctors in the UK regularly read the *Lancet* or the *BMJ*, the teaching profession does not have a peer-reviewed journal, published for practitioners by

practitioners, which is regularly read to keep abreast of R&D.)

- Incentives are needed for schools to develop partnerships beyond the school, through adjustments to funding, governance and target-setting arrangements.

Key driver 4: Intelligent accountability

A fairly sophisticated national framework for accountability has evolved in England since the early 1990s. That framework, which links together standardised achievement tests and examinations, target setting, publication of performance tables and independent inspection, made a major contribution to the raising of standards during the period. However, such an externally imposed approach to accountability has also had some perverse effects, such as teachers ‘teaching to the test’ and schools increasing their ‘competitiveness’ through adjusting their admissions policy. It has also increased the degree of dependence and lack of innovation within the system.

In the move from ‘prescription’ to ‘professionalism’, any accountability framework needs to be able not only to fulfil its original purpose but also to build capacity and confidence for professional accountability. In other words it needs to become intelligent. This is not just in terms of its own remit but also in supporting the capacity-building function of the other three drivers.

To better support progress towards ‘every school a great school’ we therefore

need a more intelligent accountability framework. This would have at least two key elements:

(a) A better balance between Internal and External assessment

There is a clear distinction between internal and external assessment: the former relates to assessment undertaken by a student’s school, college or other provider, commonly referred to as teacher assessment; and the latter to a national standardised exam, externally marked.

Although the balance of assessment will inevitably and gradually shift from internal to external, as students move through school stages, there are strong arguments for moderated teacher assessment being the default approach to assessment. It can be very reliable. It also links well to personalised learning, supports teacher professionalism, and through external moderation encourages the transfer of curriculum innovation between schools.

As the effectiveness of teacher assessment and school self evaluation increases, capacity is built in the system, and the need for ‘high stakes’ testing can be confined to

key points of transition in a narrower range of subjects.

(b) A better balance between formative and summative assessment

In clarifying the purposes of assessment, it is important also to distinguish between formative and summative assessment. Formative assessment is commonly understood as *Assessment for Learning* and this has a clear focus on the improvement of learning. This is an essential feature of learning how to learn, is an embedded component of effective teaching and lays the basis for school self evaluation.

Summative assessment, on the other hand, is commonly understood as *Assessment of Learning*, whose uses are certification, selection, standard-setting, and accountability. The increasing operational clarity between formative and summative assessment enables each to support its core purpose more effectively. For example, random national sampling is a far more accurate means of monitoring the level national standards than full cohort testing, which is onerous, expensive and has too wide a margin of error.

Key directions related to the above are the following.

- It is necessary to ensure that procedures for both external and internal

accountability are in place and that the methods used in each domain complement each other.

- It is necessary to develop increasingly precise methods for formative assessment, such as assessment for learning, student progress data, contextual factors, value added and school profiles that become tools, not just for personalising learning and enhanced teacher professionalism, but also for assisting school self evaluation and for holding schools open to public scrutiny.

Leadership as the catalyst for systemic change

Each of the key drivers/trends outlined above is integral to a social democratic settlement for education. But it is system leadership that has the power to maximise their impact in schools and make them work in different contexts.

Such leadership needs to be focused on three fundamental purposes.

- **Setting direction:** to enable every learner to reach their potential, and to translate this vision into whole school curriculum, consistency and high expectations.
- **Developing people:** to enable students to become active learners and to create schools of professional learning communities.
- **Developing the organisation:** to create evidence-based schools and effective organisation, and to be involved in networks collaborating to build curriculum diversity, professional support, extended services.

Such leadership also needs to be reflected at three different levels.

It is system leadership that has the power to maximise their impact in schools and make them work in different contexts.

- **System leadership at the school level** – with, as its essence, school principals becoming almost as concerned about the success of other schools as they are about their own.
- **System leadership at the local/urban level** – with practical principles widely shared and used as a basis for local alignment (across a city) so that school diversity, collaboration and segmentation are deliberately exploited and specific programs are developed for the most at-risk groups.
- **System leadership at the system level** – with social justice, moral purpose and a commitment to the success of every learner providing the focus for transformation.

The key direction related to the above is the following.

- Non-governmental agencies should better prepare leaders for ‘leadership

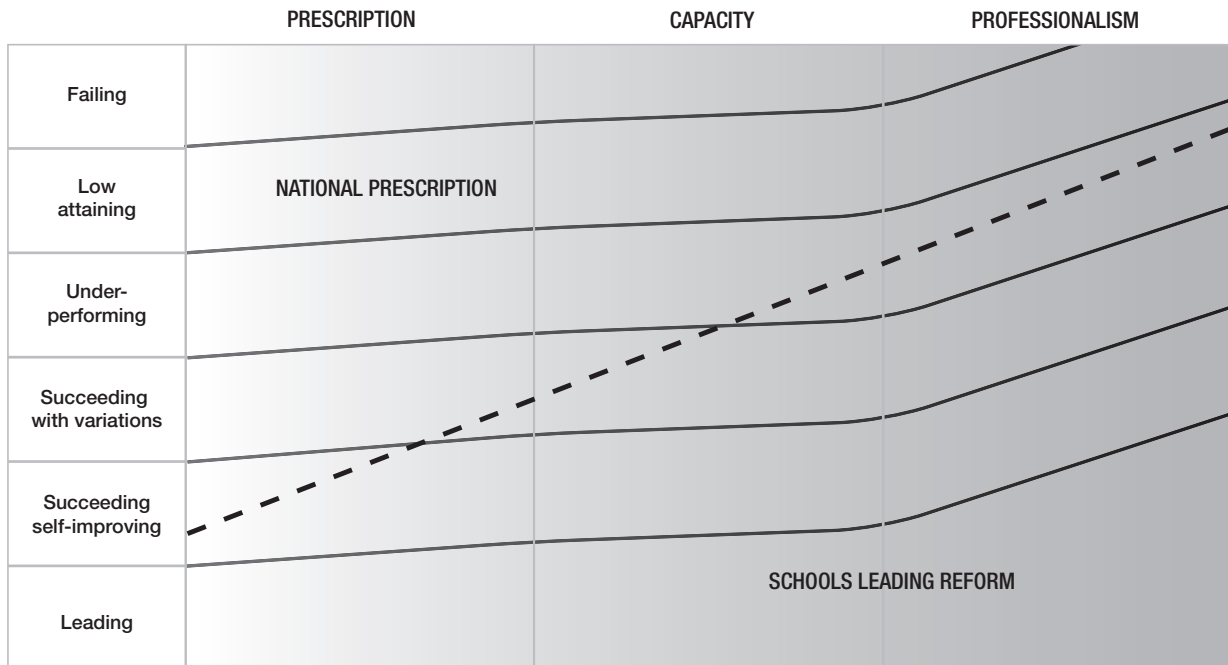
in learning’, including the ability to manage teaching and learning, as well as to contribute to system change beyond their individual schools. Leadership training must move beyond ‘regression to the mean’.

Segmentation as the key to ‘every school a great school’

In the move towards ensuring that every school is a great school, the four drivers together with leadership are necessary but not sufficient conditions. The missing ingredient is the concept of **segmentation**. The key idea here is that all schools are at different stages in their improvement cycle, on a continuum from ‘failing’ to ‘leading’. This opens up a highly differentiated approach to school improvement, given that different schools will need different forms of support and intervention at different times. An outline of this approach is set out in Table 1.

Table 1.

TYPE OF SCHOOL	KEY STRATEGIES – RESPONSIVE TO CONTEXT AND NEED
Leading Schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Become leading practitioners ■ Formal federation with lower-performing schools
Succeeding, self-improving schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Regular local networking for school leaders ■ Between-school curriculum development
Succeeding schools with internal variations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Consistency interventions; such as Assessment for Learning ■ Subject specialist support to particular departments
Underperforming schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Linked school support for underperforming departments ■ Underperforming student programs: eg, catch-up
Low attaining schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Formal support in Federation structure ■ Consultancy in core subjects and best practice
Failing schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Intensive Support Program ■ New provider

Figure 4. Segmentation for school transformation

Segmentation is made increasingly possible by the highly sophisticated data now available on school and student performance. For example, schools with similar characteristics (attainment of intake, context measures) can now be 'matched'. This can work at multiple levels: from a whole school indicator, for example, demonstrating 'which schools are similar but have 10% more pupils achieving the national benchmark at 16?'; to a subset of pupils in a specific subject, for example 'similar schools that are doing better with say Caribbean boys in English at 14?'.

A further refinement would distinguish between schools that have always done well and those that have recently improved. The latter are often more likely to know what they have done to improve, and hence better able to give advice to other schools.

Such analysis could be linked to the groupings outlined in Table 1, to support an intelligent system enabling groups of schools to identify (a) issues where they shared both strengths and weaknesses, ie, their capacity for sharing and (b) common issues where they were likely to need some external input. As such, key elements of segmentation could be achieved through self-evaluation rather than centralised prescription. This idea is captured in Figure 4. It illustrates how, over time, this approach to segmentation can lead to a dramatic decrease in school failure and underperformance.

To be successful, however, the segmentation approach requires a fair degree of boldness in setting system level expectations and conditions. There are four implications in particular that have to be grappled with; they are as follows.

- Each failing and underperforming (and potentially low achieving) school should have a leading school that works with it in either a formal Federation (where the leading school head assumes overall control and accountability), or in more informal partnership. Evidence from existing federations in England suggests that a national system of federations would be capable of delivering a step-change in improvement.
- Schools should take greater responsibility for neighbouring schools, so that the move towards networking encourages groups of schools to form collaborative arrangements outside of local control. This would be on the condition that these schools provided extended services for all their students, but equally on the acceptance that there would be incentives for doing so. Encouraging local schools to work together will build capacity for continuous improvement at local level.
- The incentives for greater system responsibility should include enhanced funding for student most at risk. A proxy for this is that students who receive free school meals (FSMs) carry with them significantly more funding (perhaps three times more) than non-FSM students. Beyond incentivising local collaboratives, the potential effects for large-scale long-term reform include
 - a more even distribution of FSM students and associated increases in standards, due to more schools seeking to admit a larger proportion of FSM students, so as to increase their overall income.
 - a significant reduction in ‘sink schools’ where FSM students are

Crucially, a balance needs to be achieved between national prescription and schools leading reform, with the presumption towards the latter.

concentrated, as there would be much greater potential to respond to the socioeconomic challenges (for example, by paying more to attract the best teachers; or by developing excellent parental involvement and outreach services).

- A rationalisation of national and local agency functions and roles, to allow the higher degree of national and regional coordination for this increasingly devolved system.

There is no doubt that an increase in national standards is possible with a boldness of vision and resoluteness of approach. The challenge of ensuring that every school is a great school requires perhaps even more boldness, **but of a different type**. Crucially, a balance needs to be achieved between national prescription and schools leading reform, with the presumption towards the latter, except when schools find themselves in very challenging conditions. In turn, through self-evaluation, schools will become increasingly aware of how to improve and how to contribute to improvement in other schools. Every school a great school – you bet!

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