

back from the brink

Getting out of Special Measures is possibly the most demanding challenge teachers, and particularly headteachers, can face, says Iain Erskine. But it can and has to be done...

Between 2001 and 2003, I found myself leading a school out of Special Measures. I took on the school six months into the process and, what is more, volunteered to do it! The memory of this time will stay with me forever.

In recent times the Government has announced its intention to convert failing primaries into academies and has also suggested taking a similar approach with schools that have been judged as satisfactory in three consecutive Ofsted Inspections. This puts tremendous pressure on those of us who are in headship, particularly in schools that face challenging situations, such as ours. At a time when Contextual Value Added (CVA) is not being used as a measure when judging a school, the pressure can really be on.

In 2001, I was head of an infant school and we had just received – two years running – a government award for being a school that by national standards (basically SATs results) was showing good

improvement. The junior school was in the same building; just through a pair of seldom opened double doors.

I had invested considerable energy in opening lines of communication between the schools, specifically through forging a positive relationship with the long-serving junior school head. For Governors, the Local Authority, staff, parents and all of us in the infant school, the news that the junior school was going into 'Serious Weaknesses' (now known as 'Notice to Improve') was a great shock. The long-standing head retired and the almost equally long-standing deputy head succeeded him.

For the rest of that year nothing much changed as the school and Governors were still in denial. I was keen, with the Local Authority, to work with the newly promoted head who was an experienced, well liked, respected and very good professional. But sadly, the deputy – who I thought would have been a very good head – was thrown in at the deep end and the school was placed in Special Measures due to lack of progress.

A head's worst fear

The HMI in charge of Special Measures had visited once, concluding there was still a lot to do. The new head resigned under discussion with the Local Authority and I was asked to take over running the junior school as well as the infant school.

"You will enjoy it. Once you have taken this school out of Special Measures, you'll want to do it again with another school." Or so said the Local Authority Advisor. She went on, "You'll spend the first 12 to 18 months dealing with behaviour problems that will occupy most of your day. And whilst you are doing that you must get rid of those stuffed animals in the corridor - they give me the creeps!"

Failing a school Ofsted inspection is probably the number one fear for any headteacher. To come out of Special Measures you need a good team around you; people you can trust. It is not a one man job. I do not believe, and never have, in the concept of a 'super head'.

When we started the process, I asked the deputy from the infant school, Charlotte Krzanicki, to join me since we worked very well together and trusted each other. We were able to explain things badly to each other and yet still know what it was the other meant, and not take anything the wrong way.

The strategies we were being asked to use to bring the school out of Special Measures did not match our ideal leadership style, but there was a job to be done and it is one of those situations where a dictatorial approach sometimes takes precedence. Once out of Special Measures we could build a leadership structure based on whole staff ownership and a distributed leadership model. That was the style we preferred,

but in Special Measures time is limited and action is needed.

It is essential to work out who your allies on the staff are and who will sign up to the agenda that must be followed; any resistance is both foolish and counter-productive - these are unique times. The leadership team is constructed and must be of one mind and totally focused on the job in

hand. Getting the balance between short term needs and long term ideals is important if you plan to stay at the school once Special Measures is over. And I definitely wanted to be in it for the long haul as I loved the school, the children and the area.

Looking for support

I faced considerable resistance from members of the teaching and administrative staff who were unsettled by change and modernisation. Reflecting on it now, it must have been a very difficult time for me as head.

One key factor for me during this whole process was having a very supportive and loving family. The hours were long and the pressure significant and all you can talk about - for it consumes most ▶

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Difficult decisions

One of the repercussions of a school failing seems to be staff turnover; staff blame themselves, feel like failures and often need a new start. Some staff show tenacity to help the school out of the situation for which they feel responsible before leaving. It was not many years after the school came out of Special Measures that only one member of the teaching staff remained. Some had to be encouraged to go and, as a headteacher, that is an issue you have to be strong enough to follow through with because the need for the children to get a good education - the best that you can offer - is paramount. Schools tend not to go into Special Measures unless a significant percentage of teaching is unsatisfactory. Some staff respond to support and improve but others are simply unsatisfactory teachers that should have entered a different profession.

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was a lovely thought to ask the original inspector back so she could see how the school had been transformed.

A Governor who had outspokenly not accepted her decision to fail the school

apologised to the inspector and thanked her for putting the school into the Special Measures category saying, quite simply, it was the best thing that could have happened.

Towards the end of the Special Measures period I had to report the deputy head for unprofessional conduct, deal with a deferred redundancy situation that I had inherited and anticipate what hopefully would be the visit that would take us out of Special Measures.

I survived it all and the school came out of Special Measures a much better place for children to enjoy their education. I have no desire to take on another school in Special Measures.

of your waking thoughts – is what is going on in school and what you need to do next. What can the staff cope with, and what if I do not succeed?

I was determined to transform the school and recognised I simply had to deal with each difficulty as it arose because the children's education was too important to avoid any of the issues. Also my credibility as a head was on the line. I simply followed what the HMI inspector said at each visit, listed his action points and ensured they were in place by his next visit. Two other schools in Peterborough were in what we came to refer to fondly as the 'Special Measures Club'. We all had the same lead inspector and he was following the same recipe at each school.

In Special Measures we received a termly visit from two to three HMIs to assess our progress. In my experience, the HMI in charge of the process came every time with a different colleague.

With this process, as with Ofsted inspections, I tried hard to get on well with the inspectors; to take their advice and learn from them even if I decided to discard their advice at a later date. I

got on very well with the lead inspector and he commented very positively on how I listened, took advice and acted upon it. He was very good at his job, as I believe are most inspectors. He got to know our school in a way that a normal inspection team never can and he cared about the school succeeding. I believe it was a matter for his pride that we did well as much as it was for me. In so many aspects of headship it is important to realise that other people often know better than you do and that their advice can benefit your school, the children and the staff.

On the final visit, the HMI in charge brought with him the inspector who had put the school into Special Measures. Progress was significant and it

Where are they now?

We now have amalgamated the Infant and Junior School (2004) into an all-through, 700 strong, primary school with 0-2, 2-3 and 3-4 Nursery classes on site as well as a Children's Centre. We have had two more Ofsted Inspections and we became a National School of Creativity in 2008 as we not only reformed our leadership structure post Ofsted, but also undertook a paradigm shift in our curriculum approach. We now have had four years of very good SATs results founded on our curriculum changes that put the child ahead of the test, and both ourselves and the Local Authority believe we could be graded 'Outstanding' at our next Ofsted inspection. After Special Measures, the real adventure began and will continue. We will never allow our school to stand still again. The only sadness for me, at the age of 57, is that the current pension crisis may force me to leave the school earlier than I may have wished to. But that is another story!

Back to basics

HOW TO LAY THE FOUNDATIONS FOR A BETTER SCHOOL...

- > To avoid failing an inspection it is important that a head has high expectations about what pupils can achieve, makes sure that lesson planning is good and that there is a wide range of classroom activities available to engage pupils in their learning. In schools with unsatisfactory leadership, there is often no clear direction, and so as heads we must ensure effective monitoring of all aspects of the school's work and instigate thorough evaluation of the impact of change.
- > The head of a school that is subject to Special Measures will have regular short-notice Ofsted inspections to monitor its improvement. Heads and Governors must take strong and decisive action in all the areas in which a school has been identified as underperforming and, to support this, HMI will write a report after each visit with agreed short term targets. If intervention is unsuccessful, then the leaders and teaching staff can lose their jobs, the school Governors can be replaced and ultimately, if the school fails to improve, it may be closed, or nowadays become part of an academy.
- > When schools are in Special Measures they usually receive focused support from the inspecting team that will visit termly and the Local Authority link adviser, who will have an important role in providing or organising appropriate training for staff, including the school leaders. With such support, progress and improvement usually follow. In this situation, as heads we should be proactive in ensuring that the Local Education Authority takes swift, supportive action and we should ensure that the monitoring of teaching and learning secures better results and improved classroom practice.



Find out more

Teach Primary readers can get 20% off Iain Erskine's book, *Brilliant Headteacher: a practical guide* that will help you take the next steps in your career with confidence (just visit pearson-books.com/readerofferteachprimary). The book explores what leading, organising and managing a school really involves. You can also get 20% off the other books in the Brilliant Teacher series by following the same link.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Iain Erskine is head of Fulbridge School and Children's Centre, a 700-place primary school with 0-2, 2-3 and 3-4 nursery classes. In 2005 the Ofsted team described Iain as an inspirational head. In 2009 his school became a National School of Creativity.

