



PRIVATE SECTOR INTERVENTION

- 1 Since 1997, the government has frequently looked to the private sector to 'turn round' schools and local education authorities in difficulties. Among LEAs, London boroughs and cities in the north and midlands have been subject to intervention by the private sector. Among schools, private sector intervention has most frequently been in those with the most challenging intakes of pupils.
- 2 In order to be in a position to tender for this work, private sector companies have to engage successful chief education officers and head teachers from the public sector, paying them handsome salaries. Private sector companies have employed a considerable number of successful LEA and school leaders, who are thus lost to the public sector. The expertise of these leaders has been developed almost exclusively in the public sector and it is an irony that the government appears to be wedded to private sector solutions, when the expertise for which the private sector is being given credit comes from people whose experience has been gained in the public sector.
- 3 SHA believes that LEA and school improvement could be carried out more effectively and efficiently within the public sector and offers the following model for a public sector solution.

LOCAL EDUCATION AUTHORITIES

- 4 Private sector involvement in LEAs deemed to be failing normally occurs as a result of government intervention, followed by a process of planning and tendering. There have been many examples of less dramatic intervention in LEAs and these provide the model for a public sector solution to the problem of LEAs that give an inadequate support service to schools and the public. In this model, a chief education officer from another LEA or a recently retired CEO, sometimes with a team of experienced and successful staff from other LEAs, is drafted into the troubled LEA for a limited period. When adequate support systems and management structures have been put in place, the team withdraws, leaving an improved situation for existing LEA staff or newly recruited officers to build on.
- 5 There has been a considerable number of successful interventions of this type, contrasting with the over-hyped and expensive involvement of private companies, whose success rate has not been good.
- 6 The private sector model is accompanied by a top-down target-setting regime, in which schools are set achievement targets that relate more to the company's threshold for success, imposed by the government, than to any realistic assessment of the potential of the pupils in the schools. For example, Education Bradford's targets were so unrealistic that it proved impossible to set meaningful school targets that could be aggregated to anything like the target set for Education Bradford.

- 7 Sometimes, however, the LEA problems lie more with the politicians than with the competence of the officers. In these cases, instead of privatisation, SHA recommends that a partnership board be formed from all the major stakeholders. As in Hackney, the Secretary of State would grant powers to the education board to administer the service.

SCHOOLS

- 8 SHA has long disputed the criteria on which schools are deemed to be successful or failing. We believe that the proportion of a cohort of pupils gaining five GCSE passes at grades C and above is not a sensible measure and we have argued elsewhere for improved measurement, based on value added and average points score. This remains our view, but it is not the purpose of this paper to reiterate these arguments.
- 9 Leaving aside the criteria, the question remains of how best to support schools in difficulties. It is SHA's view that the government has never found the right balance of pressure and support for schools, with much greater emphasis being placed in recent years on pressure and too little attention being given to the development of effective support mechanisms. This is particularly so in relation to schools with a significant number of challenging pupils.
- 10 LEAs have been given a role in school improvement, and particularly in supporting schools in difficulties, but not all LEAs are staffed with people able to carry out this role successfully in the secondary sector. It is not safe, therefore, to put in place a system that relies exclusively on the capacity of LEAs to provide the support for schools.
- 11 Some LEAs have been very effective in promoting the type of activity advocated in this paper. Bedfordshire School Improvement Partnership (BSIP) began in 2000 as a collaborative secondary schools project with a focus on action research into teaching and learning. The project has been extended and now includes lower, middle and upper schools. There is a county-wide structure of school-based facilitators and consultants. School-led school improvement groups (SIGs) usually provide the driving force for school improvement planning. Activities in this project include transforming learning (Hay/McBer), networked learning communities (National College for School Leadership), thinking skills, inductive teaching, accelerated learning, peer coaching, student voice and students as researchers.
- 12 *SHA believes that the expertise on which a school support system should be built lies primarily in the schools themselves.* First, there are many successful school leaders – heads and other members of school leadership teams – who can be identified to help schools in difficulties. Indeed, this has already occurred many times, usually at the instigation of the LEA (as in the Bedfordshire example above). Support has varied between an occasional visit by a head teacher of another school, a secondment of another head to the school for two days per week, and the drafting in of a team of several school leaders full time for six months or a year.
- 13 *This system is a proven success: far more schools have been brought out of special measures by leaders from public sector schools than from involvement of the private sector.*
- 14 Second, there are, in almost every school, areas of expertise that could be of benefit to other schools. In this context, it is interesting to note that teachers from beacon schools often find that they learn as much from a visit to a supposedly inferior school than the school learns

from them. A comprehensive, mutually supportive, system would bring lights in many schools out from under their bushels.

- 15 *SHA proposes the establishment of school improvement partnerships (SIPs)*, comprising around ten secondary schools, not necessarily in a geographical cluster and with partners chosen by the schools themselves. Such a proposal puts flesh on the bones of the government's recently expressed desire to promote greater collaboration between schools. The Leadership Incentive Grant (LIG) guidance proposed similar sharing of expertise between groups of schools. Many other forms of collaboration exist for mutual school improvement.
- 16 Under the SHA proposals, when a school requires help with a particular subject department, it will be able to draw on the expertise of a subject head from another school in the SIP group. A school wanting to review its homework policy, reporting procedures, behaviour management, lesson observation procedures or to develop its work in other policy areas will similarly be able to draw on expertise within the SIP group.
- 17 Schools needing to look outside their SIP for support will also be able to turn to 'leading edge' practice in other schools, identified by the DfES as sources of particular expertise.
- 18 The National College for School Leadership (NCSL) Consultant Leaders Programme has the potential to provide within the public sector the identification of the expertise necessary to take forward the SHA proposals. Most groups of about ten secondary schools would, in time, have at least one consultant leader among their number. Other consultant leaders are recently retired heads, who would have an important role to play, both in SIP groups without a consultant leader and for specific projects where their expertise would be particularly useful.
- 19 For schools in difficult situations, the SHA paper *Towards Intelligent Accountability for Schools* (2003) put the case for a different model of school inspection and support. It stated:

Schools in challenging circumstances are more likely than schools in more advantaged neighbourhoods to be criticised for their performance. Depending on the approach of the individual inspector, these schools are put under immense pressure by the current system. Instead of frequent inspections, schools under special measures or in one of the other categories of "failure" should have an agreed programme of external support, with clear roles for external consultants to work with the head teacher on the action plan and the meeting of objectives. The external consultants would report on progress, thus reducing the need for such frequent HMI visits.

- 20 Thus, when a school is in major difficulties (for example, being placed in special measures by Ofsted), the head and governors would look first to their own SIP for a consultant leader to be attached to the school to support it through the process of recovery. If no suitable consultant leader is available within the group for the amount of time required (which could be as much as a full time secondment for a year), the school would look elsewhere for a consultant leader with the right expertise. The consultant leader may, in some cases, need to be supported by a team with the right blend of expertise.

- 21 The model proposed in this paper would fit well with the single line of reporting for head teachers and the proposals for a more intelligent accountability structure outlined in the speech on *Building a new relationship with schools*, made by David Miliband to the North of England Education Conference on 8 January 2004.
- 22 Clearly it is easier for partnerships to be effective in developmental work in schools that are making good progress than in a situation where progress is dependent on difficult personnel decisions being made by the governors or the head. As outlined in paragraph 20 above, external input is often required in these circumstances. This may amount to considerably more than a single consultant leader and would require supplementary resourcing. However, this is likely to be a good deal less expensive than the cost of many of the current models for supporting schools in difficulties.
- 23 Among many examples that could be cited, a working example of the proposals in this paper occurred in the early 1990s when, after incorporation of colleges, the ten sixth form colleges in Yorkshire formed an improvement partnership. There was a strong emphasis on professional development and expertise was shared between institutions, which drew on each other's ideas and successes. The scheme extended into corporate risk management and quality assurance, with a ready source of external validation. College principals regarded the scheme as both beneficial and cost-effective. In the same way, there is no reason why schools should not now take the initiative and form their own SIPs, and many have already done so.
- 24 Collaboration costs money. This is recognised in the Leadership Incentive Grant, which aims to promote greater collaboration between schools and which provides a very substantial sum to a limited number of secondary schools. The collaborative work of SIPs would need to be supported by additional funding, for which there should be shared responsibility between the schools in the SIP.
- 25 SHA believes that the proposals in this paper represent a sensible use of public sector expertise and a logical development from many existing practices.