

# Network-based Reform: adaptive challenges facing the English education system

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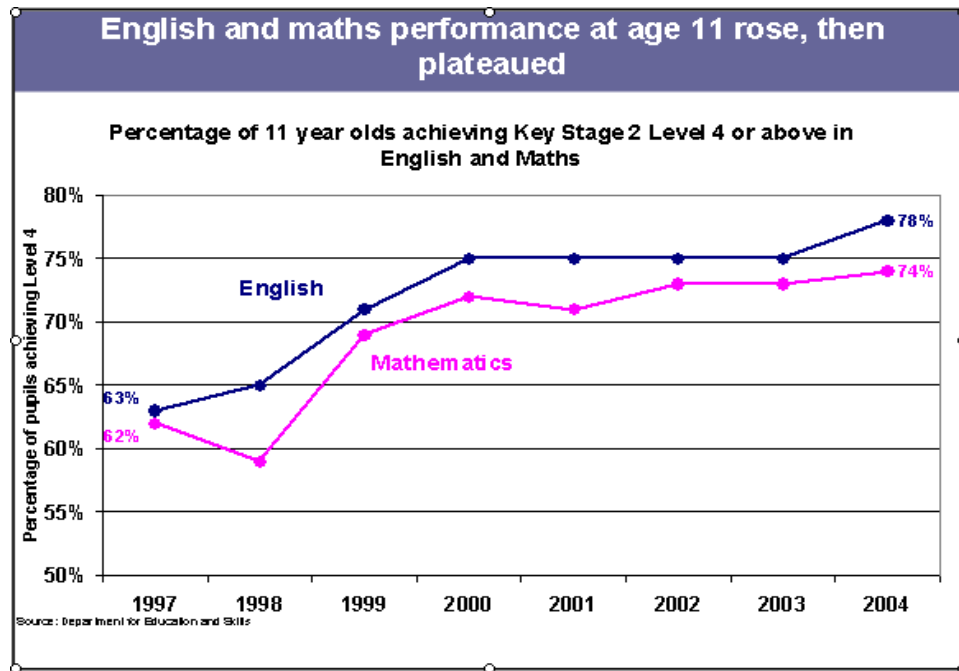
This paper creates an overview and a context for the symposium *Network Solutions to Adaptive Challenges*. It will review the current data on student performance in the English system, and explore how the design for system reform has been adapted to address the challenges which those data present, taken together with intelligence from other sources such as evaluations. A new element in the design is the incorporation of systemic school-to-school collaboration. From a number of experimental/marginal/additional programmes (Networked Learning Communities, Excellence in Cities), there is a move to 'scale up' to much greater network coverage. However, questions are raised about whether enough is known about the conditions for success of such expansion; how (and how soon) success should be judged; and the place of research in contributing to the process.

## Section 1: The story so far: data on outcomes in the English education system

The reforming zeal of the Labour government elected in 1997 was powered from many sources, including: emergence from the impotence of opposition; a powerful commitment to a more equitable society, a strong awareness of the influence of education on life chances. The reform programme which emerged disappointed many of the party's supporters, however. Whilst the increased investment was widely welcomed, not all changes which previous Conservative Governments had introduced were reversed. And it is fair to say that the new administration's attention to data on student outcomes disconcerted many. It seems strange to say it now, but close attention to outcomes for students had not been the English habit. The data on progress – or lack of it – in national literacy levels led, as is well known, to the National Literacy (and then Numeracy) Strategy, adopting system-wide processes for change and improvement which had never been attempted previously on such a scale. The focus in this paper is on how the initial reform design has evolved, in part as a response to the trajectory of progress in improving outcomes, as well as to improved understanding of what constitutes critical success factors for large scale, sustained, change management. First, what are the results of the English system in recent years?

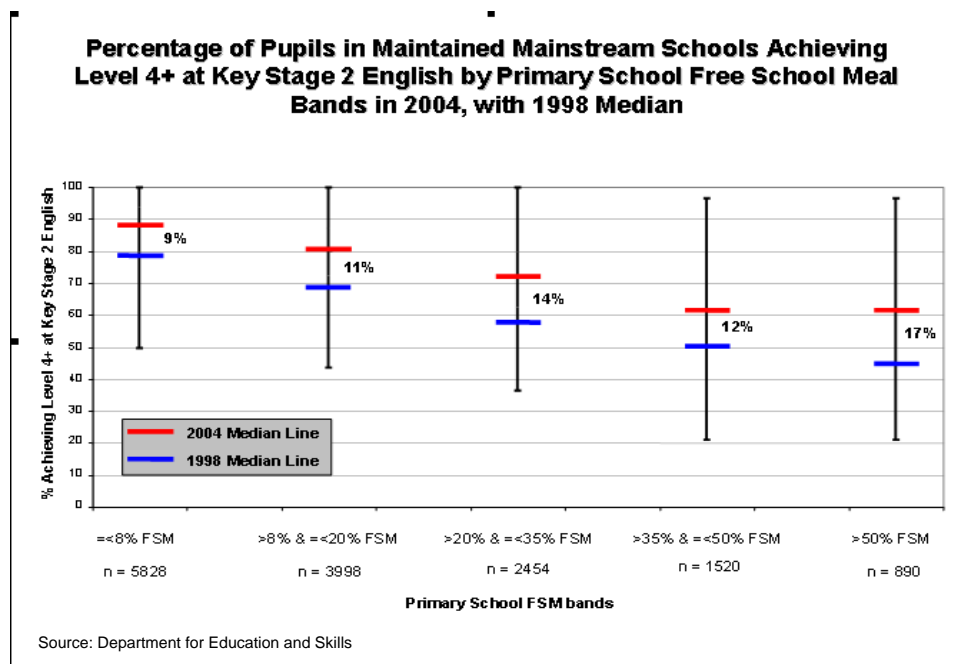
At age 11, performance in literacy and numeracy improved rapidly from 1997 to 2000, and then plateaued. There has been a subsequent modest rise. (Figure 1)

Figure 1



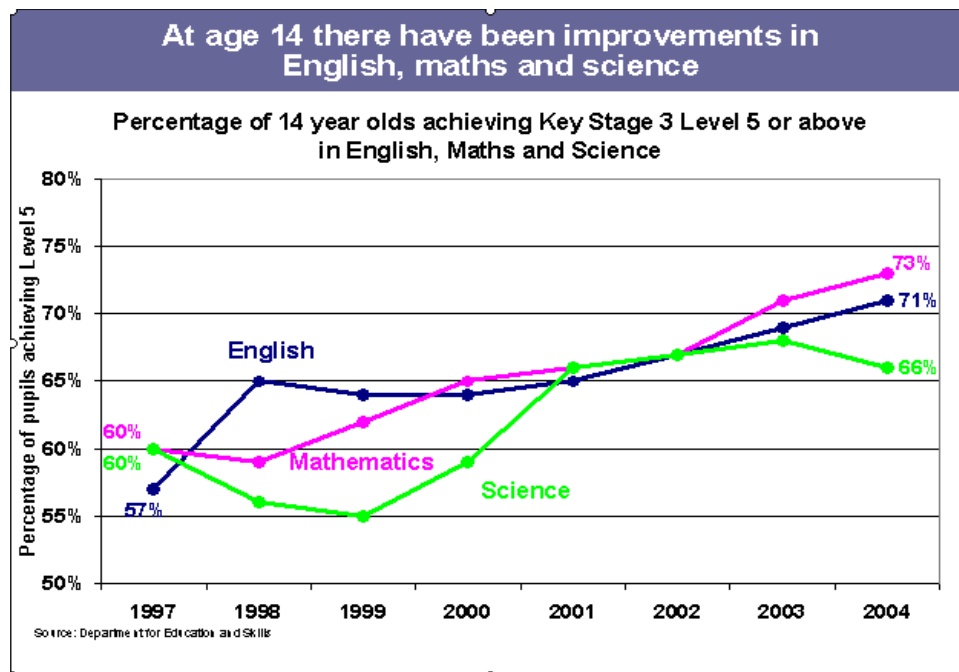
There is evidence moreover that, at the primary stage, improvements have been greatest amongst lower socio-economic groups (as measured by eligibility for free school meals). (Figure 2)

Figure 2



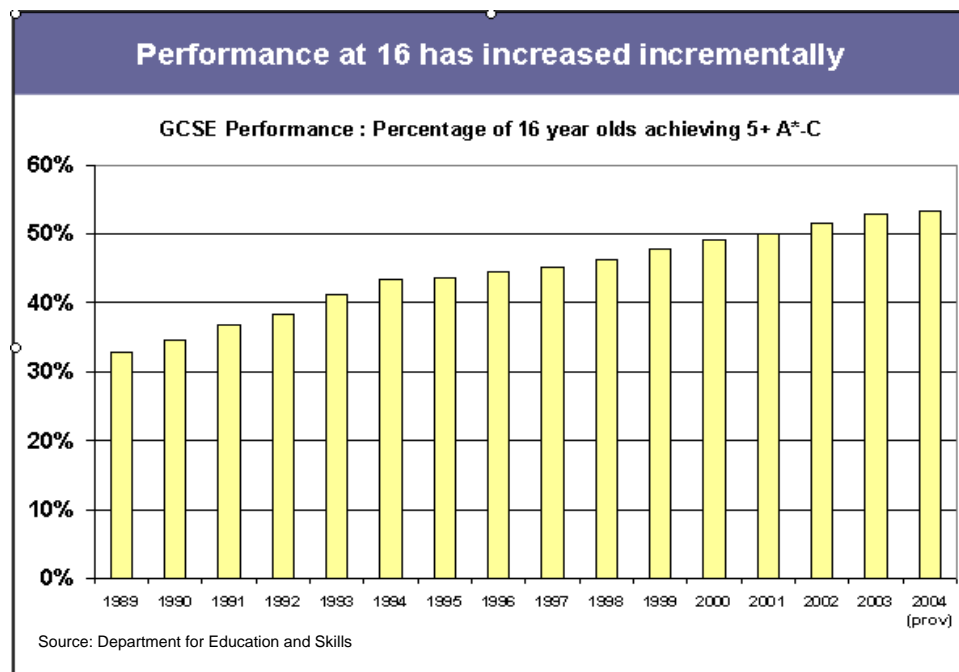
At age 14 the improvements in English and Maths have been steady, uneven in Science.  
(Figure 3)

Figure 3



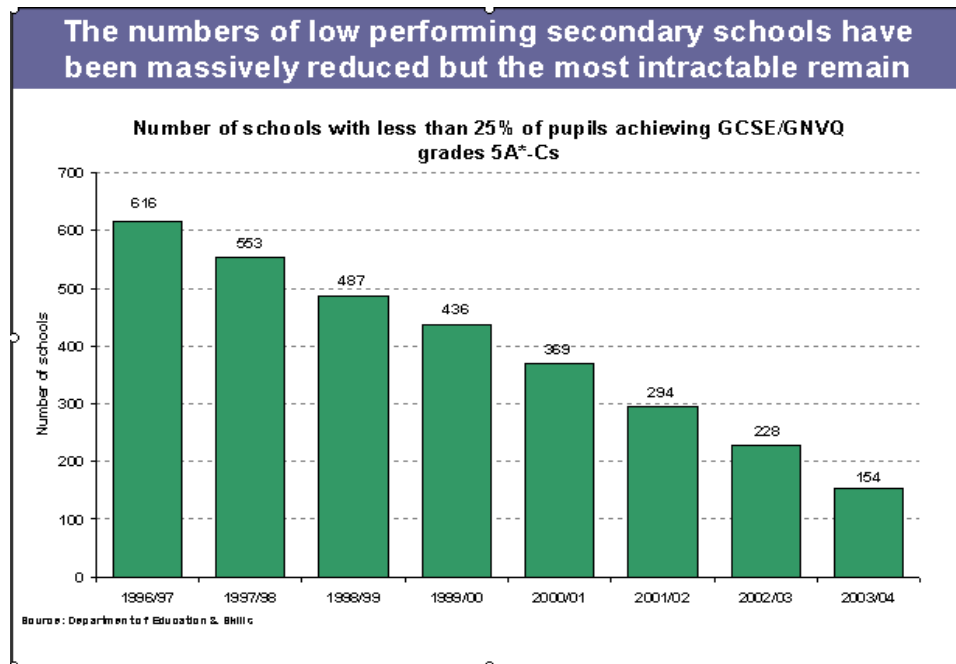
At age 16 the steady incremental progress from 1989 does not appear to have been markedly improved by the post-97 reforms. (Figure 4)

Figure 4



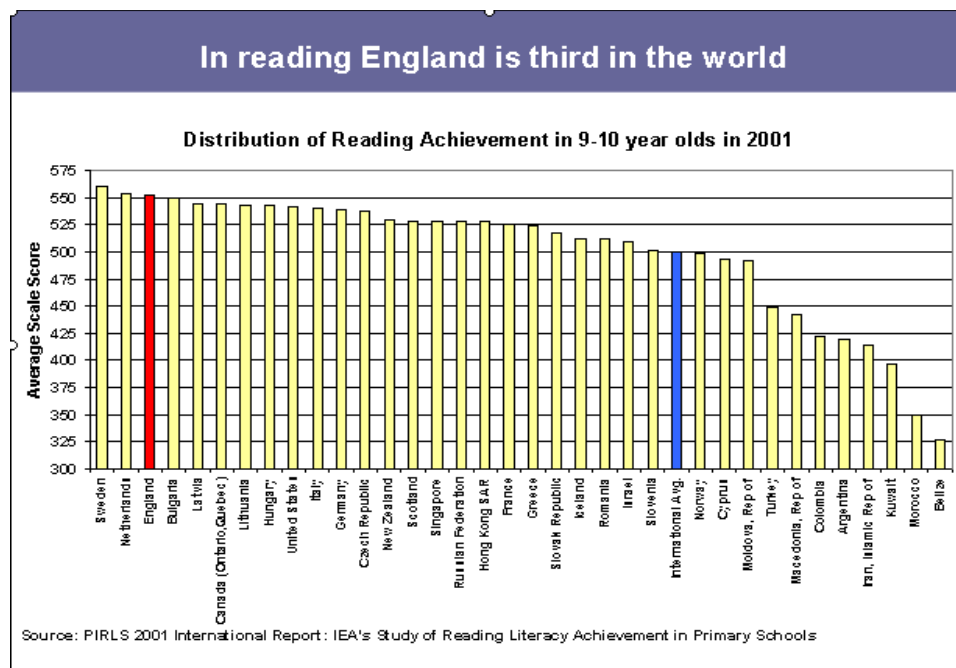
But the chances of a student attending a seriously underperforming school have reduced significantly. (Figure 5)

Figure 5



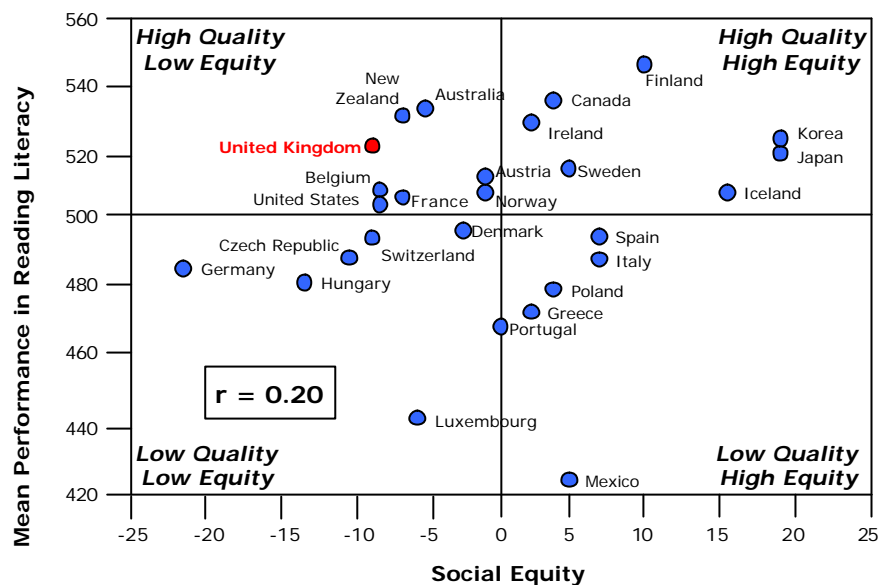
However, the outcomes of internal testing systems need to be set against the outcomes of international comparisons, to ensure that some form of objective benchmarking can be made. These data suggest the English system was amongst the fastest improving in the world. The *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study* (PIRLS) shows that, from a middling position in the '90s, England moved to being ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> in the world in 2001. (Figure 6)

Figure 6



In the secondary sector, again, there is less rapid improvement. Recent data from the *Trends in International Maths and Science Study* (TIMSS) suggest that improvement in England is no faster than elsewhere. Moreover, despite the data in figure x above, OECD data suggest that whilst England's education system is making strides in terms of excellence, much remains to be done in terms of addressing the issue of equity. (Figure 7)

Figure 7



Source: OECD (2001)

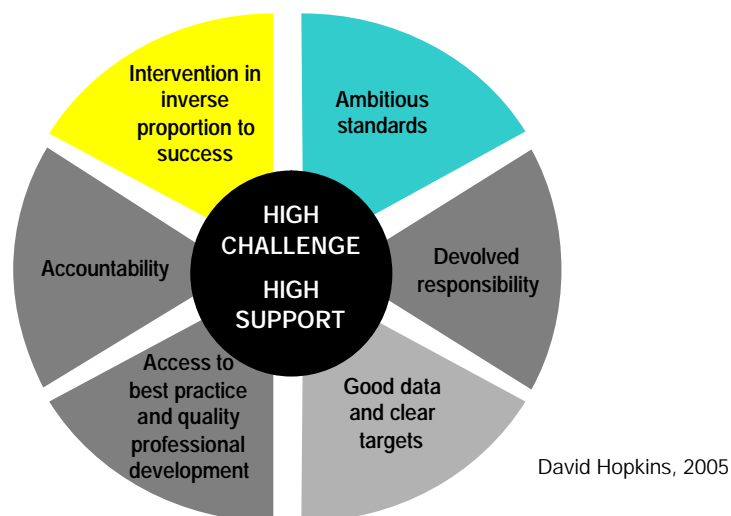
In summary, these data show a measure of short-term success in addressing deep-seated and long-standing problems within English education. However, there has been no transformation: in secondary, steady incremental improvement; and in primary, apparent step-change followed by plateau. It could be argued that this is the fate of every large scale reform initiative. However, policy makers in England remain committed to vigorous pursuit of more profound and longer-lasting change. The next section explores the shifts in the design of the reform strategy in response to this adaptive challenge; and in particular the place of collaboration between schools (and other agencies) in the evolving design.

## Section 2: The evolution of the reform design, and the place of collaboration

In a recent paper<sup>i</sup> one of the key architects of the reform strategy in England, Michael Barber, describes the early phases of it as 'ruthlessly prescriptive': justified, in his view, because only through such central direction could significant system-wide progress be made at sufficient speed. When in government as, first, head of the newly established Standards and Effectiveness Unit, Barber argued consistently that the government could only justify (and the electorate would only tolerate) significantly increased spending on education if palpable improvements in performance were demonstrable. The 'first phase' strategy has been captured as follows (Figure 8):

Figure 8

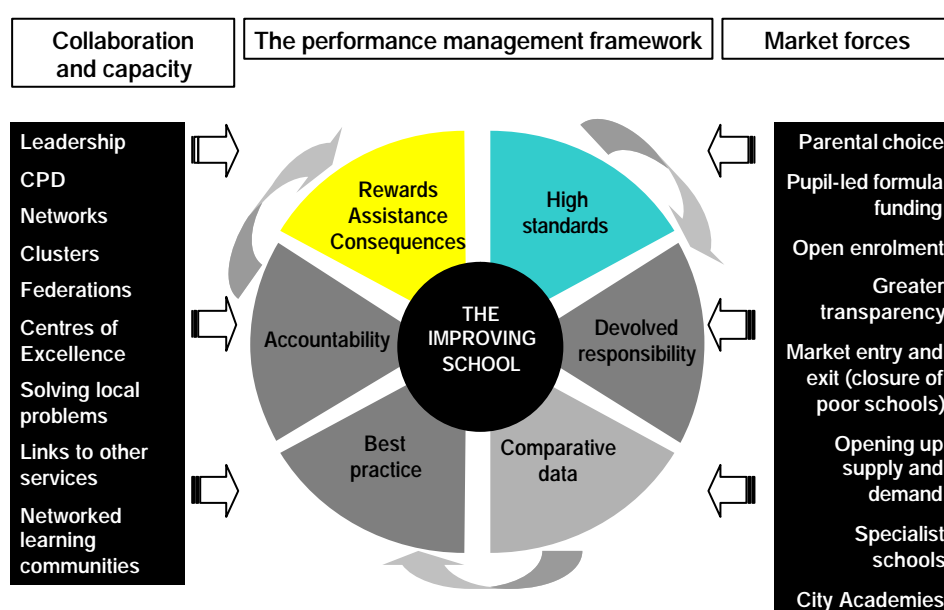
### 1st phase of reform



This encompasses the prescriptive supply-side approach: the National Curriculum, externally set targets, detailed teaching programmes (through the primary and KS3 strategies); national, external, high-stakes inspection; etc. This was standards-based reform.

However, following the second Labour election victory in 2001, a number of government documents<sup>ii</sup> signalled adaptations to the above. From a recognition of the importance of a broad and balanced curriculum, to a lighter-touch inspection system with an important role for self evaluation, significant modulations of the earlier approach are in train. In addition to changes to the framework captured above, two additional levers are being brought to bear on the system. Arguably, they are in some tension, although Barber sees them as working in concert. (Figure 9)

Figure 9



The two new levers are *collaboration and capacity* and *market forces* (or the demand side). Arguments for the former have been made from the earliest stages of the reform programme: partly from an ideological standpoint, from critics who despised the element of competition between schools which was initially introduced by the Tories in the '80s, and which New Labour did little to reduce. More tellingly, commentators such as the government-appointed evaluators of the National Literacy Strategy (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education) observed that whilst early gains were to be had by means of a culture of compliance, deepening and maintaining them entailed building teachers' own capacity and ownership of the means to solve problems and improve practice. And key to that objective was strengthening leadership within schools and collaboration between them.

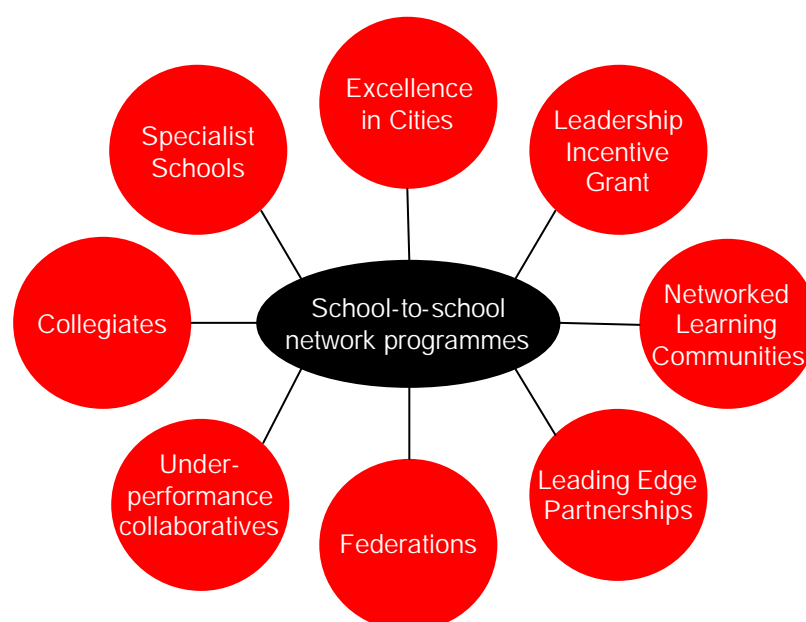
However at the same time, the most recent policy document (*The DfES 5 year Strategy 2004*) lays heavy stress on the opening up of the supply side, building on the principle of *diversity* which the introduction of specialist secondary schools presaged. Inviting new providers to enter the market where it is judged that there is a scarcity of good school places (or enabling good schools to expand) is seen as extending the kind of choice which middle class parents have always enjoyed, to the less privileged. A newly appointed Secretary of State, in her first public speech, stressed her determination to see more 'parent power', to a less than enthusiastic response from her audience, the Secondary Headteachers Association<sup>iii</sup>.

The focus of this paper, however, is the entry of the concept and practice of collaboration between schools into the approved pantheon of elements of school reform: in balance – or in tension, depending on your viewpoint – with other improvement levers. Of course, there is already a range of networking programmes: we are now seeing moves to bring them to scale.

### Section 3: 'Scaling Up'? Network Expansion in an Ambivalent Climate

2005 in England will see the implementation of 2 programmes which, taken together with the expansion of the *Leading Edge Partnership Programme*, have the potential to bring networking between schools to scale. These are *Primary Strategy Learning Networks*<sup>iv</sup> and *Education Improvement Partnerships*<sup>v</sup>. These initiatives arise within a networking landscape which is at best confusing. (Figure 10)

Figure 10



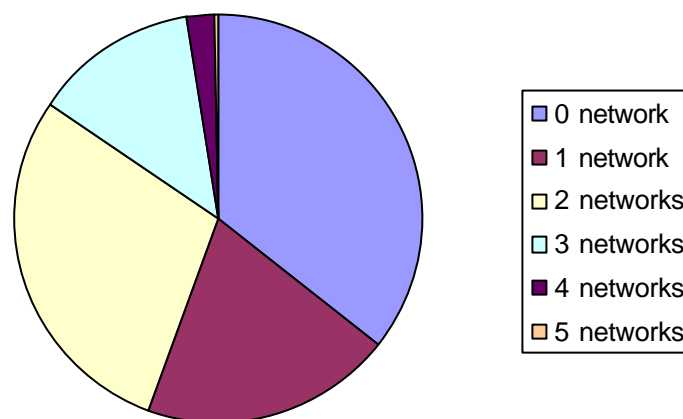
The above programmes belong to a broad family of collaboration: but there are significant differences between them, in terms of features such as:

- voluntary/prescribed;
- equal/unequal (in status, effectiveness, power)
- cross- or single- phase
- geographically proximate or distributed

We do not have good data about the level of engagement of schools in the primary sector in such programmes. However, in secondary, we know that on average, schools are involved in 2 such initiatives (some listing many more in their portfolio). (Figure 11)

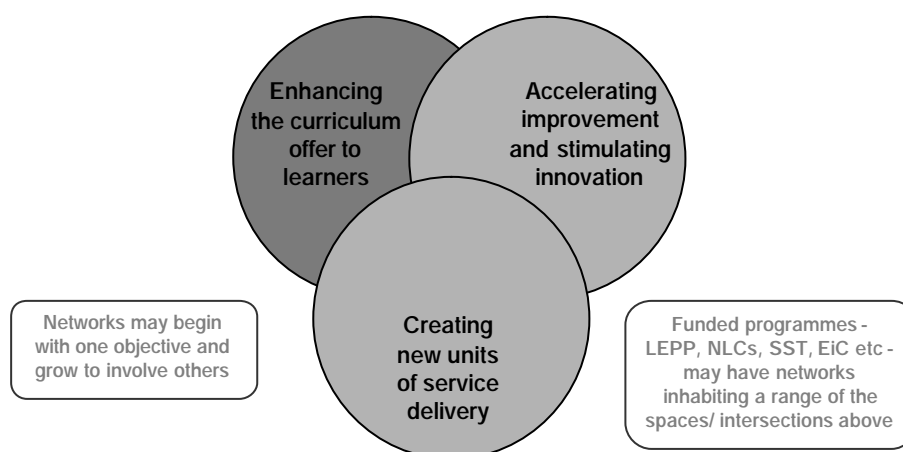
Figure 11

### Secondary school participation in network programmes



Schools will have had many reasons for doing so. In some cases the financial incentive was serious. From our work with schools, we suggest that an illuminating way of understanding this activity is by means of the *purposes* of the schools. (Figure 12)

Figure 12





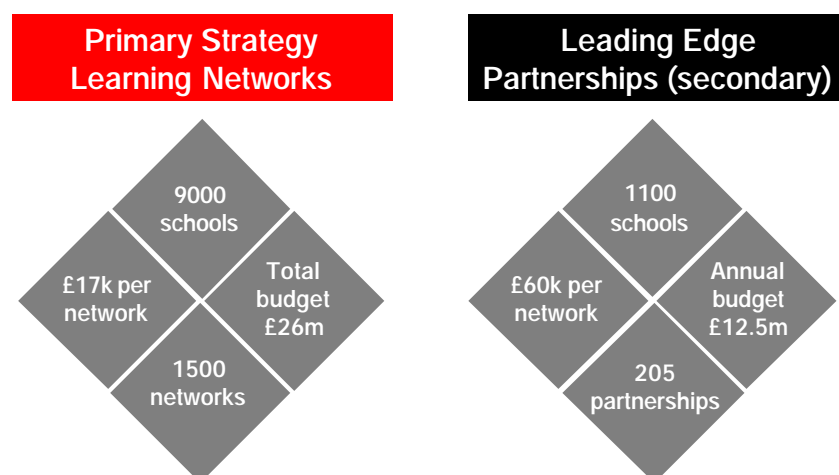
The above figure seeks to capture the insight that networks may begin with one objective (perhaps because of the availability of funding for membership) but may grow to involve others over time – or indeed move into another space altogether. Such, we learn from network theory, is the fluid nature of networks. Programmes such as Networked Learning Communities may have networks inhabiting a range of the spaces above (though their primary purpose, given the programme design, will have been to accelerate improvement and innovation). A potentially important development will be the expansion of those categories of networks whose primary purpose is to create *new units for service delivery*. In part, this is in response to The Children Act 2004, the fundamental proposition of which was that, in order to deliver on *all* the outcomes we desire for our children (including their safety and well-being), it is imperative that the services concerned with these outcomes work in much more integrated ways. The term ‘LEA’ will soon disappear in England, to be replaced by ‘Children’s Services Authorities’ (CSAs), reflecting their broader brief and professional base. The implications for schools are becoming clear: more extended ‘full service’ schools; more, and deeper, multi-disciplinary working; schools working together and in partnership with other types of agency to create *new units for service delivery*.

In one sense, therefore, irrespective of the narratives of standards-based reform designers, networking is flourishing. The evidence of impact on standards in England it is yielding thus far is favourable, but not yet powerful. What we have<sup>vi</sup> suggests some modest gains (in terms of student performance) in a number of collaborative programmes, with one or two interesting pointers.

More broadly, the published international evidence base does attest levels of improvement in attainment and achievement: but is more convincing when it turns to the mediating outcomes/variables, such as teachers’ practices, attitudes, knowledge, relationships.<sup>vii</sup> There are no killer facts though. Interestingly, the shift ‘to scale’ is taking place in advance of very much categorical evidence about impact on student outcomes. But so is the introduction of other levers like the freeing up of the supply side.

2005 will see a step-change in the extent of active, learning-focused collaboration between schools in England. The Networked Learning Communities programme was formerly the largest educational networking programme in the world with 1533 schools in 135 networks. By September we will have –

Figure 13



Primary Strategy Learning Networks will begin to fulfil the promise in *Excellence and Enjoyment* that every primary school would have the opportunity to join a learning-focused network. Whilst embedded in the framework and structures of the Primary National Strategy, they have been developed with close reference to other programmes: for example, the planning materials which schools are required to use have been developed by the Networked Learning Group of NCSL. The Leading Edge Partnership Programme (comprising collaboration between groups of secondary schools clustering around those assessed as 'leading' in terms, not only of their high standards, but also in terms of their innovativeness and collaborative capacity) has a strong focus on student data. Finally, in terms of potential for scale-up, the concept of Education Improvement Partnerships (EIPs) was launched via a DfES prospectus<sup>viii</sup> in March 2005 (just before the General Election was called). None yet exist, and the level of interest from schools can only be guessed at, but this could be the vehicle through which school networks move towards assuming a wider variety of roles and functions (including some of those currently fulfilled by Local Authorities): in terms of figure 12 above, *creating new units of service delivery*.

However, the concept – beloved of school reformers – of moving to scale is not, or should not be all about expanding numbers. Cynthia Coburn, in her paper on *Rethinking Scale*<sup>ix</sup> points out that the concept of scale – if it is to help us realise the potential of pockets of success into the wider system – must include, in addition to *spread* –

- Depth
- Sustainability, and
- Shift in ownership.

This redirects our attention to the manner in which these expansions are being introduced. The programmes listed are, in various ways, attending to these dimensions – but with differing degrees of emphasis. The pluralism in programmes arises, I believe, from 2 sources. First the differing *purposes* of school to school networks would make it likely that depth, sustainability and ownership would have differing meanings in differing contexts. Secondly, even within the specific domain of learning-focused networks, there is insufficient evidence which is authoritative enough to indicate effective models. Commenting on the situation, Barber remarks:

*The system is still learning how best to promote collaboration (much of what currently goes under the name is too loose to be effective) but we are getting better at it and have learnt significantly from the experience of our parallel health reforms.*

We can and are learning about effective collaboration from within the education system also. But we need to be smarter about the kinds of evaluation and research that will make a difference to the direction of policy and its practical implementation.

What should the contribution of the research community be? We really need:

- good evidence, intelligently interpreted, on the impact on student outcomes of forms of collaborative practice
- a confident understanding of the necessary and sufficient conditions for effective collaborative practice;

- and we need it in real time.

The evidence need not, perhaps could not, be causal; but at present we have so little. Some relationship, though, between that which can be identified as effective collaborative practice

and the design features of programmes is urgently overdue if the collaboration dimension is to retain a place within reform strategies, and demonstrate its value unambiguously. There remains considerable scope for a more influential contribution from the research community. The evaluation of the NLC programme by OISE, about to commence its third phase and complete by December 2005, may be an exemplary addition.

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<sup>i</sup> *Journeys of Discovery: the search for success by design* Barber, M. (2005) Keynote to National Center on Education and the Economy

<sup>ii</sup> *Schools Achieving Success* (2002); *Towards a Specialist System* (2003); *Excellence and Enjoyment* (2003); *DfES Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners* (2004)

<sup>iii</sup> 'Kelly Loses Her Heads' in The Times Educational Supplement, March 11th 2005

<sup>iv</sup> For details on the Primary Strategy Learning Networks see

[http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primary/publications/learning\\_networks/1095729/pns\\_learningnetworks086904.pdf](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primary/publications/learning_networks/1095729/pns_learningnetworks086904.pdf)

<sup>v</sup> For the EiP prospectus see <http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/sie/si/educationimprovementpartnerships>

<sup>vi</sup> Data produced by DfES Analytical Services

<sup>vii</sup> *The Existing Knowledge Base Around Networking and Collaboration: A brief review of the literature.* Research Team NLG, National College for School Leadership; commissioned by the Innovation Unit 2005  
www

<sup>viii</sup> EiP prospectus, *ibid*

<sup>ix</sup> *Rethinking Scale: Moving beyond numbers to deep and lasting change* Coburn, C., (2003) Educational Researcher Vol 32, No 6, pp3-12.