

THE DIFFERENTIAL IMPROVEMENT OF SCHOOLS CAUSING CONCERN IN ENGLAND

*Peter Matthews and Pam Sammons**

1. INTRODUCTION

Schools causing concern in England are identified systematically through external inspection. The subsequent changes in the performance of most of these schools illuminate issues of school effectiveness and improvement. For over ten years, the relative effectiveness of all schools in England has been assessed and reported publicly (see www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications). This has been achieved through periodic inspections (external evaluations), now in their third cycle, and the annual publication of school performance data, particularly test and examination results. The legislation¹ that provided for regular inspection of schools and reporting of results reflected both a political desire to give parents greater information on which to exercise school choice, and the perceived need for greater accountability of schools that are largely autonomous as a result of delegated financial management.

When the new national inspection system was established in 1992, government hoped that the diagnosis provided by inspection, coupled with greater accountability and the mobilisation of informed parental interest, would promote school improvement. This was reflected in the strap-line of the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), *'Improvement through Inspection'*. This expectation has recently been formalised in the government's policy for inspectorates², which states that 'public service inspections should pursue the purpose of improvement.' The impact of Ofsted on all the different sectors it inspects has been evaluated recently³.

Contracted-out teams of private inspectors, which undertake the majority of school inspections in England, have a specific duty to consider whether or not a school is a cause for concern. Three categories of concern are defined by regulation: i. schools which fail to provide an adequate education for their pupils and thus require special measures; ii. schools in which education is generally satisfactory but which have one or more serious weaknesses, and iii. 'underachieving schools'. The latter include, for example, schools whose results are not as high as would be expected from the social backgrounds or prior attainment of their pupils. Where a school is found to require special measures, the judgement is corroborated by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector (HMCI) on the basis of scrutiny of the inspection evidence or, if the school wishes, a further visit, conducted by Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI). This mechanism adds to the reliability of the special measures designation.

* The authors are grateful for the evidence and data provided by Ofsted and the contributions of Andy Reid, Dr Alan Sykes and Alison Edwards. Full details of the effects summarised in this article have been submitted to The London Review of Education

¹ *Education (Schools) Act 1992* (1992), Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, superseded by the 1996 School Inspections Act

² *Inspecting for Improvement* (2003), Office for Public Service Reform, The Stationery Office, London.

³ Matthews P. and Sammons P., (2004), *Improvement through Inspection*, The Office for Standards in Education and the Institute of Education, University of London (also on www.ofsted.gov.uk)

We have considered the relative improvement of schools in the two main categories of schools that cause concern (ineffective schools): special measures and serious weaknesses. Evidence suggests that schools in special measures demonstrate greater capacity to improve and to sustain improvement than in schools whose performance is not of quite so much concern. We explore the possible reasons for this effect and argue for greater support, monitoring and stimulation of schools that make ineffective use of critical analysis, whether this stems from inspection or self-evaluation, and lack the drive for self-improvement.

2. THE IDENTIFICATION OF INEFFECTIVE SCHOOLS

All schools in England experience external evaluation, termed ‘section 10 inspections’⁴ at least once every six years. The inspection of school effectiveness in England requires, by law, reporting on: ‘the quality of education provided at the school’ (especially teaching and learning, the curriculum, care and guidance, parental links and so on); ‘the standards achieved by pupils at the school’, the school’s ‘leadership and management’, and the personal – that is to say spiritual, moral, social and cultural – development of pupils at the school. These broad characteristics are interpreted by the criteria in a succession of inspection frameworks, the latest of which was introduced from September 2003⁵.

The frameworks were derived from previous inspection practice and informed by school effectiveness research, particularly a research review conducted by Sammons *et al*⁶, which grouped the main characteristics of effective schools. A review of studies of the characteristics of *ineffective* schools highlights four aspects which are recognisably the opposite of effectiveness⁷:

- Lack of vision
- Unfocussed leadership
- Dysfunctional staff relationships
- Ineffective classroom practices

Schools causing concern often show weaknesses such as those listed above that inhibit the educational progress of their pupils. Inadequacies may be direct, such as much teaching that is ineffective teaching, or indirect, such as weaknesses in leadership or quality assurance. In its 2003 guidance for inspectors⁸, Ofsted described schools that ‘are failing to provide a satisfactory education and thus require special measures’ as being likely to have two or more of the following major weaknesses:

- Significant underachievement by a large proportion of pupils or groups of pupils
- Unsatisfactory or poor teaching overall or in specific stages
- Ineffective leadership or management

⁴ School Inspections Act (1996), The Stationery Office, London.

⁵ Ofsted (2003a), *Inspecting Schools: the framework*, Office for Standards in Education, London.

⁶ Sammons P., Hillman J and Mortimore P., (1995), *Key characteristics of effective schools*, Ofsted and the Institute of Education, University of London

⁷ Stoll and Fink (1996)

⁸ Ofsted (2003), *Inspecting Schools: Handbook for inspecting secondary schools* (2003).

- A breakdown of discipline or a situation in which pupils are at physical or emotional at risk from other pupils or adults
- Significant levels of racial harassment

Ofsted specifies other weaknesses that are likely to be present in such schools, including: the poor attendance of pupils; failure to implement the national curriculum; inefficient use of resources; an unsatisfactory ethos; high levels of exclusions; low morale among staff; lack of confidence in the headteacher, and poor provision for pupils' development. Special measures are also justified if schools are considered *likely to fail* to provide an acceptable standard of education owing to: lack of improvement since being judged previously to have serious weaknesses; rapid deterioration in important areas such as the quality of teaching or standards achieved by pupils, and the inability of leaders and managers to check decline.

These criteria have grown organically, influenced not only by research, but also by inspection evidence and the experience of those HMI who have monitored over 2000 ineffective schools in the period 1993 to 2003. At the end of an inspection, inspectors make a judgement about whether a school falls into one of the categories of schools causing concern. The categories are that the school:

- is failing, or likely to fail, to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and thus requires **special measures**
- provides an acceptable standard of education, but has **serious weaknesses** in one or more areas of its work
- does not require special measures or have serious weaknesses, but is **underachieving**.

At the end of 2002/2003, the numbers of schools in these categories were as shown below.

Table 1. Numbers of schools in different categories of schools causing concern in July 2003

	Primary	Secondary	Special	PRU*	Total
Special measures	185 (1.0%)	58 (1.7%)	25 (2.2%)	14 (4.5%)	282 (1.2%)
Inadequate sixth form	-	10 (0.6%)	-	-	10 (0.6%)
Serious weaknesses	278 (1.5%)	73 (2.1%)	16 (1.4%)	8 (2.6%)	375 (1.6%)
Underachieving	79 (0.4%)	14 (0.4%)	-	-	93 (0.4%)

* Pupil referral units (PRU) make educational provision for disruptive pupils.

Evaluation of the impact of inspection supports the findings of earlier research that inspection has played an important role as a catalyst for change and improvement during the period 1993-2003, particularly for weaker schools.⁹ Over 1 million students were estimated to have benefited from improvements in the quality of education provided by schools which moved out of special measures and substantially larger numbers from improvements in schools in serious weaknesses. Table 2 gives details of the numbers of schools identified as requiring special measures over a 10- year period. Overall more than 85 per cent improved, with improvement being more common for primary schools (nearly 90%) but less common for Pupil Referral Units (PRUs).

⁹ See reference 6

Table 2. Outcomes of ‘Special Measures’ (SM) over the 10 years to 2003

	Primary		Special		Secondary		PRUS		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Removed from SM	799	89.6	114	77.0	167	76.6	18	60.0	1098	85.3
Closed	93	10.4	34	23.0	51	23.4	12	40.0	190	14.6
Total	892		148		218		30		1288	

These outcomes should be viewed in the context of schools of all degrees of effectiveness. Evidence from successive inspections indicates that the majority of schools (two-thirds) inspected in 2002/03 were judged to have made ‘good’ or ‘excellent/very good’ improvement since their previous inspection, as can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Judgements of extent of Improvement of 3041 primary and 551 secondary schools since their last

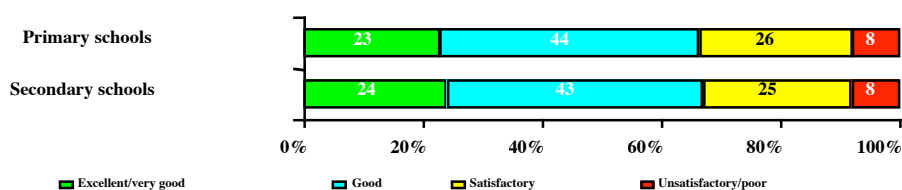
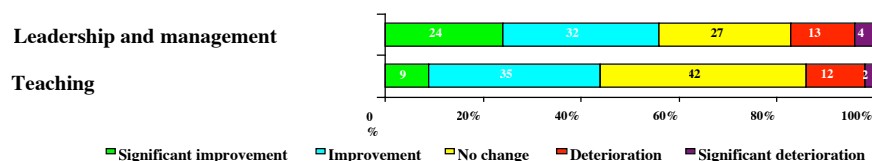


Figure 2 again using data for 2002/03, shows that overall greater improvement was identified for schools’ leadership and management than for teaching.

Figure 2. Primary schools: change of inspection judgements since previous inspection (percentage of 3041 schools)



The evaluation of Ofsted’s impact suggests that there differential effectiveness in schools’ responses to inspection, with the most and least effective schools making best use of the external evaluation provided. Against this background, we shall look more closely at the improvement of special measures (SM) schools, and the most similar group of schools that are not in special measures: those having serious weaknesses (SW).

3. THE CONSEQUENCES OF SPECIAL MEASURES

A 'special measures' decision normally follows a long period of decline. The judgement that a school requires special measures, which is corroborated by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector, can be devastating to a school and have consequences such as key staff leaving, parents considering the removal of their children and negative publicity in local newspapers. The judgement, however, also triggers a range of actions designed to help the school to become effective. The school has to produce an action plan for approval by the Secretary of State for Education and Skills. The school also becomes eligible for extra school improvement grant.

The two main agents to have an ongoing link with special measures schools are Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI), who are civil servants, and staff of the local education authority (LEA) (see figure 1). HMI visit and monitor all special measures schools, on average three times a year, to support the school and evaluate its progress. The visits of HMI often provide considerable assistance to the school as it works to become more effective. A school is expected to be ready to emerge from special measures status within two years, and, in practice, most achieve this earlier. The school is brought out of special measures by a small HMI -led inspection and then is re-inspected by a section 10 inspection two years after coming out. Perhaps rather surprisingly given their history, a small number of schools are found to have improved so much that they are subsequently listed in HMCI's annual report as 'very good and improving schools.'

Many of the schools in special measures also receive significant help from school improvement staff in their local education authority although HMCI reports that '*advice and intervention was sometimes too little and too late.*'¹⁰ The arrangements in many local authorities for supporting and improving ineffective schools have improved considerably since the first cycle of inspections of LEAs.

In 2002/03, 108 schools (2.8% of all the schools inspected that year) were made subject to special measures. A further 52 schools required special measures as a result of section 3 inspections led by Her Majesty's Inspectors. Thirty-eight of these schools already had serious weaknesses (34) or were underachieving schools (4); the rest were secondary schools known to be facing challenging circumstances. During the 2002/03 year, 130 schools were removed from special measures, when HMI-led inspections (point C in Figure 1) decided that they were providing an adequate education.

In 2002/03, the number of schools designated as having serious weaknesses was 163 (4% of all schools inspected). Over the year, 43 schools that had been designated previously to have serious weaknesses had not improved sufficiently, and required special measures. During the same year, 40 schools were identified as underachieving.

The progress of schools in all these categories is monitored both by the LEAs, and by HMI, who focus particularly on special measures schools, but monitor serious weakness schools at less frequent intervals. HMI removed 130 schools from special measures during the year, *identifying improvements in their leadership as the main factor contributing to improvement*. All but 34 of the 289 schools having serious weaknesses visited by inspectors were considered to be making sufficient progress as a result of taking action to raise standards. Of the 58 underachieving schools visited in 2002/03, 46 had made at least satisfactory progress.

¹⁰ Ofsted (2004), *HMCI's Annual Report for 2002/03*

4. THE INVERSE DIFFERENTIAL IMPROVEMENT OF LESS EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS

When examining the impact of Ofsted, Matthews and Sammons (2004) found that secondary schools that had been in special measures were more likely to sustain their improvement than the slightly less ineffective group of schools classified as having serious weaknesses. This conclusion was based on several complementary sets of evidence, one of which is trends in the examination results of secondary schools (Table 3).

Table 3. Change in KS4 results of all secondary schools inspected in the 2003/2004 school year whose previous s10 inspection identified serious weaknesses or the need for special measures

Designation at previous inspection	Special measures (22 schools)		Serious weaknesses (39 schools)	
	Number	%	Number	%
Improved results	19	86%	27	69%
Worse results	3	14%	11	28%
No change	0	0%	1	3%

We can take the analysis further by examining the relative regression of schools that have been in, and subsequently left, the serious weakness or special measures categories (Table 4).

Table 4. Number of schools with serious weakness that re-entered serious weakness or special measures categories*

Status	Number	Number of schools placed in SW overall (1997-2004)
Serious weakness to serious weakness	74	1,916
Serious weakness to special measures	288	1,916

*Schools that left and re-entered the same day or within days of the original identification were removed.

These figures contrast strongly with the 31 schools that have been placed in special measures twice, five of which have now closed.

Further evidence can be found of the potential of special measures schools to become highly effective, by reference to HMCI's annual reports, which identify outstanding schools. Fourteen schools that were previously in special measures were highlighted as outstanding in the 2002/03 Annual Report, 3.5% of the total. This compares with ten (2.5%) of the much larger group of serious weaknesses schools.

Taken together, this and other evidence points to the greater success of special measures schools in subsequent years than schools in which serious weaknesses have been identified. This suggests that the mechanisms and support for school improvement may be different in the two groups, but there may be other reasons for the faster recovery of special measures schools..

5. FACTORS THAT MAY INFLUENCE SUSTAINED IMPROVEMENT IN THE WEAKEST SCHOOLS

The obvious starting point is that schools in special measures have been the subject of more intensive monitoring and support, from HMI, LEAs and other agencies, than those having serious weaknesses. A range of other initiatives and policies have also been applied, including the semi-privatisation of some local education departments, identification of 'Schools facing Challenging

Circumstances’, and the development of ‘City Academies’ and ‘Specialist Schools’. The changes identified in special measures schools through a range of school improvement measures does not continue when they have left that category, however, but appears in most cases to sustain their gains and leads continued improvements.

Could special measures and serious weaknesses schools have other characteristics that influence their subsequent trajectories? Inspection evidence from HMCI’s 2002/2003 Annual Report presents a picture of the processes in the two groups of schools inspected in that year.

*‘Schools that require special measures usually have low standards and ineffective arrangements for ensuring improvement. Many have a high proportion of unsatisfactory teaching, often with inadequate curriculum planning that restricts pupils’ progress.....Most schools had begun to find ways of dealing with their difficulties. However, in some, **improvement was frustrated by the loss of effective staff, slowness in embracing new ideas or difficulties in recruiting suitable experienced teachers.**’*

HMCI continues by writing that:

‘A stumbling block to improvement in some schools is weak leadership that, in the initial stage of special measures, does not help staff to face up to the problems and results in delays in finding solutions.’

This analysis, based on evidence from HMI visits to all schools in special measures, points to an unwillingness to accept the need for change and a lack of capacity to galvanise the action needed. Inspection evidence provides independent reinforcement for the characteristics of ineffective schools identified through research, some of which are not necessarily the diametric opposites to characteristics of effectiveness. Reynolds (1995), for example, identifies features that resonate with inspectors’ perceptions:

- Non-rational approach to evidence
- Fear of outsiders
- Dread of change
- Capacity for blaming external conditions
- Set of internal cliques
- Lack of competencies for improvement.

Inward-looking inertia appears so firmly embedded in some schools that nothing less than the jolt of a special measures judgement will shake it. To have an impact in such contexts any change must be radical change, and that is what usually happens, for in all special measures, leadership has to adapt or be renewed.

We suggest that a different syndrome, not amounting to a blockage, may apply in some schools that do not merit the special measures classification. Having serious weaknesses is unfortunate enough, but at least the school is not (technically) ‘failing’. Since September 2000, HMI have visited schools with serious weaknesses within six to eight months of their inspection. They found that:

Schools that are providing an adequate education but which have serious weaknesses are likely to exhibit: unsatisfactory teaching or achievement in core subjects; underachievement among particular groups of pupils; unsatisfactory leadership or management; poor behaviour or attendance; a narrow or unbalanced curriculum, or an ethos that inhibits pupils’ personal development.

These are the more classic opposites of effectiveness characteristics, resembling those listed by Stoll and Fink (1996). In the 34 schools that had not made sufficient progress and were made subject to special measures, the main reasons for their lack of progress were:

- Headteachers, senior staff and governing bodies had not taken sufficient action to raise standards
- The monitoring and evaluation of standards of work, the quality of teaching and the progress being made by pupils were insufficiently rigorous
- The action plan was not being implemented with sufficient thoroughness and urgency

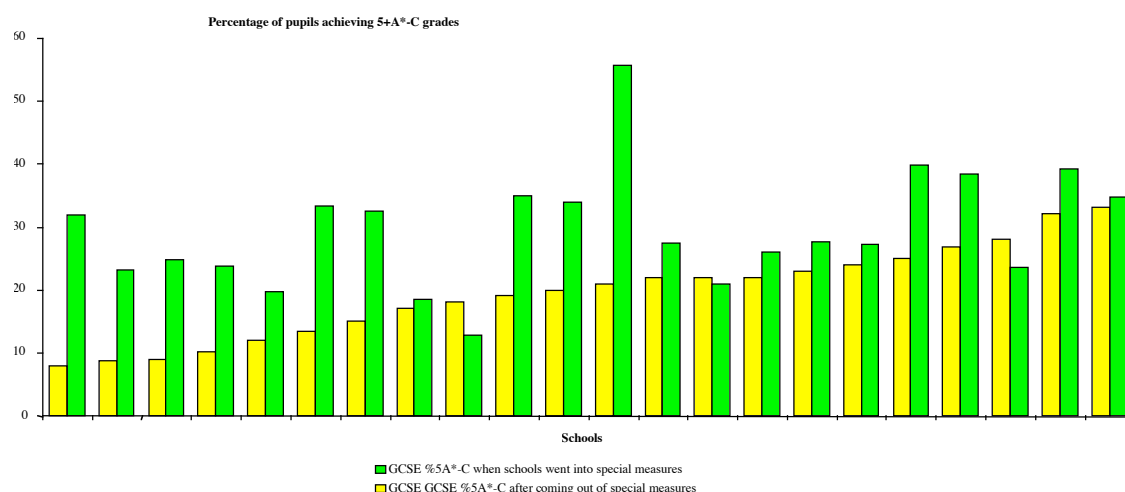
These observations seem to reflect greater lack of momentum than direction; in other words, it seems that the necessary drive to implement change may be missing.

6. SPECIAL MEASURES POLICY IN ENGLAND

The impact of the special measures policy is measurable in a number of ways. There is no doubt that most schools improve markedly following a period of being subject to special measures. This is particularly the case for primary schools. Only a small proportion of schools that emerge from this category have deteriorated subsequently. Indeed, some develop innovative and successful practice, which puts them at the leading edge within their own LEAs.

All special measures schools have another section 10 inspection within two years of being removed from special measures. The improvements observed in such schools, from the inspection that designates them to the next inspection after they have left the special measures category, are in most cases substantial. Figure 4 below shows the improved standards of most special measures secondary schools at the time of the later inspection, carried out in 2002/03. The improvement in standards in schools is variable, and noticeable in over half the schools, with one school now exceeding the national average.

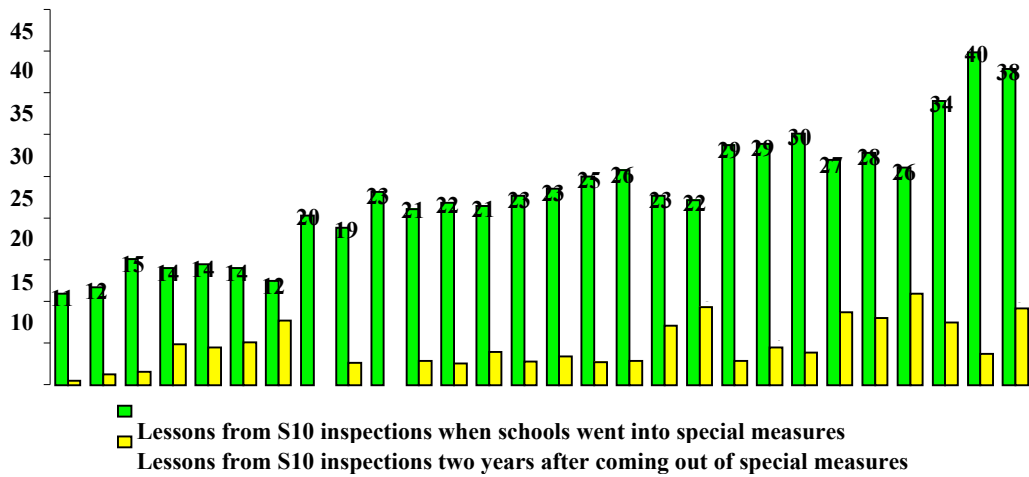
Figure 4: Percentage of pupils achieving five or more A*-C grades in GCSE when the school went into special measures and when they were inspected in 2002/03, two years after coming out. (Some schools closed during this period.)



The extent of improvement in the quality of teaching observed in special measures schools, as assessed by inspectors, is likewise substantial (Figure 5). It should be noted that action plans are strongly encouraged to focus on the quality of teaching and learning.

Figure 5: Percentage of unsatisfactory or poor teaching in lessons in secondary schools at the time of going into special measures and their inspection in 2002/03, two years after coming out

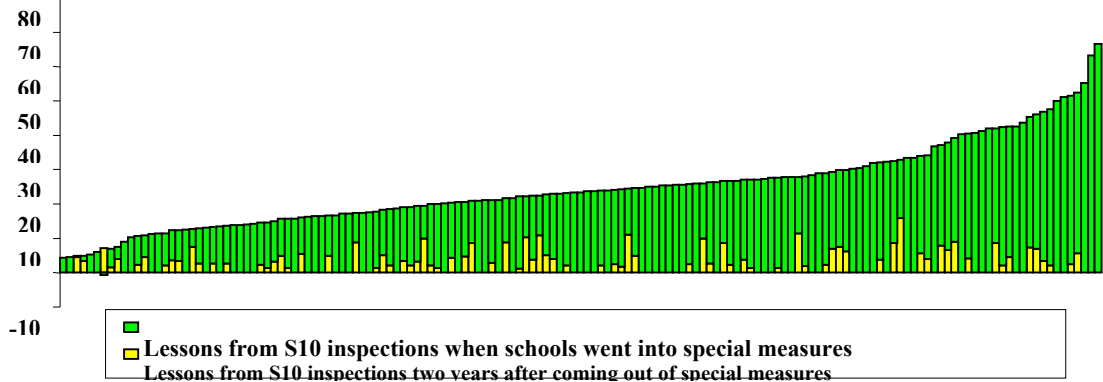
Percentage of lessons unsatisfactory or poor



Improvements in primary school teaching are found to be equally marked in terms of both attainment and quality of teaching (Figure 6 illustrates the extent of changes in inspectors' judgements).

Figure 6. Percentage of unsatisfactory or poor teaching in lessons in primary schools going into special measures and from all that were inspected in 2002/03 two years after coming out

Percentage of lessons unsatisfactory or poor



7. CONCLUSIONS

There is little doubt that the schools that enter special measures need external help, nor that the combination of features that form a profile of their ineffectiveness is daunting. While the majority of schools serving disadvantaged pupil intakes are not placed in special measures proportionately more special measures schools have high percentages of pupils on free school meals. Given this, the level of improvement seen in both primary and secondary sectors is striking. For some, inspection acts as a catalyst and encourages the school to adopt a range of approaches, well-documented in HMI publications and school improvement literature, to evaluating, planning and implementing programmes that enhance the quality of teaching and learning and school climate which promotes sustained improvement in standards. In others, there seems to be a strong parallel with a failing business, where a change in leadership and management leads to a turn around in its fortunes. There is a change of headteacher in an estimated two-thirds of schools¹¹ before they emerge from special measures. A further number of headships change in period immediately before the inspection that identifies the need for special measures.

Elsewhere we have drawn attention to the equity implications of special measures designation, arguing that the improvement of such schools is likely to have benefited disadvantaged pupil groups in particular, since they are over-represented in such schools. Given this, the special measures policy can be seen as a powerful tool in combating social exclusion through improving the quality of education provided by schools serving some of the most vulnerable groups of pupils.¹²

In the case of schools having serious weaknesses, one common problem identified is a lack of focus in addressing weaknesses. The remedy to this starts with being absolutely explicit about the weaknesses that need to be remedied. In its proposals for a new inspection framework from September 2005, Ofsted is proposing to abolish the 'serious weaknesses category' but make the improvements required of weak – but not failing – schools absolutely explicit.

'Inspectors must consider before the end of an inspection whether the provision is inadequate and is failing to give learners an acceptable standard of education. If they believe this to be the case, they must state this clearly in the report. They must also make a judgement on the capacity for improvement and whether a school which is providing an acceptable standard of education is not performing as well as it should be in one or more areas (which might include the quality of the sixth form). It is proposed that there should be two categories of schools causing concern:

- *schools which require special measures because they are failing to provide an acceptable standard of education and show insufficient capacity to improve*
- *those which require significant improvement in one or more areas of activity, which should be served with an **Improvement Notice**.*

The issue of improvement notices that may do something to help prevent schools with significant weaknesses slipping into special measures. But for many schools that justify them, the issue of such notices will not be enough on its own. Greater guidance and support will be needed if they are to show the same level of improvement achieved by the majority of special measures schools.

¹¹ School Improvement Division, Ofsted

¹² Sammons, P (2004) Policy Changes and Educational Standards: Making Connections, paper presented at the Goldman Sachs US/UK Conference on Urban Education, Institute of Education University of London, 13-15 December 2004