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Fresh Start Schools in England: Reconstitution or Re-inventing the Wheel?

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## **Fresh Start Schools in England: Reconstitution or Re-inventing the Wheel?**

*Margaret McLay, Manchester Metropolitan University*  
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### **Perspective**

The question of how to tackle the improvement of failing schools is one that has exercised successive governments in Britain throughout the 1990s and into the 21st Century. Stark (1998.) and Doherty and Abernathy (1998) write that failing schools have usually lost their capacity to turn around, which implies that external agencies have to be brought in to aid the renewal process. Nowhere is this more apparent than under the present 'fresh-start' arrangements in England, where external agencies are introduced into the heart of the school. The school is 'closed' - and when subsequently 'reopened' under a new name but on the same site, many former staff including the principal, will find themselves replaced by recruits drafted in to increase the potential for self-renewal. (p.42)

Our knowledge as to why some schools fail whilst others in similar circumstances do not, is still limited, although it is increasing. Gray (1999) points out that, in England, the Ofsted framework highlights three common features of failing schools:

- the under-achievement and low level of attainment of pupils
- a high proportion of unsatisfactory teaching
- ineffective leadership

Leithwood et al.(1999) address what needs to be done to generate capacity for improvement, albeit using slightly different terminology. They write of 'first order' changes - which centre on teaching and learning processes, and act directly upon achievement and expectation levels - and 'second order' changes, which hinge upon the style and competence of leadership within the school. It is these second-order changes which the fresh-start schemes have presumably been designed to address.

Nicolaidou and Ainscow (2002) add the caveat that the causes of ineffectiveness are different for each school. "It is difficult, therefore, to have a common definition of failure." (p.3)

### **Fresh-Start and Reconstitution**

Doherty and Abernathy (1998) point out that

“... the term 'reconstitution' lacks a precise common meaning. It has been used to describe intervention strategies that range from the restructuring of school leadership, mandated redesign of a school's program and instructional practices, to state takeover of school governance. In its most extreme form, reconstitution involves the disbanding of the existing Faculty and replacing nearly all the school's staff. This approach to reconstitution has garnered the most attention and engendered the greatest controversy. (p.45)

These different approaches to different causes of failure reinforce Nicolaidou and Ainscow's caveat cited above.

The "fresh start" scheme in England relies heavily on the "most extreme form" of School Reconstitution from the US. Even its proponents concede that it can be a wrenching process that can take years to yield positive results. Orfield (1996) has pointed out that Reconstitution is major surgery, drastic intervention, it's like trying to rebuild a rapidly deteriorating train as you're running down the tracks". Clearly then, it should not be the first option to be considered; rather it should be seen as an alternative when all else has failed. Studies of the various reconstitution programmes in the United States have tended to back up this point (Rozmus, 1998; Peterson, 1998; Doherty & Abernathy, 1998; Borman et al, 2000).

Despite these reservations, the particular UK approach to failing schools which is the subject of this paper, is clearly modelled on reconstitution. However, little cognisance appears to have been taken of the studies that had already taken place in the United States when it was introduced. Had this happened, 'fresh start' might have had more success. Mulholland (2000) put it more strongly: "The Fresh Start scheme is based on the idea of 'reconstitution' developed in San Francisco in 1984. By 1997 - just when the DfEE grasped the idea - it was thoroughly discredited." Matters were made worse by the high degree of publicity surrounding the first 'fresh start' schools: two were the subjects of lengthy television documentaries. during which the principals of both resigned. The national press was caught up with sensational headlines of further resignations by principals of other 'fresh start' schools soon after.

It is clear that reconstitution has had some success in some States and under certain conditions: Rusk Elementary School, Houston, is cited as having shown dramatic improvement within a year (Doherty and Abernathy, 1998).and Hardy (1999) writes "early reports on San Francisco's first four reconstituted schools were positive." Bacon (1999) reports that these schools not only benefited from more generous funding, but also had reduced class sizes, and agreements with parents to get their children to school on time and to ensure that homework was completed. Rozmus (1998) also notes a more positive attitude to the school from the community.

However, Doherty and Abernathy report altogether less positive experiences: "Other observers consider the threat of the reconstitution a faulty strategy that blames teachers for school failure while doing little to solve the underlying problems that contributed to low performance. By this account, School reconstitution has the potential to *diminish* morale in schools that are already weakened communities. Teachers in one San Francisco high school, for example, called the threat of reconstitution a 'degrading process' that has 'sent morale down the tubes.'" (p46).

Hardy (1999), Doherty and Abernathy (1998) Rozmus (1998) and Borman (2000) report the difficulty for reconstituted schools in attracting experienced staff. Most reconstituted schools reopened with largely inexperienced teachers, because those with more experience did not wish to be tainted by association with a school singled out as failing.

It is also not clear whether other school support systems would have been just as, or more, successful, and as Doherty and Abernathy (1998) report . "To date, there are no conclusive data demonstrating that the threat of reconstitution is an effective motivator for change." (p. 47) A further issue is what should be measured and how, in order to evidence improvement.

Hardy (1999) writes that test scores are often used as the principle measure of successful improvement, having been used to identify the failing school in the first place. Rozmus' two principals remarked that they would have liked more recognition given to the positive affective gains to balance out the emphasis on test scores.

Peterson (1998) identifies a number of 'lessons' to be learnt from reconstitution, amongst which are:

- Reconstitution is a complex process
- There are several, varied approaches across districts and states
- The improvements in student learning have been varied
- Reconstitution requires an "enormous reservoir of resources, skills, knowledge, and leadership"
- Care and attention is needed at each stage if reconstitution is to succeed
- Skilled leadership is crucial to success
- Districts need to consider the 'fall-out' from such reform, including, conflict, low teacher morale, loss of experienced staff to inexperienced staff.

Further lessons are outlined by Doherty and Abernathy (1998 pp 47-8):

- To successfully reconstitute [literally "to rebuild" ] a failed school requires overcoming a legacy of failure developed over a long period and that may persist after reconstitution.
- Strong leadership at the school site is essential.
- Successful rebuilding of a new performing school appears to require a very clear break with past practices at that site.
- High expectations and collective responsibility for student learning must be at the heart of the rebuilding effort.
- Professional development and capacity building are the key to success.
- Beware of the unintended consequences.
- The role of the district and state leadership is pivotal in determining the success of reconstituted schools

## **Purposes of the research**

The research has two main purposes:

1. to examine 'fresh start' as a school improvement measure
2. to consider circumstances under which 'fresh start' could be deemed to work in England

This paper will explore the initial impact of the 'fresh start' initiative as a school improvement strategy in four schools, two high schools and two primary schools. It considers whether and how management practice, resources, community support and pupil behaviour and school image have changed as a result.

## **Methodology**

In the case of the two secondary high schools, we examine and analyse extensive documentation about the school as revealed through official reports, Internet accounts, TV and press coverage, to determine what practices were used to turn the school around, whether these succeeded, whether they were likely to lead to sustainable success in the light of what we already knew about schools that were failing or in difficult circumstances. Because of the particular situation in which these schools found themselves and the adverse media coverage which was generated, it proved impossible to access anybody directly concerned with the cases.

In the case of the two primary (elementary) schools evidence is based on semi-structured interviews conducted with the principals and other stakeholders. Documentary evidence was examined and interviews were recorded in writing at school sites. Data collection and coding procedures were used to produce categories, themes and conceptual understandings inductively from the data (Blase, 1990).

### Data and Sources of Evidence

School A in north London has approximately 600 pupils on roll between the ages of 11 and 18 years. The school was opened in September 1999 under the 'fresh start' initiative, and inherited the site and buildings from the previous school, which closed in July 1999 as a failing school. The communities served by the school have considerable levels of social and economic disadvantage (Ofsted, 2000). Forty four percent of the pupils speak English as an additional language, representing at least thirty-five language backgrounds. A significant proportion of these pupils are recent arrivals to the UK, often as refugees.

The newly appointed principal, principal A, had what might be described as a sixties liberal educational philosophy. When the 'fresh start' school opened building renovation work had not been completed and, because of this, the timetable did not work as a many of the classrooms were still not available. The scale of the problems he encountered appeared to surprise him. A fortnight before the school was due to be officially opened by the then Secretary of State for Education, a violent incident developed which was not easily resolved. It led to the subsequent exclusion of twelve students, three of whom Principal A wished to exclude permanently. This decision, however, was overruled by the school board. Principal A seemed to have had little relevant experience in dealing with this type of racial tension.

The downward spiral intensified. Orfield's (1996) image of "trying to rebuild a rapidly deteriorating train while you're running down the track" seems apposite here. Buildings remained unfinished and Principal A's leadership began to lose credibility with many of the staff, students and parents. In these circumstances he felt impelled to resign, and by so doing prompted an embarrassment for the Government and its 'fresh start' school policy.

A central plank of his philosophy had been to turn this into an arts and media school. Unfortunately the necessary resources were not in place when the school reopened. Just before he resigned the school radio station did at last open and this was received with enthusiasm by the pupils. It appears that Principal A was right in his vision that arts and media status would be an important motivating factor for these students; therefore the fact that the facilities were not available from the start was all the more serious.

In the summer of 2000 the school fared badly in national examination results. However once another principal was seconded to the school from March 2000 to the end of the Summer term 2000, it became a much calmer place: this new principal excluded some fifty students to

restore discipline. Although the results for 16 year olds were disappointing, the examination results for year 9 SATs (the National Curriculum tests for 14 year olds) were extremely encouraging.

<b>Year</b>	<b>GCSE A*-C grades</b>
Pre-fresh start:	
1997	17%
Post fresh start:	
1999	5%
2000	6%
New head in place:	
2001	22%
2002	23%

Table 1: GCSE (age 16 national examinations) results for School A

It should be noted that SATs and GCSE results are a crude measure, because they concentrate on a narrow area of achievement and give no account of variation. Variation often occurs in schools in difficult circumstances because of the high, but fluctuating, number of pupils with special educational needs. However such results are required to be published annually in league tables as a benchmarking tool without regard to such variation. These results do not show the improvements that may or may not have been achieved in other domains important to students' development, a point made by the principals in Rozmus' (1998) interviews. Another reason for the drop in performance is that it is not only experienced staff who refuse to come to a school labelled as poorly performing; students who are able to make the choice also move to other schools, often leaving the failing school with a significant proportion of those less able, or with less supportive parents.

A fairer measure of schools' success in pupil attainment can be provided with data on value-added performance. Unfortunately such data is only now being produced (from 2002 onwards). It will be interesting to re-visit these schools in subsequent years to examine this data as well.

School B in the north east of England was one of the first three schools to be reorganised under the Government's "fresh start" policy, reopening in September 1998. The school served two of the most deprived areas in the west end of the city. It suffered from low levels of literacy and numeracy, a high truancy rate and other problems of multiple social deprivation.

A pillar of the new principal, principal B's 'fresh start' policy was the establishment of a strong literacy and numeracy scheme for year 7 (age 11-12) in which children were given extra tuition to bring them up to national standards. At that time this was an innovative plan. A more controversial initiative, however, was the way in which the truancy figures at School B were lowered: a number of persistent truants were simply removed from the school roll with the parents signing agreements to educate them at home. School numbers which had started from a low base did not improve. This had serious consequences, because extra funding as part of the "Fresh Start" programme was reliant on the school achieving full capacity in three years. This raises issues regarding the wisdom of setting top-down, arbitrary targets as was the case with the truancy target which aimed to get the school's attendance rate from approximately 75% attendance up to nearer the national average of approximately 90%. Principal B did pilot a more positive approach to improving attendance, however. This was to pay final year students a small sum which was provided by a local commercial sponsor, provided they achieved a high level of attendance and reached academic targets in subjects

such as literacy, numeracy and computer skills. This is a scheme which has now been successfully adopted by the 16-19 sector where it is called 'Education Maintenance Allowance'.

Few staff from the previous school had retained their jobs and this contributed to a loss of morale. Union action when staff refused to teach disruptive pupils, was only narrowly averted. Principal B resigned in March of her second year having apparently failed to solve many of the school's problems. Evidence cited for this fact are the School's national examination results which were poorer than before 'fresh start':

<b>Year</b>	<b>GCSE A*-C grades</b>
pre fresh start: 1999	9%
post fresh start: 2000	4%
Acting head in place 2001	12%

**Table 2: GCSE (age 16 national examinations) results for School B**

Again, it could be argued that many of the more able students in the locality had chosen to attend other schools in the district especially as the low pupil roll made the future of the School B even more uncertain.

When principal B resigned, the acting principal of the previous school was brought back to take it over. Principal B had been a firm believer in the mantra of inclusion and therefore had a policy of no exclusions. The acting principal now found discipline to be poor. His approach was completely different: he had a policy of zero tolerance where the staff were always on duty and never walked past any incident. Between Easter and Summer, seven students were excluded for more than five days. In summer 2001 national examination results improved, but school numbers continued to fall. Because of this the School District decided to merge School B with a nearby high school. This plan is imaginative and cutting edge - a nearby University will be involved in its management, but for the staff, pupils and parents of School B, it means more uncertainty.

School C is a medium sized primary school in an urban area in the North West of England of approximately 300 hundred pupils. Although the area is above the UK average in affluence, School C serves an estate of largely social housing with high levels of economic deprivation, including unemployment and drug misuse. This area is one of three in this town to attract European Community Funds to try to stimulate economic regeneration.

The approach to 'Fresh Start' in School C was unusual. Two schools with falling numbers and where the principals were both leaving, were both identified in Ofsted inspections as performing poorly. As a result they were closed, merged and reopened under a new name. This allowed the School District to moderate parental opposition to closure of either school, and also to bring about a new school board which it was hoped would have the strength and expertise to drive improvement forward.

The School District subsequently decided to apply to the Government under the 'Fresh Start' Scheme in order to attract the funding the national scheme provided. This allowed for a completely new building to bring the two merged schools onto one site. In the instance of



School C, the School District decided to reappoint several staff from the previous two schools, before appointing the new principal, principal C. At an interview with the researchers in January 2001, principal C stated that he would not have appointed some of these staff had he been given the opportunity, although he did appreciate that they provided necessary continuity. The School Improvement Officer from the School District, at a subsequent interview, took issue with this opinion. Her view was that the re-appointed staff were not only necessary to aid stability, but they were capable teachers worthy of keeping their posts.

At first the school appeared to be slowly improving. The funding allowed extra pastoral and out of school study support to be initiated with a consequent improvement in pupil behaviour. However Principal C felt that the funding was still insufficient to provide the level of pastoral care necessary to address the considerable social problems faced by the children in this area.

A further interview with the Deputy Director of the School District in November 2002 revealed that the new school was not continuing to improve. Indeed, there were serious concerns about the rate of progress in pupils' learning. The District had taken Principal C to task for spending too much time on the building-site with the consequence that he neglected the vital areas of teaching and learning. Principal C continued to devote too much time to the building works, and the School's results in the Standard Assessment Tests in English and Mathematics at age 11 fell from those of the previous year; although the results in Science show a slight increase, this is well below the performance of other schools in the District. (see Table 3) Principal C went on long-term sickness leave with stress. The district has put in an acting head to stabilise the situation.

<b>Year</b>	<b>English</b>	<b>Mathematics</b>	<b>Science</b>
*1999i	32%	10%	26%
*1999ii	41%	18%	41%
2000		(not given)	
2001	39%	33%	50%
2002	30%	23%	53%

**Table 3: School C results in Standard Assessment Tests for Key Stage 2 (age 11).**

(Percentages show the number of pupils attaining the expected level for this age group. \*1999i = school i before merger, 1999ii - school ii before merger)

To set School C in a more representative context for the above figures, the test results of a neighbouring school (School N) which has the same catchment area, are as follows:

<b>Year</b>	<b>English</b>	<b>Mathematics</b>	<b>Science</b>
1999	28%	28%	48%
2000	56%	48%	56%
2001	59%	44%	56%
2002	50%	58%	73%

**Table 4: School N results in Standard Assessment Tests for Key Stage 2**

School N has, in the core curriculum areas, appeared to make substantially more improvement than School C, despite starting from a lower base (in 1999) than one of the

schools which formed school C. The 1999 results could well have meant School N also being closed and put into the fresh start programme. It has achieved success without this, possibly despite this drastic intervention. Again, the use of value-added data would help to give a more complete picture here

School D is also a primary school and is another unusual case for the ‘fresh start’ programme. It is situated in a semi-rural location in the North Midlands of England. Although this area has small pockets of deprivation, it is largely more affluent than the areas served by other ‘fresh start’ schools. The current principal, Principal D, stated that the success of this submission for ‘fresh start’ status was achieved because it was well-drafted and might have been granted as a symbolic gesture.

The School District saw ‘fresh start’ as an opportunity to close the old school in order to make the existing staff, who were perceived to be the main problem, apply for the new posts. Most had been in post for many years, but nevertheless did not function as a team. The School Board was also considered to be confrontational and ‘fresh start’ allowed a new one to be appointed. It was also hoped that the fresh start would begin to increase the number of children applying to the school as student numbers had been falling steadily in the past few years.

The previous principal who was also an Ofsted inspector, had not been devoting the school the time it needed and it was felt that the SATs results were not as good as they should have been.

for a school of its type:

<b>Year</b>	<b>English</b>	<b>Mathematics</b>	<b>Science</b>
1998	70%	65%	90%
1999	63%	69%	88%

**Table 5: School D’s SATs results before Fresh Start**

A further problem was the poor state of the fabric of the building, with some health and safety issues, which was another indication of the previous principal’s lack of attention to the school. The school was identified as performing poorly by Ofsted in 1998 and this gave the School. District the impetus to apply for fresh start status and funding.

Under Principal D and with a largely new staff, the school’s educational attainment started to improve and there is a much better sense of team-working. The extra funds have allowed necessary environmental improvements to be carried out. an Ofsted Inspection in 2001 found the school to be achieving well, and Principal D’s leadership to be effective in providing a clear vision for staff to follow. Interestingly however, the SATs results do not show a sustained improvement:

<b>Year</b>	<b>English</b>	<b>Mathematics</b>	<b>Science</b>
2000	62%	71%	86%
2001	88%	75%	96%
2002	55%	54%	92%

**Table 6: School D’s SATs results before Fresh Start**

. The Ofsted inspectors noted the high number of relatively inexperienced teachers on the staff (a direct result of the fresh start process) which placed a higher mentoring burden on the few experienced staff, and a high workload for the Principal herself. This could be a factor in the variation seen in the SATs figures. This school is not without its continuing problems. Pupil numbers are small, now only 129, and there is, therefore, a question-mark over the school's continuing viability.

Both primary principals stated that there were problems with the fresh start initiative. Firstly the Government agency did not demonstrate an understanding of the needs of primary schools and secondly, they did not at that time appear to consider the importance of sustainability of the improvement measures. Therefore both primary principals are keeping funds in reserve in order to maintain their higher than normal staffing levels necessary to sustain this improvement.

## Conclusions

What could have been learnt from the American experience of a reconstitution in 1998 at the time it was being introduced into Britain? Peterson's (1998) lessons would have provided useful guidelines:

1. "*It is difficult to successfully reconstitute schools.*" School B, in particular, was not given time to show improvement. Just as it was closing, pupil attainment appeared to be improving. Stark (1998) appears convinced that two years is sufficient time to turn round a school. Mulholland (2000) however produces data which would suggest otherwise showing that of the 166 schools in Special Measures (which included the fresh start schools), on average only 13.66% of pupils achieved five A\*-C grades at GCSE.
2. "*There have been extremely varied approaches*" Rather than opting for the most drastic form of reconstitution, more consideration of the varied approaches in the United States could have provided a menu of choices which could have been used to suit the different local circumstances.
3. "*Reconstitution does not guarantee improved student learning.*" Did the fresh start schools in this study show significant improvement? If the standard performance measures in the tables above are considered, then the only one of the four to do so so far is school A, which interestingly had the most traumatic beginnings. Had this important lesson of Peterson's been learnt, other interventions might have been provided to ensure improvement.
4. "*Districts need to commit some of their best people and many resources to support reconstitution.*" The principal of School A needed more support from the district to ensure the school building was finished on time and with sufficient resources. School B was simply not given sufficient time to turn the around.
5. "*Care and attention to each stage of reconstitution is needed...*" The necessary help to prepare for fresh start, especially in rebuilding and resources, appears not to have been there for School A in particular

6. *“Highly qualified, skilled school leadership remains crucial to success.”* Since a number of principals of fresh start schools have resigned, the whole issue of the qualification, skill and experience of those selected needs much more careful consideration

7. *“Districts need to consider the range of unintended consequences”*. There is a sense in which fresh start might seem politically astute, staving off closure of a school, being able to clear out management and front-line teaching-staff who might have been perceived to be performing below par, however the replacement staff are often inexperienced lacking both the repertoire of teaching-skills needed and also more experienced staff to mentor them through their first years.

To these may be added some of Doherty and Abernathy’s (1998) lessons: (pp47-8)

*“To successfully reconstitute [literally “to rebuild” ] a failed school requires overcoming a legacy of failure developed over a long period and that may persist after reconstitution.”*

There is a problem in labelling a school as failing. School B struggled to convince the local community that it was indeed a different school with more potential for success. It has taken School A four years to achieve full enrolment to year 7 (first year).

*“Strong leadership at the school site is essential”* More than this, the case of Schools A and C show that the school leader needs not just to be present at the school site, but needs to concentrate on teaching and learning and standards of behaviour, and not be distracted by spending too much time on the building-site.

*“High expectations and collective responsibility for student learning must be at the heart of the rebuilding effort.”* The lack of engagement of parents in their children’s learning caused concern in both Schools A and B. This is in contrast to the experience in the United States where, according to Doherty and Abernathy (1998) *“A number of districts have intervened in a collaborative process involving all stakeholders including parents, teachers, administrators, and unions to redesigned low performing schools”* [ p 40]

*“Professional development and capacity building are the key to success.”* This is obvious in the case of the large number of inexperienced staff who are likely to be working in a fresh start school, but is also necessary for those staff who may have retained their posts from the previous, failing school which is likely to have neglected staff development.

With the benefit of hindsight, what went wrong in schools A and B was that the principals were immediately confronted by three problems: the behaviour and attitudes of the pupils, the competence and morale of the staff, and limitations and inadequacies of the school buildings set against a background of the school being singled out as failing. It would appear from the cases outlined above that there was too much concentration on aspects of leadership and financial resources. By investing so much in the figure of the principal perhaps not enough attention was paid to teaching and learning. In at least two cases the principals allowed themselves to be distracted by the extensive rebuilding works. The National Curriculum provided a further problem by limiting the innovatory approaches necessary to provide a more radical review of pupil needs and interests which may have resulted in a different curriculum pattern, and done much to reduce pupil disaffection especially at high school level,

## **Educational importance of the study**

The study demonstrates that initiatives may be transplanted but, since some of the problems which emerged had already been highlighted in the USA, more research should have been undertaken before embracing imported initiatives wholeheartedly given different educational and cultural contexts. The DfES still produces guidelines for fresh start, although there is little emphasis on this policy because of the disastrous publicity which surrounded it at the start. The new DfES (2003) guidelines suggest that lessons have been learnt from the earlier experience. These are:

- the lesson of sustainability cited by the two primary school principals - a necessary part of the new fresh start programme is that the school district and the school must identify ways of sustaining improvements once the extra funding has been withdrawn.
- The focus on teaching and learning particularly stressed by the School District of School C, has also been learnt with the requirement now to have a 'Raising Attainment Plan'.
- The concern raised by the primary principals that the DfES did not understand the special requirements of this sector has also been addressed in the separate advice on these plans for both primary and secondary sectors.
- A further lesson learnt is the necessity to consult widely with all stakeholders and the wider community. The case of School B showed that the lack of engagement with the wider community was a serious barrier to the continued existence of the school.

The reasons why the US evaluations should have been taken into account at the start are clear. The first is that already-damaged students underwent further negative school experiences because of the hasty implementation of fresh start in many schools. The second is that much public money could have been spent on school improvement measures which have been proved to be more successful in raising attainment, such as Study Support (after-school programmes), the Excellence in Cities programme, and Extended Schools (full service schools), but was instead wasted particularly in those fresh start schools which were closed for not yielding 'quick fix' solutions. It is undoubtedly true that education in England could adopt many of the initiatives undertaken in the United States, but when importing an initiative, the lessons learnt in the 'parent' country should be examined first. To return to the metaphor of the title: do not waste time reinventing the wheel, instead learn from the experience of the original inventors and move forward from there.

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