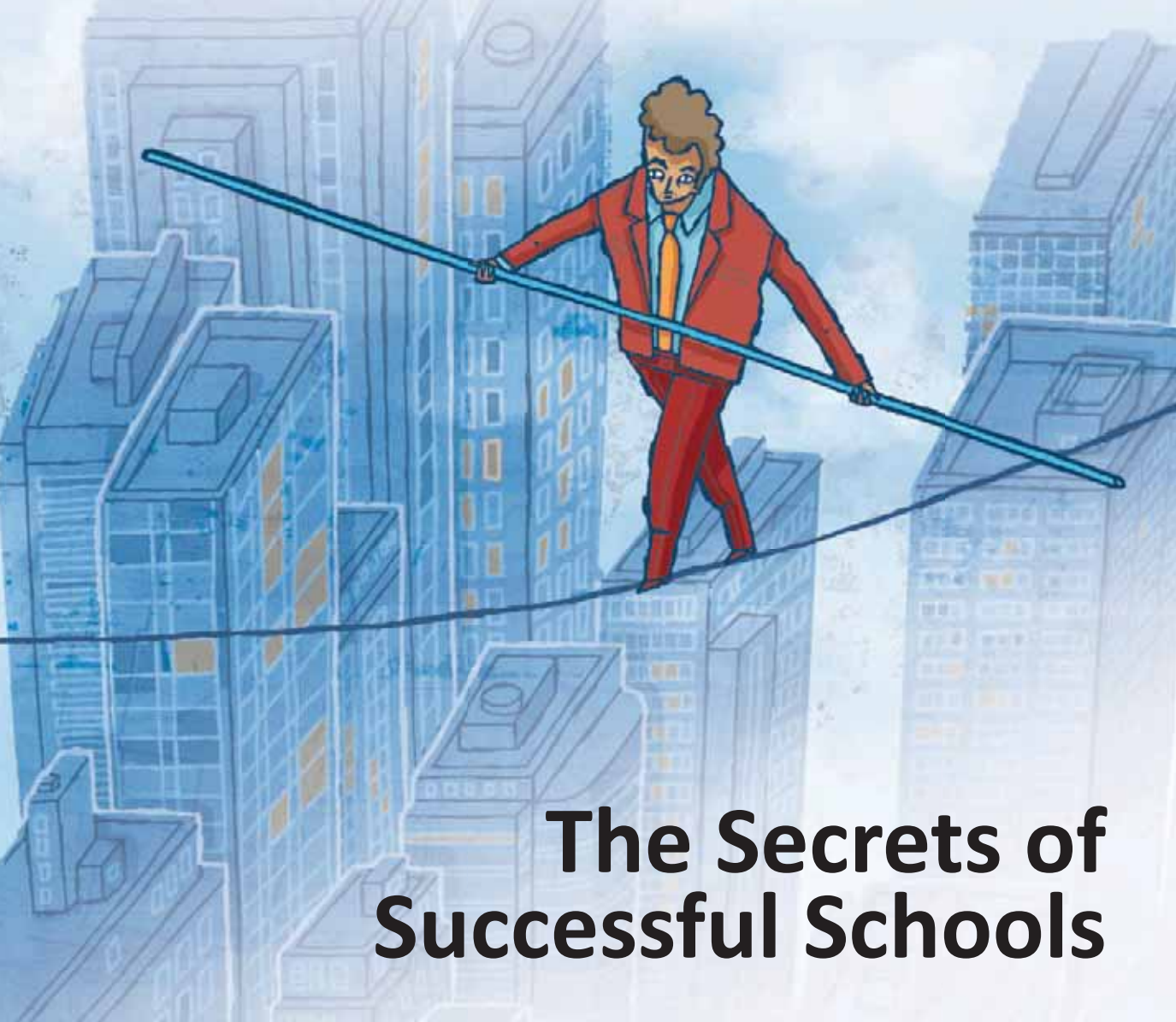


# High Performers

Alistair Smith



**The Secrets of  
Successful Schools**

What makes twenty of the top performing state schools so successful?

Alistair Smith visited them to find out. He asked the same questions in each school and in this book he shares his findings with us.

*High Performers* is a practical 'how to' guide, packed with tips and drawing on original research. For school leaders and classroom practitioners, it gives sound evidence-based guidance on what some of the best schools have done to succeed on the learning journey. It focuses on:

- Core purpose
  - Student outcomes
  - Learner engagement
  - Classroom teaching
  - Roles and responsibilities
  - Professional development
  - Managing data
  - The school as a community
- 

*High Performers* is a compelling read. It's strongly recommended for current and would-be school leaders, and also for our political masters who would benefit from this sharp-eyed, astringent and endlessly uplifting insight into what great schools do, day in, day out.

**Geoff Barton, Headteacher,  
King Edward VI School**

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**The Secrets of  
Successful Schools**



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# Introduction:

## The concept of high performers

This book explains how you can become a high performer and so help your school become even more successful – a high performing school, perhaps.

The book is the product of hundreds of hours spent in schools and it emerged from a research project completed with the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT), which examined the leadership cultures in some of the most successful non-selective state schools in England. I visited 20 schools, 15 of which the SSAT had chosen as ‘high performers’ and 5 of which I added as my outliers.

The criteria for selection of the 15 core schools included:

- Outstanding in Ofsted (all categories)
- At least three years of progress
- Specialist Status from 2008 and prior to then
- Leading Edge Status
- CVA (Contextual Value Added) 2009 above expected
- Low internal variability
- JVA (Jessen Value Added) 5A–C 2009 equal to or above +10
- JVA 5A–C EM (English, Maths) 2009 equal to or above +10
- 2 A–C Sc (Sciences) 2009 above 54
- 2 A–C MFL (Modern Foreign Languages) 2009 above 32
- Non-selective.

The criteria for selection of the 5 ‘outlier’ schools included:

- High or exceptionally high contextual value added
- At least three years of progress
- Recognised nationally for an aspect of their work in leadership or in learning

## High Performers

- Schools 'complementing' the core list by offering a novel dimension: for example, 'speedy' turnaround from category; innovation in parental engagement; outstanding succession planning; 'dramatic' intervention to improve results and imaginative work in learning
- Known to me.

Other schools cited in the book offered case studies of practice that I uncovered through reading, recommendations or conversations or from previous visits. The high performer model emerges from this work but also draws on the fact that over 20 years I have visited hundreds of schools, spoken to thousands of educators and delivered over 1,100 in-service events. Hang around long enough and something must rub off!

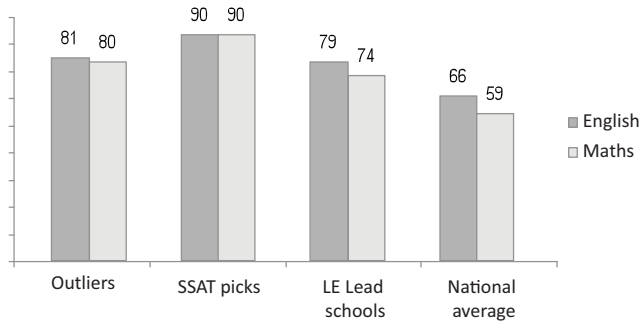
The schools that have been included do not claim to be the 'best' in the country, nor am I, on their behalf, making such claims. Some of the best leadership in the country takes place in schools where it goes unrecognised. Schools where, for instance, many students have everyday lives that are characterised by high uncertainty, dysfunctional relationships and poverty. For these students, their school is a reservoir of hope. There are schools that do terrific things in learning and teaching but are hampered by the absurdities of coping with endless bureaucracy, absurd regulations and an inspection regime which, all too often, misses the point and hands out 'limiting judgements' focused on peripherals. In years to come we will look back and ask ourselves how, as a profession, we allowed ourselves to label schools as failing with all the stigma, stress and consequence it carries because at the time of the visit the KS4 data hadn't been analysed by ethnicity.

Adjust the criteria for selection and you adjust the list of schools. It would have been possible to give a bigger emphasis to contextual value added, levels of progress from KS2 or the demographics of the catchment. The fact that every school acknowledged it struggled to create autonomous learners whilst at the same time improving their academic performance, suggests that for the schools here the definition of success needs to go beyond their exam pass rates.

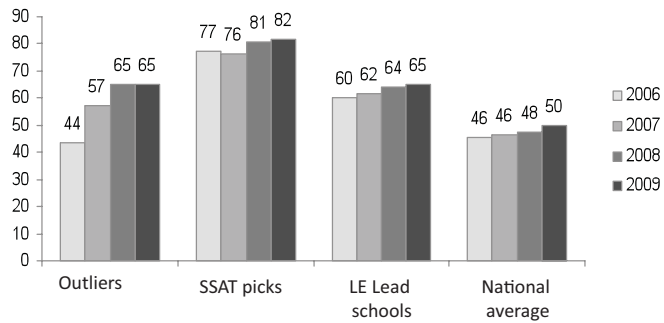
In comparative terms the high performers sample is very small. There were 3,457 maintained secondary schools in England in 2003. There were 220 Leading Edge Schools from which the SSAT pick was made. The graphs below provide a sample of how our SSAT pick and outliers performed against Leading Edge Schools and all maintained schools.



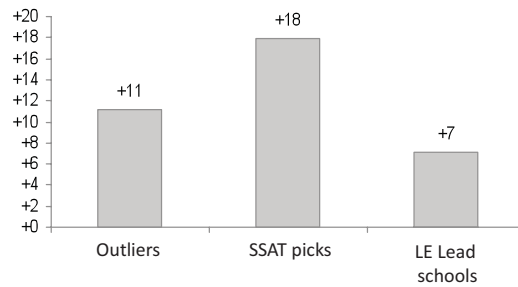
### KS2 to 4 progress in English and Maths 2009



### 5 A–C inc. English and Maths improvements 2006 to 2009



### Jessen value added (KS2 to 4) 5 A–C inc. English and Maths 2009



The 'research' has limitations. What was provided was a snapshot with visits confined to a limited time frame and schools choosing the staff interviewed. I was the only interviewer. There were limited opportunities for observation of classroom practice. The questions I asked were open to a variety of interpretations and inevitably respondents would wish to position themselves and their schools in a favourable light in answering them. There are hundreds of schools which do interesting and innovative work and do so in equally or even more challenging circumstances than those included here. However, to begin to account for every possible permutation in selecting high performers is a life's work. This is a snapshot of what some of the best have done to secure their success, no more than that.

In each of the 20 schools I visited I asked the same ten questions – in the same way – of three categories of educator: leadership teams, middle managers and classroom teachers. I was attempting to gauge what was the essence – or distinctive character – of successful schools, and what factors had shaped this essence. It was a study in school culture. I wanted to find out more about the everyday preoccupations and behaviours of influencers in successful schools.

Clear patterns emerged. Schools in the project were all well led. They had clarity around core purpose and said no to pressures or initiatives that threatened to divert them from core purpose. They were all stable with many, but not all, outward looking and eager to improve. All schools benefited from supportive parents though each had arrived at this positive situation by a different route. All schools were struggling to sustain high academic outcomes whilst at the same time creating more independent learners. Surprisingly for me, learning and teaching was not consistently good across these top-performing schools and, in fact, in some it appeared pedestrian. All schools managed student performance data effectively and most put it into the hands of teachers when they needed it most. Clear lines of accountability at all levels were apparent in nearly all of the schools, with the middle manager role seen as key. Staff development varied significantly – from practice that was in my view genuinely 'leading edge' to practice that had been the norm 30 years previously.

The high performer model assumes that leaders, managers and teachers all share responsibility for providing life changing experiences for the students in their care. In this regard they are like the performers in the main arena.

The leaders are high wire walkers who are visible to everyone, often – though not always – on their own, taking risks and showing a lead. This lead is based on years of experience, careful decision making and sensitivity to the changing environment in which they perform. The head teacher or principal is a high wire walker who stays focused on what matters, is relentlessly determined and looks ahead – not down or back. A word of

caution for those who would walk the wire: becoming a head teacher is not the end of your journey. It's a higher and more conspicuous platform on which you must perform. Only go there if you are prepared for its particular demands and if you want to make a difference rather than have the role.

The teachers are the trapeze artists who know, understand and engage their audience with relentless optimism. Through great training and quality support systems, they are allowed to be and have become highly creative. They respect their performance medium and its inherent risks. They express themselves in ways that are often breathtaking in their individuality. They work tirelessly for perfection, they inspire – and never more so than in a choreographed small team performance.

The middle leaders are the human pyramid builders who work together building a solid platform that reaches up and up. They challenge expectation, provide support for others and show high levels of interdependence. Their success is based on strong bonds of mutual regard, trust and a capacity to micro-adjust, shifting weight and balance to keep the team aloft.

High performers work together and in doing so gain our admiration and respect. They do things we can mimic but never reproduce so the best we can hope for is to learn from them and create our own act.

One of the impulses to write this book was to let teachers, middle leaders and leadership teams see what the others needed to perform at their best. Most teachers don't buy books about leadership. Leadership teams have bought most of their teaching books, many of which now languish on the office shelves. Middle leaders don't seem to get many books written for them! So if I can do my bit to help each group widen its understanding of the everyday demands on the others then it can help elevate performance as a whole.

When I started the work on this book we were in the last days of a Labour administration. Now, as I finish, we are in the early months of a very different administration, a Conservative-Liberal one based upon a pact and one with a different set of emphases on education, assessment, inspection, learning and teaching. An hour ago the first White Paper was published. So for the performers, the wire has moved.

When the wire starts to move it's dangerous for the wire walker to try to stay still. The wire walker must adjust position and move with the wire. When the conditions change, adjust your stance but as you do so you must always look forward ...

# 10. Repertoire of strategies

*It's more important to be a great teacher than a great specialist.*

Teacher, Tudor Grange

Schools are improving in England yet, as the performance bar is raised, the gap between the best and the worst is not being narrowed. The gap between high performing schools and poorly performing schools in England remains marked. This is despite the number of secondary schools where less than 30 per cent of pupils gain five good GCSEs including English and maths, falling from 1,600 in 1997 to 247 in 2009 and where 100,000 more pupils achieve level four English and maths at the end of primary school each year.<sup>12</sup>

The gap between children from disadvantaged backgrounds and the rest is also considerable. At GCSE, 54.2 per cent of pupils not eligible for free school meals achieved five good GCSEs including English and maths, compared to 26.6 per cent of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals – an attainment gap of 27.6 percentage points. Working class boys eligible for free school meals do particularly badly. Only 19 per cent of white boys eligible for free school meals gain five good GCSEs and only 22.4 per cent of black Caribbean boys. Despite performance going up in all groups, a 'stubborn' gap remains. In 2006 the gap between white boys eligible for free school meals and all pupils was 33.9 percentage points. Three years later in 2009 it widened to 35.2 percentage points.<sup>13</sup>

So there are big gaps between schools and also between groups of students across and within schools. There are haves and have-nots. One of the worrying features is the within school variance in performance. Academics suggest there can be as much as 12 times more variation within a school than between schools. This means that some of the disadvantage can multiply up. Students with the best teachers in the best schools learn at least three times more each year than students with the worst teachers in the worst schools.<sup>14</sup> Therefore investing in the quality of teaching and teachers is a must.<sup>15</sup> To become a great teacher takes about eight years of full-time commitment but the teacher needs to develop through a combination of challenge, tacit and formal learning, being exposed to good practice and having space and opportunity to groove in good teaching habits.<sup>16</sup>

What you do on a daily basis as a teacher impacts directly on the life chances of the students in front of you. You can begin to compensate for some of the barriers described above. One of the most productive investments you and your school can make is in you!

Become a learner of the processes that shape learning – become a scientist investigating your own teaching.<sup>17</sup>

**Recommendation for teachers: become more self-aware of what you do in the classroom and the impact it has on student learning: learn about your own teaching.**

Do you teach history or do you teach GCSE history? Do you teach mathematics or do you teach A level mathematics? Do you teach your subject or how to pass exams in your subject? Are you a great specialist or a great teacher? If one or the other, how do you know? Why not both?

Great teachers have a repertoire of strategies that are based on an understanding of the process of learning. It's partly science and partly art. The science is in understanding the principles upon which learning is based and the art is in deploying those principles in different contexts. It's helpful to think of the repertoire of strategies as a continuum. The continuum extends from teacher directed learning at one end to student initiated learning at the other. Direct instruction to social constructivism; great teachers can move up and down the continuum as the circumstances demand.

## Teacher roles

Some of the roles a teacher would adopt in moving along the continuum would be as follows:

- Instructor: directs students to essential information and rehearses the application of that information; stays focused on a narrow range of tasks
- Teacher: orchestrates the whole learning experience having chosen what is to be learned and how it will be learned
- Facilitator: structures learning situations which directly or indirectly extend the learning of the students; asks really good questions and works alongside the students as they search for solutions
- Coach: focuses on specific skills or techniques and works with the student to improve them
- Mentor: offers individual guidance to help maintain the students' capacity to deal with personal and interpersonal issues and to sustain personal resource
- Guide: provides general advice to help the student make informed choices

- Role model: behaves in positive ways that will provide a template for the student to emulate.

The teacher would be able to assume several roles during one lesson, responding to the changing circumstances and demands of learning. In the very best practitioners the transitions would be smooth with roles overlapping, merging in and out of each other and the whole experience appearing seamless.

### **Recommendation for teachers: widen your repertoire of classroom intervention roles and practise moving between them.**

There are social, emotional and cognitive dimensions to learning. Some youngsters, like some adults, prefer their own space and are happier learning on their own. Paired and small group learning are challenging contexts for these students. Others, more gregarious and extrovert perhaps, actively seek out peers with whom to engage in learning.

Our social dimensions to learning are therefore:

- Individual
- Pair
- Group
- Class
- Community.

Learners perform better, stay involved longer and get more satisfaction and enjoyment from learning when they have efficacy within their preferred social dimension.<sup>18</sup> In other words, when students know how to go about learning on their own or in pairs, small groups or as a class they do better. As a teacher one cannot assume such skills are in place: you have to be very explicit in teaching them the associated skills. Academics call this meta-learning. Teach them to become meta-learners!

Should we have the equivalent of a pedagogy MOT in schools? It would be a fascinating exercise to concentrate on this alone. Is your class oriented to learning or performing? Classroom teachers experience a tension between getting youngsters through public examinations, the results of which shape their life chances, and equipping them to be better learners and so more able to cope with what life throws at them. In speaking to staff in the research schools about the student outcomes they desired, I asked the question, 'What do you wish your students to leave you and the school with?'



**Alistair Smith** is an internationally known consultant, author and trainer. He has spoken to tens of thousands of teachers across the world and has written a number of books including: *The Brain's Behind It: New Knowledge about the Brain and Learning*, *Help Your Child to Succeed: The Essential Guide for Parents and Accelerated Learning: A User's Guide*. He is the designated learning consultant to the Football Association. He is also the author of *Learning to Learn in Practice* ISBN 978-184590287-2.

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**John Dunford, Chair of Whole Education and Chair of WorldWide Volunteering**

Alistair Smith leaves the reader professionally aware and personally motivated. Leadership can make a massive difference and young peoples' lives benefit when it does.

**Mick Waters, Professor of Education at Wolverhampton University  
and President of the Curriculum Foundation**

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**Will Ryan, Assistant Head of School Effectiveness Rotherham Borough Council,  
Education Consultant and Author**

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**Professor David Woods CBE, Chief Adviser for London Schools and Principal National Challenge Adviser**

Alistair Smith has set out to distill the practice of twenty high performing schools – and has come up trumps. The result is a highly readable book full of valuable practical advice.

**Sir Dexter Hutt, Chief Executive Ninestiles Plus and Executive Leader Hastings Federation**

*High Performers* is an easily read and impressively practical “how to” guide full of “tips” that draw on original research.

**Vanni Treves, Chairman of Governing Council, National College for School Leadership**

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