

### Specialist Schools

*The Specialist Schools Programme began in 1994 and aimed to promote school improvement by providing opportunities for schools to work to their strengths, enabling them to deliver effective teaching and learning in their area of expertise, as well as across the curriculum, and to drive innovation. Specialist schools are an important part of the Government's strategy to raise standards in secondary education as described in the DfES Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners (see [www.dfes.gov.uk/publications/5yearstrategy/index.shtml](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/publications/5yearstrategy/index.shtml)). There are currently 1,956 specialist schools, which represents approximately 61% of all secondary schools.*

There are now 10 specialisms that schools can develop:

- Technology;
- Languages;
- Sports;
- Arts;
- Business and Enterprise;
- Engineering;
- Science;
- Mathematics and Computing;
- Music; and
- Humanities.

Schools can also apply to be designated in a combined specialism and/or choose to incorporate a rural dimension into their specialism. More details can be found at:

[www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/specialistschools/](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/specialistschools/)

### Science specialist status

Science college designation has been available since 2002. There are now 224 Science Colleges (and 18 with a combined specialism that includes science) across England. See the Specialist Schools Trust website at [www.specialistschoolstrust.org.uk/](http://www.specialistschoolstrust.org.uk/) for a complete list of specialist science schools.

# The Specialist Schools Trust:



**working in  
partnership  
with ASE**

Annette Montague

### Science Colleges are expected to:

- create a challenging environment which raises standards of achievement and the quality of teaching and learning in science and mathematics for all their students, leading to whole school improvement in performance;
- provide a centre of excellence in scientific, technological, enterprising and vocational education;
- be an active contributor to local and national developments within science and mathematics and encourage young people to pursue science and mathematics beyond 16; and be active partners in a learning society with their local families of schools and their communities, sharing resources and disseminating good practice.

One of the most tangible benefits of gaining specialist status is the enhancement in facilities that the capital funding provides, although it never allows as much renovation as departments really need! This creates additional opportunities, and stimulation and motivation for staff and pupils working in the areas. However, the extra funding also brings an additional layer of commitment for the specialist departments. In Science Colleges, demanding performance targets for the science and mathematics faculties, the whole school and the community will have been set (and must be achieved) and the additional work detailed in the application must be planned, delivered and evaluated.

The specialist departments lead whole school improvement by disseminating good practice and working with colleagues on specific cross-curricular activities, but all departments have their role to play, and this will have been detailed in the application. It is expected that gaining specialist status will result in a radical development in what is taught and how learning takes place across a school. Science Colleges are likely to be offering an enhanced curriculum in science and mathematics-related subjects as well as running exciting competitions, clubs and projects. A third of the annual funding will be spent on work with local communities, which will have a science and/or mathematics focus. This means working very closely with partner primary and secondary schools, providing resources and forging strong collaborative relationships that result in improvements in teaching and learning in science and mathematics. It also means understanding the needs of the wider community and working with organisations such as LEAs and Learning and Skills Councils to provide part of a co-ordinated programme of appropriate support and learning for specific groups of people. Visit [www.schoolsnetwork.org.uk/main.asp?page=52](http://www.schoolsnetwork.org.uk/main.asp?page=52) to find out about what some Science Colleges are doing in their classrooms and beyond.

Many schools that have taken on the challenge of the programme say that it has enabled departments and

individuals to do what they have always wanted to but not had the time, funding or external pressure to do so. It is not easy, but being a part of, and contributing to, a network of innovative schools gives support, enthusiasm and inspiration to keep going when it gets tough. You can read about what gaining science college status has meant for Thomas Hardy School in the June 2004 issue of *School Science Review* (p. 84).

### **The Specialist Schools Trust**

The Specialist Schools Trust is the registered educational charity that acts as the lead advisory body for the Specialist Schools Programme. The Trust supports all specialisms except Sports, where schools work with the Youth Sports Trust.

One aspect of the Trust's work is to offer advice, guidance and support to aspiring and designated specialist schools. It organises conferences for schools at all stages of their designation as well as many specialist conferences, seminars and networking meetings around specific subjects or themes. It also produces publications and newsletters, has discussion forums available and uses the website to showcase work currently being done by schools.

Headteacher Steering Groups and Expert Panels are set up for each specialism and the support, dissemination of good practice and development of a particular specialism is co-ordinated by Subject Leaders.

The Trust is also developing a network of Lead Practitioners in a number of curriculum areas, including science. These individuals are outstanding practitioners, grounded firmly in their schools but with some time funded by the Trust to support colleagues, develop exciting projects with them and disseminate good practice to colleagues via conferences, seminars and as case studies on the website.

Any school, whether specialist or not, can be part of the network of schools affiliated to the Specialist Schools Trust. There are over 2,300 schools who pay a membership fee to belong to what we believe is now the largest affiliated network of schools in the world. In addition, all affiliated schools now have the option to be a member of iNET (International Networking for Education Transformation). This is the branch of the

Trust dedicated to developing a network of like-minded schools, leaders and practitioners on a global scale.

The Specialist Schools Trust is also involved in a number of other projects. Visit the Trust's websites to find out more about its work.

### **The Specialist Schools Trust and ASE**

The Specialist Schools Trust and ASE are working collaboratively on a number of curriculum projects. For example they are currently delivering a very successful DfES-funded project 'Using ICT to impact on GCSE Science'. In this project, four schools have been identified who are under-equipped in terms of ICT and who are finding meeting targets in GCSE science difficult. These schools have been given funds and assistance in purchasing new ICT equipment and developing its use across the whole science department. The schools were identified from the network of schools in the Specialist Schools Trust and a launch event was jointly planned and delivered. Expertise, skills and contacts from both organisations were used to produce a day where the schools were immersed in various ICT options and then supported to write action plans for their proposed purchases and developments. ASE INSET Services is responsible for providing on going support to the schools for two terms.

The ASE has been an ideal vehicle for some specialist schools to deliver support for local teachers and technicians, which may be part of a school's community plan. The Science College funding can be used to provide a free venue and speakers for professional development activities involving local ASE members. Dartford Grammar School for Girls describes ASE as being '*the glue that enables a web of science professionals to work together*' for some of their Science College activities. ASE Field Officers are an excellent source of support and often know of good local speakers for school or community events.

Many staff in science colleges are members of the ASE Council, or supporting Committees, or are active members of ASE Region Committees. Science colleges participate in ASE events and conferences by providing venues and delivering presentations.

For example the Northern Area Conference in 2004 was held at Minsthorpe Community College, a Science College, and at the ASE Annual Meeting in Reading, a group of three Science Colleges delivered a presentation about some of their work both in the classroom and with their local communities.

Science Colleges are not the only specialist schools that have science as a key focus subject. Engineering Colleges and Technology Colleges will also have set challenging performance targets for the subject and are delivering curriculum innovations as described earlier. Many of these schools (around 1,000) use ASE resources in lessons, enrichment activities and clubs and have found that working closely with ASE has been highly advantageous in delivering their targets and developing their schools as centres of excellence.

The Trust's websites can be found at:  
[www.specialistschoolstrust.org.uk/](http://www.specialistschoolstrust.org.uk/)  
and [www.schoolsnetwork.org.uk](http://www.schoolsnetwork.org.uk)

The ASE can also provide specialist expertise. For example laboratory design is particularly important when specialist school funding is being used to refurbish science areas. The products of the ASE Laboratory Design for Teaching and Learning project, notably the interactive design software and compilation guidance materials, are very useful in the building of new, and refurbishing of existing, facilities.

ASE Chief Executive Dr Derek Bell is a key member of the Trust's Science Expert Panel and contributes to discussions about the development of science colleges and science in specialist schools. Both organisations support the national network of Science Learning Centres and jointly contribute to conferences, seminars and various working groups at a national level.

ASE membership comprises like-minded people committed to the improvement of science education. The ASE and the Specialist Schools Trust are working together towards their shared goal, that of excellence in science teaching and learning.

---

Annette Montague is Science Subject Leader at the Specialist Schools Trust.

---