

DCSF MPs Committee Report on School Accountability

Summary

A parent or carer who sends a child to school expects that the school will help that child to learn to the best of his or her ability, in a caring environment. Anyone who funds a school, whether through payment of taxes, fees or sponsorship, will expect that school to demonstrate good value for money. Employers, colleges and universities rely upon schools to lay the foundations for their pupils to become able and productive members of the workforce. Schools therefore bear heavy responsibilities, and they need to be held publicly accountable for the services which they provide.

Any system of accountability should in turn lead to improvement in those services, in terms of both education and broader outcomes, including wellbeing. Self-evaluation by schools is widely recognised as an essential element of accountability. For a school which is performing at a good level, embedding processes which encourage continuous self-improvement is likely to be of far more practical benefit than an infrequent inspection. Self-evaluation is a starting point for Ofsted in inspecting a school; but we believe that Ofsted should do more to encourage schools to be creative and produce evidence of the self-evaluation process which works for them rather than allow schools to gain the impression that the standard Self Evaluation Form (SEF) provided by Ofsted is mandatory.

There are now nearly 5,000 School Improvement Partners (SIPs), principally serving or former head teachers, appointed to help school leaders evaluate their school's performance. Many witnesses welcomed SIPs' work in providing the support and challenge necessary to support school improvement; but others found their effectiveness to be variable. The Government now proposes an enhanced role for SIPs, who would become in effect gatekeepers for all those who wished to engage in supporting and improving schools.

However, the Government needs to do more work to ensure that there will be enough SIPs with the appropriate skills and experience and with enough time to fulfil this expanded role. We are persuaded of the need for an inspectorate which is independent of government and which can assure the quality of provision in individual schools. However, Ofsted has grown enormously. Its responsibilities now encompass inspection of not just schools but also early years' settings, colleges, initial teacher education, adult education, children's social care and local authority children's services. Whether this is sustainable for a single organisation in the long term is debatable, and both Ofsted and the Government should be alert to any sign that the growth of Ofsted's responsibilities is causing it to become unwieldy or un-coordinated.

Ofsted is now using a new inspection framework. In general, we support the approach which it takes, matching frequency of inspection to levels of performance. Short notice periods for inspection are sensible and reduce the stress of preparation; without-notice inspection is appropriate where there are particular concerns about performance— particularly in relation to safeguarding—but it should not be used without good reason.

We do, however, recommend that Ofsted should rebalance its inspection framework in two ways. In evaluating academic attainment, Ofsted should give less evidential weight to test results and give more weight to the quality of teaching and learning observed by inspectors in the classroom. Also, when evaluating performance in non-academic areas such as pupil well-being, Ofsted should focus on developing qualitative measures which capture a broad range of a school's activity. Ofsted employs some 200 HMI inspectors. Approximately 1,000 more inspectors are supplied by contractors to work full-time or part-time. Although there was little direct evidence of a major gulf in quality between the two types of inspector, HMI inspectors are generally better respected and are rated highly. We believe that Ofsted should plan to have HMIs lead all inspections. Schools causing concern should always be inspected by a team headed by an HMI. We believe that all inspectors should be rigorously trained to the highest standard.

The Government intends to replace Achievement and Attainment Tables with a School Report Card for each school, published annually and setting out key outcomes in pupil attainment, wellbeing, reducing the impact of disadvantage, perceptions of the school, and possibly partnership working. How the Report Card would mesh with the interim assessments by Ofsted of high-performing schools - which only receive inspections approximately every five years under the new inspection framework - is unclear. The Government and Ofsted should work closely to produce a model of a School Report Card which can be used by Ofsted to make decisions on which schools should undergo a full inspection within the five year period. We welcome the introduction of a School Report Card which provides a broader evidence base for assessing schools' performance.

We support the proposal to introduce credits for narrowing the gaps in achievement between disadvantaged pupils and their peers; but there should not be penalties for increasing gaps in achievement. Such a policy would discourage schools from admitting challenging pupils and might create perverse incentives for schools not to push gifted and talented students to reach really high levels of achievement. We are not persuaded that an overall score on a School Report Card is either needed or appropriate. A Report Card is unlike an Ofsted inspection, which is based upon extensive analysis of a school's provision across the board, and based upon quantitative and qualitative evidence as well as first-hand experience. It can never be a full account of a school's performance, yet the inclusion of an overall score would suggest that it was.

The main message in this Report is a warning against the complexity which results from overlapping accountability structures and serial policy initiatives. The Government is correct in saying in the 21st Century Schools White Paper that schools should be empowered to take charge of their own improvement processes; but shifting Government priorities and the pressures of inspection, targets and Government programmes for school improvement combine to prevent schools from having the freedom to take ownership of their improvement. The "flexibility" of the accountability system, championed by the Government, may not be quite the benefit which it appears to be. Schools and local authorities now need a period of stability so that they can regroup, take time to identify where their priorities lie, and then work to secure the necessary improvements