

# UPDATE on changes to the school accountability system in England

## Introduction

The school accountability system in England is under scrutiny. This roundup up of key articles and policy updates gives a brief summary of the arguments in favour of reform, the response of the government, and the latest news from Ofsted.

## Summary

In 2016, progress is introduced as an accountability measure for primary and secondary schools, along with a revised set of attainment-based measures. While generally perceived as a fairer measure than judging schools on attainment only, this fuels a surge in data gathering amongst schools, as progress becomes a high stakes measure, and schools feel under constant pressure to provide evidence.

The changes to school accountability measures go hand in hand with changes to school inspections. From 2015, 'Outstanding' schools become exempt from routine inspections, while 'Good' schools receive a one-day inspection approximately every four years, providing their performance is maintained. Data scrutiny becomes a major feature of the inspection process.

Meanwhile, there is a growing sense of unease over the impact of England's accountability system, which is seen as out of step with high performing jurisdictions such as Finland, Denmark and the Netherlands, and detrimental to achieving the high-quality education outcomes and sustained improvements it seeks to deliver.

In September 2017, Ofsted publishes their strategy for 2017-22 in which they describe their 'guiding principle' as "A force for improvement through intelligent, responsible and focused inspection and regulation".

Pressure to change the accountability system builds through 2018, with the academic, commercial and teaching community (through their unions) arguing for reform which would see a shift in power from top-down accountability, towards greater autonomy and self-regulation amongst schools.

In the OECD publication 'How to Build a 21<sup>st</sup>-century school system'<sup>1</sup> Andreas Schleicher observes that "autonomy in an education system...can create stronger incentives for innovation. ...By contrast, innovative change can be more difficult in hierarchical and bureaucratic structures that are geared towards rewarding compliance with rules and regulations."

To date, the DfE remains committed to the dual accountability measures of inspections and national testing.

## Autonomy versus Accountability

The narrative from education policy makers is that high accountability is balanced against high autonomy, with Multi Academy Trusts cited as the flagship programme which delivers on this promise. But according to an indepth study carried out by the IoE between 2014 and 2017<sup>2</sup>, which looked at 47 school case studies in four regions, this 'semblance' of autonomy and self governance is

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<sup>1</sup> Schleicher, A (2018), World Class: How to build a 21<sup>st</sup>-century school system, Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education, OECT Publishing, Paris.

<sup>2</sup> Toby Greany and Rob Highham, (2018), Hierarchy, Markets and Networks. Analysing the 'self-improving school-led system' agenda in England and the implications for schools, IoE Press, UCL Institute of Education Press

‘in practice experienced as a loss of support coupled with increased pressure to perform against measured targets.’ The summary goes on to say: ‘case study school leaders regularly felt incentivized to prioritize the interests of the school over the interests of particular groups of, usually more vulnerable, children. High levels of stress were widely reported to result from these pressures for compliance and standardization, with a clear sense of a constrained professionalism among school staff.’ In other words, rather than freeing teachers and leaders to collaborate and build on best practice, drawing on their professional expertise, state control over school performance is intensifying, with many educationalists feeling disempowered as they grapple with an increasingly complex and fragmented education landscape. [https://www.ucl-ioe-press.com/ioe-content/uploads/2018/08/Hierarchy-Markets-and-Networks\\_Executive-Summary.pdf](https://www.ucl-ioe-press.com/ioe-content/uploads/2018/08/Hierarchy-Markets-and-Networks_Executive-Summary.pdf)

### Key publications in 2018

What Impact Does Accountability Have on Curriculum, Standards and Engagement in Education? published by the NFER in September 2018 reviews the literature on the impact of accountability on curriculum, standards and engagements in six countries. It identifies the unintended consequences of high stakes school accountability regimes, and concludes “If Canada, Finland and Singapore do not have school inspection featured in external evaluations and these countries perform better than England PISA tests, we must question Ofsted’s future within the English system.”

Read the full report here: <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/what-impact-does-accountability-have-on-curriculum-standards-and-engagement-in-education/>

Improving School Accountability: September also saw the publication of the NAHT’s report based on the findings and recommendations of their accountability commission. The case for change argues that the current accountability system has worked to the detriment of education by (amongst other things) narrowing the curriculum and failing to meet the diverse needs of all pupils, diverting attention from teaching and learning as schools constantly strive to be ‘Ofsted-ready’ with real-time information on the progress of every pupil along with predictions of future performance. Recommendations range from setting out a new role for Ofsted which focuses on identifying school that are failing and providing stronger diagnostic insights, removing the exemption from inspection for outstanding schools, and encouraging schools to become self-reflective to reduce top-down accountability. Read the full report here <https://www.naht.org.uk/news-and-opinion/news/structures-inspection-and-accountability-news/improving-school-accountability/>

In ‘Ideas for a 21<sup>st</sup> century enlightenment’, Julian Astle and Laura Partridge cite 10 ‘categories of problem’ that stem from the use of metrics to measure school and teacher performance, and argue that ‘fundamental change might now be achievable’, given the crisis in teacher recruitment and retention, and Amanda Spielman’s campaign for an inspection regime that rewards schools for the quality of the education they provide. [https://www.thersa.org/globalassets/pdfs/reports/rsa\\_ideas-for-a-21st-century-enlightenment.pdf](https://www.thersa.org/globalassets/pdfs/reports/rsa_ideas-for-a-21st-century-enlightenment.pdf)

In November 2018, The House of Commons Library published a briefing paper called: “School inspections in England: Ofsted” which covers the background to school inspections, inspection processes, inspection outcomes, and current issues. The final chapter is a useful summary of the current status of the inspection reform process, and next steps in the process. <http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN07091/SN07091.pdf>

### Government response

In May 2018, Damien Hinds announced ‘sweeping changes’ to the school accountability system, according to Schools Week. In essence, the accountability regime based around inspections and

schools' performance in national tests is unchanged. There is however greater clarity over who can carry out inspections (Ofsted), the consequences of failing to meet accountability expectations, and what constitutes 'acceptable performance'. The latter means doing away with the dual measures of 'floor' and 'coasting' standards. In response to concerns amongst primary schools struggling with year on year fluctuations to results arising from small cohorts, the introduction of rolling three-year averages for performance data as an addition to (not replacement of) annual headline measures was announced.

Although the Ebacc measure has remained a central component of the suite of performance-based accountability measures for schools since it was announced in 2010, the DfE have scaled back targets over the percentage of students taking it, changed the way it is calculated, and from 2019 will also publish Ebacc entry and achievement comparison tables of similar schools.

More radical reform is being led by Ofsted, with Amanda Spielman's speeches over the past 12 months giving a clear sense of direction and an insight into the research driving the changes.

The new inspection framework, due to come into effect from September 2019, will be consulted on from January.

Ofsted wants teachers and leaders to focus more of their time on the real substance of education, with the inspection regime 'complementing' rather than adding to the scrutiny of performance data. Ms Spielman has expressed concern that: 'The cumulative impact of performance tables and inspections, and the consequences that are hung on them, has increased the pressure on [schools]; focusing too narrowly on test and exam results can leave little time for hard thinking about the curriculum, and ...can sometimes end up making a casualty of it. ...performance data is coming at the expense of what it taught at schools.'

In summary, the new framework will: Replace the existing inspection judgements with four new judgements; remove the grade for pupils' outcomes; and focus on the substance of education and a broad curriculum.

### The direction of travel

Government remains committed to the accountability regime, counterbalanced, in Education Secretary Damien Hind's view, by the autonomy granted to MATs. "The vision behind Multi Academy Trusts is a simple one. It's about schools coming together to achieve more than they can on their own." Having said that, Government is turning its attention to accountability for MATs, which are currently exempt from Ofsted inspections<sup>3</sup>. <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/damian-hinds-speech-at-confederation-of-school-trusts-conference> [October 2018]

Ofsted, led by Amanda Spielman, is pursuing a strategy which challenges Government orthodoxy that good results are the only measure of high quality education outcomes. If she remains in post, we may see a shift in the balance of power away from top-down, government-led policies, towards a teacher-led system, in which schools are genuinely empowered to innovate, experiment and design their own curricula and goals, with creativity and excellence rewarded through a newly designed inspection system. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/chief-inspector-sets-out-vision-for-new-education-inspection-framework>. "I want to make sure that at Ofsted we focus on the 'how' and the

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<sup>3</sup> In July 2018, Amanda Spielman said that the inspectorate was trialling a new approach to inspecting academies in MATs to better understand the way they operate, improve the reporting on the impact of MATs, and improve intelligence-gathering by sharing evidence between inspection teams.

*‘what:’ the essence of what performance tables cannot capture”* – Amanda Spielman, Ofsted Chief Inspector, outlines the thinking behind the proposed new inspection framework

That said, funding for Ofsted has been cut significantly over the past years: from £280 million in 2005-2006, to £167 million in 2015/16, a decrease of 40% in real terms, and is expected to fall further in 2019/20.

Teacher unions, along with many others in the community, will continue to lobby for a system based on trust, teacher judgement, and removal of external accountability measures, to bring England in line with other high-performing jurisdictions. In the meantime, there has been cautious optimism over the recent announcements from Ofsted.

In the end, budgets and funding could be the ultimate driver of change: inspection, national testing (the new times tables tests are costing £5 million to implement) and top-down accountability regimes are costly to implement and maintain, and with school budgets squeezed ever-harder, the system may reach a tipping point.

### About this document

Compiled by Melissa Mackinlay, an independent strategy consultant with eighteen years experience of working in the education publishing sector, this draws on documents in the public domain, in an attempt to make sense of key issues shaping the education landscape.

I’d love to hear your feedback. Please email [melissamackinlay@btinternet.com](mailto:melissamackinlay@btinternet.com) or call me on 07426709505.