

ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS AND LECTURERS

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Indicators of a school's contribution to well-being
Response from the Association of Teachers and Lecturers
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ATL, as a leading education union, recognises the link between education policy and our members' conditions of employment. Our evidence-based policy making enables us to campaign and negotiate from a position of strength. We champion good practice and achieve better working lives for our members.

We help our members, as their careers develop, through first-rate research, advice, information and legal support. Our 160,000 members – teachers, lecturers, headteachers and support staff – are empowered to get active locally and nationally. We are affiliated to the TUC, and work with government and employers by lobbying and through social partnership.

ATL policy

ATL believes that teachers as professionals must be recognised for their knowledge, expertise and judgement, at the level of the individual pupil and in articulating the role of education in increasing social justice. Within light national parameters, development of the education system should take place at a local level: the curriculum should be developed in partnership with local stakeholders; assessment should be carried out through local professional networks. Schools are increasingly encouraged to work collaboratively to offer excellent teaching and learning, and to support pupils' well-being, across a local area. Accountability mechanisms should be developed so that there is a proper balance of accountability to national government and the local community, which supports collaboration rather than competition.

ATL response

Schools' accountability for pupil well-being

ATL agrees with the aim of the Children's Plan, *to make England the best place in the world for children and young people to grow up*. Schools have a vital role to play in promoting pupil well-being; they also need a wide range of support in order to focus on their core priorities of teaching and learning. We would state very clearly that the problems of society cannot be solved by schools alone.

Teaching and learning are the core responsibilities of schools and those who work within them. However, pupils' learning is about more than their academic achievement; schools are also places where pupils learn about themselves, their health and relationships, and the local and global society

in which they live and on which they have an impact. Schools have a responsibility to support pupils' personal development which includes but is not limited to their intellectual development. These are aspects of pupils' well-being which are part of the broad school curriculum and which, in many instances, are already measured through teacher assessment.

Schools are also, for many pupils, havens of security and continuity in a complex and changing world. It is right that those who work in schools continue to expect high standards of behaviour, offer excellent systems to ensure support for pupils who need additional care and protection where necessary, and promote equality and tackle discrimination. Listening to pupils and staff is the best way for schools to assess whether they are managing these things in the best way possible.

ATL believes that schools are accountable to pupils and parents for these aspects of their work. Schools are also, rightly, accountable to the local community for the education of pupils in the local area. However, there is a big difference between accountability for practice and accountability for outcomes, particularly where the outcomes are outside the control of schools. There is also a wealth of difference between local accountability, and national comparisons and benchmarking. Professional accountability implies commitment to evaluate and improve; it does not require a juggernaut of data collection and detailed comparison of schools.

The current accountability system for schools encourages an insular approach, ensuring that each individual school does what it can to climb the league tables, and the proposed report cards do little to alleviate this. If we are to meet the needs of all children, then we must move away from the assumption that pupil well-being can be promoted school-by-individual-school. It is disappointing, therefore, that this approach to judging children's well-being commences at the level of individual schools. It could instead start by establishing measures of the well-being of individual children and young people, using these to derive appropriate higher level measures, or instead start from an attempt to establish the characteristics of successful Children's Trusts and Children and Young People's Plans, using these to derive appropriate lower level measures.

We welcome moves to consider the accountability of local authorities for pupil well-being. As schools increasingly operate in partnerships and through Children's Trusts, local accountability is much the best measure. However, the current proposal, by insisting on both school indicators and (separate) local authority indicators, appears to duplicate accountability measures rather than placing that accountability at the highest appropriate level. Schools should be able to use local information to reflect on their own strengths and weaknesses; that assessment should be part of the SEF, validated by the SIP, and may well be published for parents as part of the school's information. ATL cannot see any need for further national data to be collected or to be published at individual school level.

Use of indicators

ATL has serious concerns about proposals to measure well-being in terms of crude data. We are disappointed that government is spending time and money developing indicators that will indicate nothing of any substance, instead of attempting to develop sound policy that reflects the

impossibility of collecting meaningful data. ATL believes that this government's obsession with targets and measurements is detrimental to the aim of offering services that meet individual needs.

The problems are intensified because of the different uses to which the data will be put. While it is right that data should be collected once and used many times, government must be careful to start from the data that schools will use, rather than defining what might be useful nationally and then finding ways for schools to use it. This proposal appears to stem from a perceived need to compare schools nationally, rather than primarily a desire to support schools in their own evaluation and improvement. Because of the range of factors outside a school's control, it is impossible for this kind of data to represent anything other than outcomes. It cannot be used as an accurate measure of a school's contribution to pupil well-being, or a school's contribution to improvement in outcomes. Publication of the data as 'indicators of a school's contribution' will invite comparison of outcomes as if they are comparisons of the effectiveness of schools.

We are concerned particularly that perception surveys will be analysed in aggregate terms and in terms of statistical deviations from a mean point. These statistical deviations are likely to be treated as deviations from a norm, rather than as variations from an average. These variations will quickly be seen as 'scores' which will lead to a damaging overemphasis on minor fluctuations from year to year. Given this unavoidable 'norm referencing', we are also concerned that the proposals seem to suggest that statistics for individual schools should be compared only with other schools in the same locality, rather than with similar schools, or with a national sample.

Since we consider the proposed well-being indicators to be unreliable, we would also consider it inappropriate to use a school's 'scores' in relation to these indicators as a part of a 'health check', impacting on the frequency of inspections.

The proposed indicators

There is, as yet, no consensus on how schools might best contribute to pupil well-being. Correspondingly, there is no consensus on appropriate measures of schools' contributions to pupil well-being. Under these circumstances, the measures being proposed in the consultation cannot even be considered as 'proxy' measures of schools' contributions to pupil well-being.

The indicators fall into two categories. While it is true that the 'quantified outcomes' indicators are already (or shortly will be) available at school level, this does not mean that they are the appropriate indicators for pupil well-being. Instead of identifying the aspects of each of the five outcomes that might be relevant to schools, and then considering whether there are measures of those outcomes already collected, this consultation starts from the data that is already collected and attempts to find a purpose for them. ATL believes that these measures are not in fact concerned with pupil well-being but represent some measure of organisational efficiency in retaining pupils (regardless of their actual levels of well-being) and making them eat school dinners. These measures (as the consultation acknowledges) would need considerable interpretation before they could

be considered in any way as measures of an individual school's contribution to pupil well-being.

The indicators relating to pupil and parent perceptions are even more problematic. Many of the questions are subject to interpretation. Some children, particularly younger children, will be influenced by their feelings about school today rather than taking a longer term view, and other questions will be subject to circumstances in the community at the time of the questionnaire. These are all issues that are taken into account when schools ask the questions, but which will be lost in national collection and comparison.

We have real concerns about the proposal to accredit private providers of surveys, and to 'invite' schools to pay to submit data for national comparison. Where schools use these kinds of questionnaires currently, the information provided is only as good as the questions asked, and for the data to be useful schools must understand the local, contextual and personal issues involved. Some schools will continue to pay for questionnaires that they find useful, others will develop their own ways of surveying pupils and parents, and while ATL supports moves towards ensuring all schools take the views of parents and pupils into account in evaluating and improving practice, this should be managed as part of self-evaluation. We are opposed to any move towards 'encouraging' schools to pay for this information to be aggregated for national purposes.

Conclusion

We believe that the measures proposed in this consultation will not offer either valid or reliable data. They cannot be said to reflect the high aspirations of the Every Child Matters agenda in general, nor of the new and emergent body of practice which has been developing in response to the creation of reciprocal duties to co-operate between agencies offering services for children. Responsibility for children's well-being cannot be placed on schools alone, but must instead be shared across local areas and services.

These proposed indicators are of outcomes, most of which will have many contributing factors, and there is no indication of the school's contribution. While the supporting document acknowledges the limitations of the indicators, there is no guarantee that any publication of the data will also make those limitations clear.

ATL agrees that schools should be accountable for aspects of pupil well-being. Professional accountability implies commitment to evaluate and improve. We do not agree that this accountability needs indicators, benchmarks and national comparisons. Instead, it would be better measured, validated and reported at a local level, through local validation of the school's self-evaluation.