

ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS AND LECTURERS

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New Inquiry into School Accountability
Response from the Association of Teachers and Lecturers
27 February 2009

Executive summary

ATL believes that:

- ♦ Accountability is a duty on all public servants but especially those entrusted with the education of future generations.
- ♦ Accountability must be balanced against professional autonomy.
- ♦ The current system gives undue weight to central government, particularly through national test data and Ofsted inspection.
- ♦ This leads to a narrowing of the curriculum and mitigates against professional reflection, innovation and creativity.
- ♦ Schools are also accountable to parents, the governing body and the local community.
- ♦ The accountability system must rebalance these interests.
- ♦ It is no longer appropriate to hold schools to account purely on an individual basis for the achievement or the well-being of their pupils.

Ofsted

- ♦ Ofsted should no longer carry out section 5 school inspections.
- ♦ Self-evaluation should drive school improvement, with the SEF validated locally.
- ♦ While there continues to be Ofsted inspection of individual schools, inspectors should have good knowledge and understanding of the phases that they inspect, particularly in the early years, preferably based on recent classroom experience.
- ♦ No notice inspection does not support schools to improve.

Performance reporting

- ♦ Checking the level of performance nationally should be carried out by sample testing.
- ♦ National testing should be abolished prior to the end of compulsory education, as part of a comprehensive review of the national curriculum and assessment systems.
- ♦ Test data at individual school level, whether raw scores or contextual value added, lack reliability. Their publication in performance tables influences school and teacher behaviour negatively.

School report card

- ♦ the school report card will replicate the problems of the current accountability system. Individual grades will be allocated based on accumulation of flawed data, but will be reported as if they offer meaningful information and comparison.
- ♦ Ofsted's publication of a 'health-check' is subject to the same concern.
- ♦ We do not believe that the proposal to collect well-being indicators is sound.

ATL – the education union

1. 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.
2. 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

3. 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.

Accountability

4. While we welcome the Select Committee's inquiry, as part of the series of inquiries into the underpinnings of the school education system, our response is tempered by our understanding of the position of the Minister of State for Schools and Learners. In conversation through social partnership, we understand that he will not move from his position that there will be a single grade for each school, published on the Report Card, and that schools will continue to be held individually accountable. We believe that if this decision has already been taken it closes down any debate about the purposes and means of the accountability system.

5. The current accountability system is based on frequent high-stakes testing, including an ever-increasing number of targets with league tables and a residual fear of Ofsted adding heavy pressure to drive compliance with government initiatives and the National Strategies.
6. This system encourages an insular approach, ensuring that each individual school does what it can to climb the league tables. Professional accountability implies commitment to evaluate and improve, it does not require a juggernaut of data collection and detailed comparison of schools.
7. We enclose with this submission ATL's position statement, *New accountability for schools*, published in 2007. In summary, ATL believes that:
 - ♦ Accountability is a duty on all public servants but especially those entrusted with the education of future generations.
 - ♦ Accountability must be balanced against professional autonomy.
 - ♦ The current system gives undue weight to central government, through national test data, Ofsted inspection and the GTC.
 - ♦ Schools are also accountable to parents, the governing body and the local community.
 - ♦ The accountability system must rebalance these interests, through:
 - Ending national testing prior to the end of compulsory education
 - Developing a system of sample-testing in order to check levels of performance nationally
 - Placing a duty on local inspectors/advisers to report to the local authority their evaluation of the School Evaluation Form (SEF)
 - Revising the duties of Ofsted, so that Ofsted no longer carries out Section 5 inspections of schools, but focuses instead on thematic inspections which are useful for national system development, and possibly on monitoring national achievement through the sample testing
 - Developing the role of the School Improvement Partner (SIP)
 - Supporting informal accountability to parents through good parent/school relationships.
8. The accountability system must develop in tandem with an increased focus on partnerships and collaborations, whether between schools, between schools and other education providers (particularly early years and 14-19), and between schools and other children's services.

Ofsted

9. ATL believes that Ofsted should no longer carry out section 5 school inspections. Self-evaluation should drive school improvement, with the SEF validated locally. Local authorities should deploy staff who can evaluate the SEF and validate it against their own ongoing knowledge of the school. This would combine both support and challenge into a single role, as well as convey the accountability of the school to the local authority.

10. While we believe that Ofsted inspection has improved since the introduction of the school self-evaluation form (SEF) and shorter notice inspection, our members still report huge workload implications from the perceived need to be 'inspection-ready', and from some inappropriate use of Ofsted gradings for lesson observations by headteachers. Ofsted continues to have a reputation for punitive rather than supportive inspection which limits the capacity of many schools to innovate and be creative.
11. Our members continue to express concerns about the training of Ofsted inspectors, their recent classroom experience and their knowledge and understanding of the phases that they inspect, particularly in the early years.
12. While there continues to be Ofsted inspection of individual schools, we believe that no-notice inspection is entirely inappropriate, and we have a number of concerns about the publication of 'health-checks' and other interim non-inspection reports of schools, because of their reliance on school-level data which we believe to be unreliable. This data is already reported in different ways and used for too many different purposes.

Performance reporting

13. National performance in particular subjects or aspects of subjects, as deemed important, can be measured and reported through sample testing.
14. Evidence shows that it is the reporting of data at individual school level through the 'performance tables', rather than the existence of tests per se, that limits the curriculum and puts pressure on children and teachers. A school's performance in the tables, within a system which encourages crude parent choice, and which can trigger major interventions such as National Challenge, puts enormous pressure on schools to focus on limited aspects of the curriculum, and test performance rather than real learning.
15. It is often the case that only schools with an already good standing in the tables feel it possible to innovate and teach creatively, while those who are lower down feel the need to focus more intensively on test outcomes. Doing 'more of the same' is unlikely to benefit many of these pupils.

School report card

16. We believe that the school report card will replicate the problems of the current accountability system. From research on assessment for learning in the classroom, we know that where grades are allocated individual comments on the context are unlikely to be heeded. We are concerned that the grade will be allocated based on the accumulation of already flawed data. Although all the measures are problematic, we believe it vital to avoid an overall score, particularly if readers are to engage with deeper information about the school.
17. The intention to include measures of 'attainment' and 'pupil progress' in the Report Card are contentious because of doubts about the reliability and validity of reporting test performance on a school-by-school basis. The data on the second two areas, "wider outcomes" and "narrowing gaps" is unlikely to be any more reliable. While we welcome

acknowledgement that schools are about more than academic performance, we do not believe that the proposal to collect data on well-being is sound. The intention for indicators to be outcome focused is contentious as some of those outcomes will be beyond the sole control of the school. We are concerned that the inclusion of "parents' and pupils' views" emphasises the parent/carer as the user of a service rather than as an active participant in its delivery and chances of success.

18. Responsibility for children's well-being cannot be placed on schools alone, but must instead be shared across local areas and services. The Report Card which is based at school-level may well recognise different aspects of pupil achievement beyond the narrowly academic but it does not address the issue of this shared responsibility, despite an emphasis in the vision on partnerships, particularly on multi-agency working.

Conclusion

19. If we are to meet the needs of all children, then we must move away from the assumption that accountability should be measured school-by-individual-school.