

# ***New accountability for schools***

## **Context**

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There is no longer any argument that there is a need for accountability in the public sector. Proper accountability is a duty on all public servants but especially those entrusted with the education of future generations. Teachers should be accountable; the questions are to whom and how? This statement sets out proposals for the reform of accountability mechanisms for schools in England, which would reflect the interests of a range of stakeholders.

Such accountability must be balanced against professional autonomy. Since 2005, the Government and its Social Partners have been committed to developing a new professionalism for teachers. ATL has a distinctive vision of new professionalism, which includes an increased autonomy over matters of professional expertise.

‘...ATL judges the current balance between professional autonomy and prescription by government and managers to be inappropriate...’

‘In order to enable and support classroom practitioners’ autonomy and professional capacity, changes need to be made to ITT, to the sites and nature of curriculum development, and to the excessive and overlapping systems of teacher accountability.’ *New professionalism*, ATL, 2005

Other organisations, notably the GTCE and ASCL, have recently addressed accountability, but both have assumed a continuation of the standards agenda with centralised imposition, together with multiple targets for pupil performance and workforce accountability through a variety of mechanisms including data publication and inspection. ATL policies on curriculum and assessment prefigure a move-on from this agenda. ATL believes that the content of curriculum should be designed locally by teachers, in partnership with local stakeholders, and that pupil assessment should be undertaken locally by teachers.

## **Major levers on school behaviour**

Government narrative on accountability has been confused since the 1988 Education Reform Act introduced the mechanisms of the market place. Parents are presumed to be the consumers, and are offered ‘product information’ to assist their selection. Yet the consumer cannot have the right to choose because of fixed supply, only the right to express a preference. Parental preference is based on two main sources of information: league tables and Ofsted reports, which are meaningful only to experts. It is not yet clear whether the school profile or the more accessible new Ofsted report format will prove to be more useful. The problem with accountability is that the major

mechanisms, league tables and Ofsted, are really for Whitehall use, and have increased the centralisation of power within the schools system.

The intention of an early Chief Inspector to make Ofsted a weapon of terror is reflected in teacher attitudes to this day. Irrespective of its formal powers, folk myth about Ofsted's expectations continues to be the most powerful lever on schools' behaviour. When the Government wants schools to do something but feels constrained from making it statutory, it announces that it will be inspected by Ofsted.

Until the reform of inspection under Section 5 of the 2005 Education Act there had been serious quality control problems, and consistency of judgement remains an issue. Most seriously, until the 2006 Education and Inspections Act explicitly gave Ofsted an improvement role it claimed to be exclusively an inspection agency, washing its hands of advising schools how to deal with the weaknesses it identified. Paradoxically, this new duty coincides with an inspection process which relies on analysis of data and documentation and includes very little direct observation of teaching. Inspection reports list areas for improvement, but usually these have already been identified by the school itself and are seldom sufficiently specific to guide future work.

Research consistently shows that the league table performance of a school plays only a small part in parental preference decisions. However, this data plays a huge part in government strategy. Senior civil servants delight in sophisticated presentations of pupil performance, apparently oblivious to the very serious weaknesses in the data. The Government has caused schools to be driven by pupil performance data by encouraging the publication of league tables, by setting targets which work down to school level and by moving towards a data-based inspection system.

Schools experience strong accountability to central government by these means, and in new ways. An important feature of the inspection system is the school self-evaluation form (SEF). Self-evaluation is a necessary precursor to improvement, and in principle the SEF is a useful tool. At first, self-evaluation is time-consuming, but as it becomes routine the work of updating the SEF becomes more manageable. However, by introducing it as an imposition and making it the key document for Ofsted inspections, the Government encourages a calculated approach to its completion rather than a frank one.

A further layer of national accountability is provided by the GTCs, which have powers relating to the registration and deregistration of teachers.

### Other stakeholders

The weakness of the present pattern of accountability is that it gives undue weight to central government in comparison with other stakeholders to whom schools have a responsibility.

1. Parents in general desire accountability in respect of the progress of their own children, but the evidence is that their concern is for 'the whole child', their happiness, sociability, freedom from bullying, as much as their progress in school subjects. Governments forget that parents enjoy this accountability informally. From their daily presence in the classroom at the youngest age, to more structured meetings in the secondary school, parents can exert great influence on their offspring's teachers. Government attempts to regulate the parent-school relationship fail to deal satisfactorily with the very different needs of parents in terms of the different performance of their offspring. Bureaucratic requirements on schools to complete a standardised school profile annually and to report to parents three times a year fail to deal with the increasing tendency of schools, by using new technologies or otherwise, to inform parents on an 'as needed' basis. **ATL believes that the Government must give due importance to parents by means of spreading good practice in home-school relations rather than the imposition of further formal requirements.**
2. Schools are also formally accountable to their governing body. ATL recognises that governors are volunteers who dedicate a great deal of time and commitment to their schools. The role of Chair of Governors is particularly onerous. However, ATL believes that too few governing bodies effectively

represent staff, parental and community interests or exercise true governance. Governing bodies are reliant on the will of the headteacher to share information and encourage debate. The Government's only justification for Trust schools is that a Trust would introduce high quality governance, but there is no evidence for this, or indeed that quality of governance makes any significant difference to school performance. In practice, many governor's duties (such as to complete the school profile annually) have to be undertaken by staff.

3. Maintained schools are provided by the taxpayer for the benefit of children of school-age and society as a whole. ATL believes that, as such, schools must be accountable to the local community served by the school; local communities ultimately administer schools through local authorities. This level of accountability has been weakened by policies of centralisation to Whitehall on the one hand and devolution to the school on the other hand. With the lack of capacity of governing bodies to be effective agents of accountability, schools formally have become excessively independent of the community, although many parents continue to lobby local councillors about local schools.

The 2006 Education and Inspections Act restores to local authorities duties and powers with respect to schools. They are now required to intervene in schools which cause concern without waiting for an Ofsted inspection to confirm that there are problems. This new accountability should be considered in conjunction with the development of the new role of School Improvement Partner (SIP), which is considered below.

### ATL's proposals

A new accountability must rebalance the interests listed above. It should contain the following mechanisms.

1. **ATL's policy 'Subject to Change' recommends the abolition of all national testing prior to the end of compulsory education as part of a comprehensive revision of the national curriculum and assessment arrangements.** National test results have been put to no fewer than 18 different uses, including system monitoring, school choice and selection, but they should no longer be used for school level analysis as they lack reliability.
2. **Checking the level of performance nationally, which is the important data for central government, can be achieved much more efficiently and cheaply by means of a single purpose sample test.** The test could be undertaken annually. Only a tiny sample of the school population would need to perform the test to achieve statistical validity; the results could not be analysed at school level so the test would not influence teacher behaviour. The Scottish Survey of Achievement is one model. An advantage of this method is an annual collection of results, which would be comparable over time.
3. Self-evaluation should continue to be used to drive school improvement, but it only becomes an accountability tool when validated by an external body. At the moment, there is duplication here: Ofsted validates for the Government, in about half of schools a local authority inspector also reviews the school's work and the SIPs broadly repeat this. **ATL believes that the proposal for sample testing provides sufficient accountability to Whitehall, and that the validation of the SEF should be a local accountability tool. Ofsted should no longer undertake Section 5 inspections of schools.** Ofsted should continue its thematic investigations, which are useful for national system development. Its other role could be to monitor national achievement levels revealed by the sample tests, although duplication of work with the DCSF must be avoided.

The purpose of the SIP remains contested, although it was introduced to facilitate a 'new relationship with schools', which aims to streamline the relationship between Whitehall and schools by means of 'a single conversation'. Some, particularly headteachers' representatives, envisage the SIP as a local serving headteacher who offers support and challenge to a colleague. However, SIPs

are employed by local authorities. In order to comply with their increased duties to monitor and intervene in schools, local authorities must be able to deploy staff who can evaluate the SEF and validate it against their own ongoing knowledge of the school. ATL believes that both support and challenge can be combined in a single role, and that this role should convey the accountability of the school to the local authority. **ATL proposes that it should be the duty of a local inspector/ advisor to report to the local authority their evaluation of the SEF, as a replacement for Ofsted inspections.**

This duty would require substantial development in the role of the SIP. It would require considerably more than five days per year, which is the current time allocation per school. It would require an ongoing relationship with the school, including the whole staff rather than only the leadership, in which the school's context was understood. Improvement work could then be continually supported, with a stress on access to professional development for all staff. However strong the arguments that local inspector/advisors ought to have successful headship experience, they could not be serving headteachers as they might be employed full-time to support a number of schools. This role is similar to that of link inspector, which it would replace, with rationalisation benefits. Ofsted might have a role in working with local authorities to support this work, and in collating local authority evaluations of schools in order to enhance its understanding of the national picture.

In such an arrangement, evaluation of the SEF and the school profile should not be summarised by a grading system, which is simplistic and unhelpful. The community would wish to know whether a school is reaching an acceptable standard, but fine distinctions should be abolished. Neither would a school be unreasonably judged on the basis of a single year's pupil performance, since the local authority would be aware of improvement action being taken by the school, and of the five-year trend which is more reliable. In addition, local authorities themselves would need to be accountable, with schools having a right to appeal against unreasonable judgements.

Together, these proposals rebalance schools' accountability. They enhance the position of parents while recognising the informal nature of home-school relations. They enhance the position of the community, as represented by the local authority. They rationalise the position of central government, and put into practice the Government's strategy for devolving responsibility in the delivery of public services. While increasing costs at local level due to the development of local inspection, they radically reduce costs at national level, not only through the abolition of expensive national tests but by the rationalisation of Ofsted.

These proposals support improved achievement by the nation's pupils. They recognise school improvement as a process and provide more support; they end the tendency of schools to fear Ofsted and instead provide a sense of autonomous but guided responsibility for development. A new accountability, linked to a new professionalism for school staff, will improve system performance more readily than the outmoded centralism of the current arrangements.