

ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS AND LECTURERS

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National College / DSCF consultation on the School Improvement Partner Programme

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 and colleges 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

We believe SIPs can play a valuable role in helping schools provide a high quality education for its pupils. ATL welcomes an enhanced role for school improvement partners (SIPs) but cautions that the model proposed needs more development, requires a stronger understanding of the difficulty of recruiting and retaining good and effective SIPs, and ultimately must answer the question of how school improvement and accountability interact. We strongly advocate a shift from national to local accountability for schools, and we believe an enhanced school improvement partner has a significant role to play in ensuring such a change is effective and helps schools improve.

Improvement and accountability

There is a tightrope to be walked by SIPs between an improvement role and serving the function of school accountability. It is essential that SIPs do not become an enforcement arm of the local authority, that they are not – and are not seen to be – a spy in school. ATL members are cynical about existing relationships between Ofsted, SIPs and local authorities and we have heard suggestions that SIPs, with LA encouragement, are reporting concerns to Ofsted. Rather they should be a critical friend of the school; nurturing and supportive. This is the basis for building the relationship between SIP and school for the goal of school improvement. ATL believes that both support and challenge can be combined in a single role. Supportive accountability will encourage schools, colleges and the professionals working within them to be innovative and creative, where punitive accountability measures are seen to limit that capacity.

ATL believes that accountability is a duty on all public servants but especially those entrusted with the education of future generations. However, accountability must be balanced against professional autonomy. We said in our submission to the Select Committee for Children, Schools and Families' 2009/10 enquiry into school accountability that "Professional accountability implies commitment to evaluate and improve, it does not require a juggernaut of data collection and detailed comparison of schools". 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. We must remember that schools are accountable beyond central government; to parents, the governing body and the local community. The accountability system must rebalance these interests and the role of SIP can play a part in this.

There are some dangers to guard against in enhancing the role of school improvement partner. An extended set of responsibilities and powers must not cause a tipping of the balance from helpful to punitive and we should be wary at all times of the enhanced role leading to more 'tick box' accountability. An ATL head teacher member's analysis of meetings with the SIP is described as follows:

"On every occasion we spend 80% of the time doing 'what we have to do' – a list from the LA of SEF sections to review, attendance data to check, progress data to verify etc.; then in the last half hour we have the worthwhile discussion based on what the school is seeking to progress (usually prefaced with, "Now that's all out of the way ...")"

It is important that there is not a duplication of interests or responsibilities – either between SIP and local authority staff, between SIP and governing body, or between SIP and Ofsted. Ofsted should not be replicating the role of the SIP nor undermining the SIP in the work its inspectors do. The negative impact and stress put upon staff would be tangible.

But we believe that there could be significant benefits to enhancing the role of the SIP, in particular in enhancing local accountability. 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. Though Ofsted took on an improvement role, it reported in both an obvious and vague manner. Our published position is that national league tables should end and Ofsted should cease to undertake section 5 inspections in favour of a local system of accountability. Enhancing the role of school improvement partner is a step towards making this work. In our radical rationalisation of the accountability system, schools would report much more locally, and much less nationally. A reformed SIP would work with local school improvement services, combining inspection and support with the advantage of understanding school's local context. Ofsted's role would be to quality assure local processes.

Quality and consistency

One of the most significant issues our members have raised with regard to SIPs is the absence of uniform quality and a lack of confidence in consistency between SIPs. The contrast between good and weak SIPs is serious. It presents a huge risk to the very young people that school improvement is for and also to the development of the education profession.

Anecdotal evidence from ATL members is clear about the benefits of school improvement partners and at the same time very wary of poor SIPs – with experience of both very common. One member's local authority found in an analysis of all their 'schools with cause for concern' that they had the same SIP. Another member has had three SIPs in the course of this and the previous two school years:

"The first was unfit to hold the role, had never been a Head and operated entirely as an irritating inspector (no matter how good we were at X, let's look only at Y). We then had an interim SIP from the LA, who rarely came and whose reports were almost entirely my words, provided by email.

Finally we secured a good SIP who is experienced, understands the context, and can challenge but also listens."

The burden generated on school staff – time, effort, and morale – by a poorly suited SIP should not be underestimated. The major challenge for the National College, central and local government is that whatever the definition of the role of SIP, the guarantee of quality must be seen as a high priority in training, development, retention and initial recruitment. In shaping the enhanced role, the aim of increasing the benefits and impact whilst reducing the problems that currently exist should be paramount.

We encourage consideration of how school improvement partners themselves are evaluated and accountable for their work. With increasing powers and expectations, such as the signing off of school improvement plans, there must be a balance of responsibility and accountability. Are SIPs formally responsible for brokering support as identified in school improvement plans, or just asked to attempt this? Are SIPs, as well as

schools, to be accountable for the plans? It is crucial that the local authority evaluation of a SIP's work is clarified and got right – it will benefit no-one having SIPs stressed by heavy-handed LA monitoring. Likewise, under ATL's suggested redistribution of accountability, moderation and inspection roles, it would not be acceptable for Ofsted to simply transfer their flawed current approach from schools to SIPs. Under existing arrangements for Ofsted but including the proposed changes to SIPs, would the enhanced role result in school improvement partners being held to account for a school's drop in Ofsted judgment? And what happens when there is profound disagreement between a SIP who knows a school and understands the context it is operating in and Ofsted inspectors who have come in for a snapshot view? These are important issues but difficult to resolve, adding weight to support the changes to the accountability system that ATL has proposed.

Qualification, allocation, training and development

Finding and recruiting qualified and competent school improvement partners is a real challenge, but one which is essential to ensuring quality and consistency.

We think the case for strengthening accreditation has not been made convincingly and advocate the concentration of focus and resources on training and professional development of SIPs over administering a licence to practise. As we have highlighted, much needs to be done to improve recruitment and training of SIPs under the current model, let alone under an enhanced model and the new skills, of brokerage for example, that will be required. We welcome the National College's involvement in developing appropriate support for school improvement partners going forward. Quality assurance of SIPs must be a factor in this work: accreditation and licenses are not necessarily the answer.

Whatever is the outcome of accreditation and licensing, it is important to be clear that even strong existing school improvement partners will need further training as they may not necessarily have all the right skills, contacts and experience for the enhanced role. The model for initial training and continuing professional development (CPD) should be a hybrid of national and local, online and offline.

In the selection of SIPs, ATL believes that serving head teachers do not have the capacity to perform the role. Former heads will of course be very strong candidates, though there will be some cases in which other local authority employees – such as those with a strong track record in brokering support – may make effective SIPs. But ultimately, school improvement partners must have both recent and relevant experience.

The allocation of SIPs to schools is worth reflecting on. Assumptions and prejudices should be cast aside. Good heads at good schools won't necessarily know how to transform schools that are struggling or underachieving. Some SIP's strengths will be in transforming a school, whilst others will be in exceeding excellence or raising the bar of ambition, or in ensuring strong CVA scores. At the same time though, developing SIPs for weak schools and SIPs for good schools poses its own problems. If they are to co-exist in their current format, matching SIPs to Ofsted judgement categories presents a logistical nightmare when the

judgements change (as would be the goal for a significant proportion of schools). A highly effective SIP may quickly help move a school from notice to improve – is the suggestion that they would then be dropped in favour of an ‘intermediate’ SIP who may or may not maintain the speed of travel? Consideration needs to be given as to what is the journey a SIP is making with a school (and to what happens when SIPs oversee real, or perceived, decline). ATL believes that, rather than strict appointment terms, a flexible model will allow for more effective improvement support for schools. We think it is extremely important that schools and their governing bodies have a say in the selection and retention of SIPs. ATL supports the development of ‘specialist’ SIPs which schools may want to call upon. These would include, but go further than primary, secondary and special school SIPs and include early years SIPs and those with experience of a given school specialism. It would be expected that they would play a role at local authority level, supported by National College, in shaping different ways of working in their sector or under their specialism.

Being able to call upon both ‘local’ and ‘national’ school improvement partners when appropriate will be useful, whether it is a school requesting, or a local authority suggesting, a particular expertise, or simply one SIP calling upon a network of others. Understanding the local context is extremely important, and local knowledge and expertise will be crucial in brokering support services. But there will be occasions when the experience of having seen things work differently will be a key benefit. A school therefore may capitalise on some wider thinking or new ideas, or a SIP may call upon such a resource to add to their own expertise of the local landscape. As such, the development of informal support networks for SIPs (different to the regional SIP coordinators who aid LA monitoring) could prove a highly helpful aspect of CPD. This needs to be managed without adding a further bureaucratic layer or another quango into the mix.

The new role for SIPs

ATL recognises school improvement as a process and our vision for the future of SIPs, improvement, and the accountability system aims to provide more support. We see a substantially developed SIP role being one necessarily involving an ongoing relationship with a whole school – the entire staff and not just the senior leadership. Interaction with the SIP should be wider – particularly for deputy and assistant heads, and beyond simply the chair of the governing body – both to benefit the school and to aid professional development. The time SIPs can offer should be considerably greater than five days for all schools¹, allowing them to quickly gain an accurate and full understanding of the school’s context. Improvement work could then be continually supported and with a stress on access to professional development for all staff.

The SIP may moderate a head teacher’s judgment on the quality of teaching and the impact on learning, and have a role in shaping how members of staff are supported by senior management to maintain and

¹ The Select Committee for Children, Schools and Families has highlighted the existing time constraints on SIPs as undermining the original driver that they would form a ‘single conversation’. We go further in saying they undermine the potential for positive impact.

improve quality. They would have a role to play in supporting performance management and goal-setting for schools but would not be constrained by new responsibilities, and the potential support they may offer should not be treated as a checklist. SIPs are most effective when they can be commissioned to offer their expertise in areas determined by the school. The school would then account for how they have used the SIP's time and how this relates to their development and improvement plans.

ATL believes in the benefits and necessity of partnership working, and the school improvement partner has the ability to guide the development of this way of working, including encouraging the development of partnerships with parents which look at how they may support school improvement.

We propose that the SIP should convey the accountability of the institution to the local authority. Self-evaluation should drive school improvement² and it is right for the self-evaluation form (SEF) to be validated locally. An effective system would see SIPs able to encourage self-evaluation to be frank rather than calculated for Ofsted. SIPs would have a duty to report their evaluation of the SEF against their own ongoing knowledge of the school to the local authority and this would be moderated by Ofsted. Ofsted should evaluate whether the SIP role is effective in offering both impartial judgement and necessary support. The link inspector would be replaced by this conception of the SIP.

We recognise that some, but not all, of these features are intended to be developed and urge serious consideration given to the remainder. We are pleased to see the desire for SIPs to spend more time with schools and have no objections in principle to the sliding scale of time commitment but would like to reemphasise the need for a SIPs available time to go beyond the number of days still envisaged. Signing off school improvement plans is a significant responsibility which must be matched with clarity over consequent accountability.

It is appropriate for school improvement partners to support schools in improving not just attainment, but all of the *Every Child Matters* outcomes, particularly if they can offer advice as to how work towards individual outcomes can interact. The single biggest proposal for the enhanced SIP is that of brokerage. For many highly able candidates for a role as a SIP, this will be their weak area and so initial training and CPD will need to be outstanding, and support will need to be provided from the local authority and from fellow SIPs. Quality assurance of brokered support will need to be in place and rigorous, both locally and nationally. But, it is important that brokered support is tailored to a school's needs and desires. Rather than offering 'packages' they can have, or that are easily obtainable, SIPs should be given the resource, contacts and skills to devise appropriate, even bespoke, support. It is our view that providing this does not take up an excessive amount of a SIPs time it may be prove useful to school improvement, partnership working, and the professional development of staff. All of which in turn should improve the education students receive.

² See www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmchilsch/88/8806.htm (part of the Select Committee's report into school accountability) for more on the significance of the SEF.