

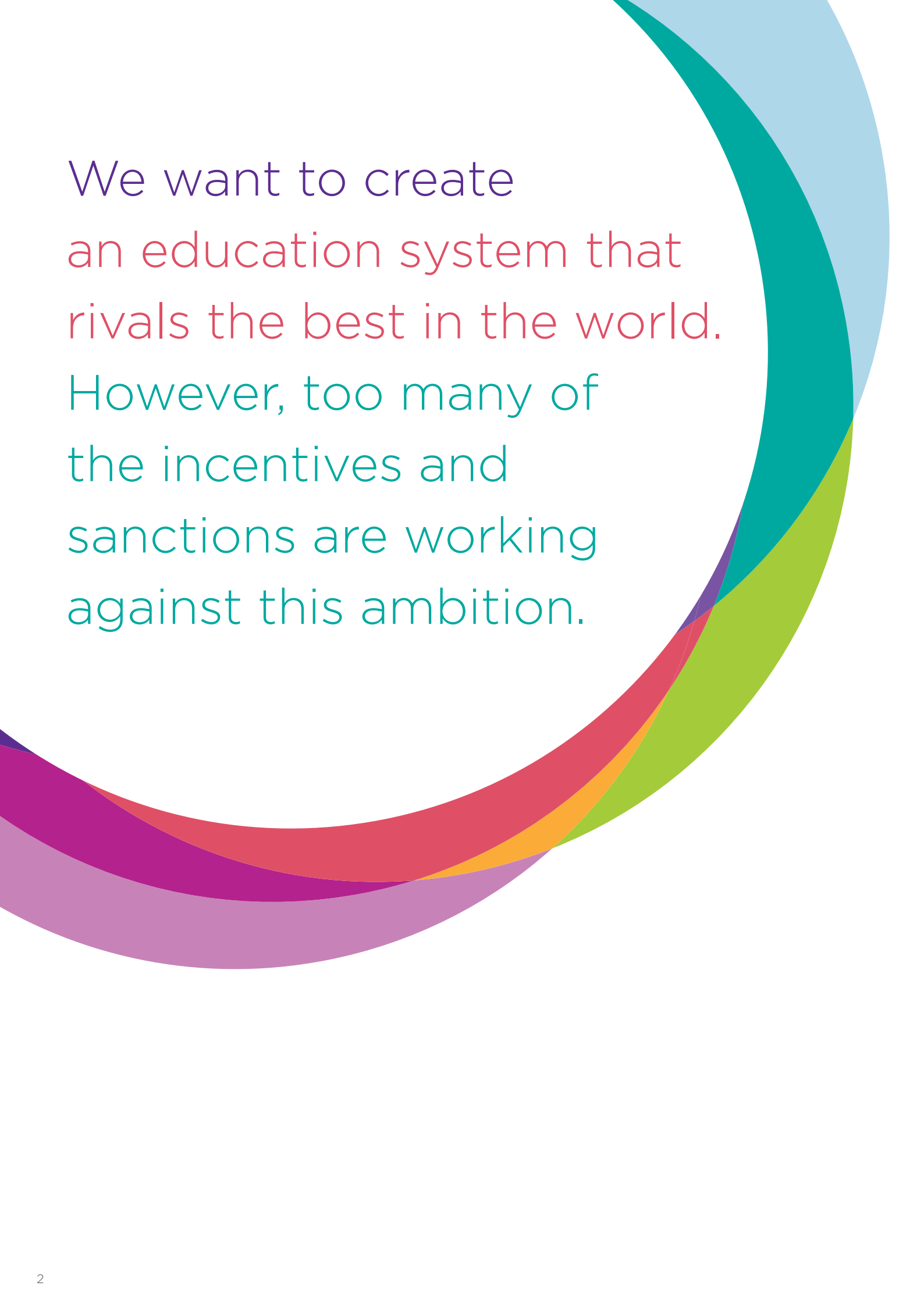
SEPTEMBER 2018

IMPROVING SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY

Report of the
NAHT ACCOUNTABILITY COMMISSION

#IMPROVINGACCOUNTABILITY





We want to create
an education system that
rivals the best in the world.
However, too many of
the incentives and
sanctions are working
against this ambition.

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Executive summary

School standards matter.

By all measures, we have the best cadre of professionals that have ever worked in our schools.

As a result, the quality of education provided in England has risen more over the last generation than during any generation before. Fewer young people are NEET (not in education, employment or training), more 16-year-olds are gaining good GCSEs and record numbers of 18-year-olds are progressing to university.¹

Yet too many children still leave school poorly prepared for life. Too many schools battle against the odds to provide a good enough standard of education, while attempting to meet the increasingly complex needs of the children in their care, with dwindling resources to do so. The rising tide of educational improvement is failing to lift all boats.²

We want to create the greatest education system in the world. One that values academic achievement, personal excellence and the emotional and mental well-being of all young people in this country. One where all schools are good schools and those working within them have the skills, insight and capacity to provide the very best education for all children, irrespective of starting points or circumstance. This is the ambition of the profession.

However too many of the incentives and sanctions in our system are working against this ambition.

To achieve greatness we need good people, in the right places, doing the right things, but the accountability system is failing on all three counts. It is driving good people out of the profession: directly, as the consequence of perceived drops in performance and indirectly, through the unmanageable workload associated with it and a pervasive culture of fear. It dissuades good teachers and leaders from working in challenging schools for fear of being treated unfairly by the inspectorate. Perhaps most concerning of all, it has celebrated and encouraged defensive and insular leadership behaviours that, if unchecked, will limit our capacity to improve.

Performance tables and Ofsted were introduced over a quarter of a century ago to hold schools to account but are no longer working in the interests of all pupils, parents, schools or the government.

Ofsted continues to perform a critical function by identifying failure in the system so that no child attends a poor school. Yet the accountability system provides little benefit to the pupils, parents and staff at the vast majority of schools in this country that are not failing. At best it is a distraction on the journey from good to great. At worst it works against improvement by incentivising the wrong actions and behaviours. At a system level, the approaches used by the government to hold schools to account are acting as a brake to overall improvement and are, on balance, doing more harm than good.

The lack of external challenge and support for schools to move beyond 'good' is a significant barrier to improving standards overall. Top-down accountability might help schools get to 'good' but it will struggle to lift standards higher. The Commission found that a 'tick-box' culture has taken hold in many schools, where compliance with what Ofsted is perceived to want has become the overwhelming driver of improvement activity. The secrets behind great schools cannot be found in the Ofsted inspection framework and if we simply continue to benchmark ourselves against it we will never unleash the full potential of schools. Internationally, we will be anchored to average, as others rise further and faster.



The current system needs adjustment to ensure that Ofsted and performance tables ‘do no harm’ to school standards. The Commission calls for immediate action by the Department for Education (DfE) to reduce the negative impact of the unintelligent use of performance data. We welcome the commitment from government to replace the floor and coasting standards with a new threshold for support, to reduce the shadow of fear that hangs over many schools. The Commission also supports the introduction of three-year averages for school performance data, to reduce the risk that it is being skewed by simple cohort differences between years. The Commission goes further and proposes that comparative performance data, which compares pupil performance with that achieved in similar schools, is currently the most reliable data indicator available to Ofsted and should be used to help inspectors make better-informed judgements.

We need to be realistic and honest about the capacity and role of the school inspectorate.

Ofsted is now reliant on a one-day, short inspection model to achieve their inspection targets, which offers much less assurance of effectiveness. It provides less opportunity for the inspector to get underneath the skin of a school or to discuss with leaders and governors how they might improve. The Commission believes that Ofsted is at a crossroads and the choice is stark — either the government chooses to invest heavily to ensure reliable inspection for all, or we revise our expectations about what to reasonably expect from the inspection process. Our assessment of the financial challenges facing education suggests that it is highly unlikely that Ofsted will see a significant increase in its funding allocation any time soon.

The Commission, therefore, proposes a new role for Ofsted, focused on identifying failure and providing stronger diagnostic insight to schools that are struggling.

These are the twin areas where Ofsted has shown that it can add real value. Ofsted has a role to support the ambition that all schools are good schools, by checking that no school is failing or at risk of decline. Beyond that, expectations of the added value of inspection should be significantly limited. It is hard to see how inspectors can make reliable judgements on the quality of teaching or curriculum in a one or two-day inspection. We should accept the reality, that inspection will provide limited insight to most schools and tell them little that they do not already know. We need Ofsted to focus on identifying what they can do in the time they have and allow others to step in and do the things they can’t.

We need school leaders to step up and into the gap vacated by Ofsted, to raise expectations and drive system-wide school improvement themselves by:

- **setting a new vision for school leadership**, valuing the right leadership behaviours with a strong focus on the leadership of learning. In doing so, we need to invest in building the capability and capacity of school leaders to take greater responsibility for standards and for one another,
- **establishing a new way of identifying excellent practice in the country**, to improve on the increasingly discredited ‘outstanding’ category. Crucially, this must work better as an aid to school improvement, by being precise in terms of the specific excellence identified and the conditions and context in which it was achieved and
- **providing robust peer-to-peer support and challenge**, focused on encouraging collaboration and supporting all schools to greatness. Through the development of quality assurance processes for national peer review programmes, we will build confidence that reviews are consistent, robust and reliable.

Our ambition — for an education system that rivals the best in the world — will not be achieved overnight, but it is well within our reach. In the short-term, we must ensure that the way in which we hold schools to account is reliable and fair; a level playing field where performance is judged fairly, irrespective of context or circumstance. But we should waste no time in laying the groundwork for developing leadership capacity and making high-quality, peer-to-peer challenge and support the norm, not the exception. Developing confidence in lateral accountability systems to peers will, in time, enable the further reduction in vertical accountability systems to the government. For it is the profession (working together, challenging one another, encouraging innovation, sharing excellence, and focusing on doing what is right for all pupils to succeed, instead of what is required to achieve an Ofsted label) that will provide the very best chance of long-term sustained success.

Summary of recommendations

PUPIL PERFORMANCE DATA



- 1 **Comparative performance data** (based on a three-year average) is the most reliable data indicator currently available and should be used by Ofsted to inform judgements of school effectiveness.
2. The DfE should use a **'requires improvement' judgement as the trigger** for funded support and as a replacement for floor and coasting standards.

INSPECTION



3. The Commission proposes **a new role for Ofsted**, focused on identifying failure and providing stronger diagnostic insight for schools that are struggling.
4. The DfE should **end the exemption from inspection** for previously 'outstanding' schools and commit Ofsted to inspect all schools on a transparent cycle of inspection.
5. The **'outstanding' judgement should be replaced** with a more robust system for identifying specific excellence within the sector, to increase the take-up of highly effective, evidence-based practice.
- 6 **Ofsted should commission research to determine the format and nature of inspection required**, in order to provide reliable judgements and reciprocal benefits for schools.

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT



7. Existing peer review programmes should be evaluated to identify characteristics of effective practice in order to **develop national accreditation arrangements**.
8. An invitation should be extended to the Chartered College of Teaching, through the Leadership Development Advisory Group, to **produce alternative national standards for head teachers** that better reflect the professional behaviours, practice and knowledge required for achieving excellence.
9. The DfE should **extend the career progression strategy** to support recently appointed head teachers in the critical first years of headship.

The Accountability Commission

The Accountability Commission was established by NAHT in March 2018 to develop a new vision for the future of school accountability.

The group was chaired by Nick Brook, deputy general secretary of NAHT and comprised leading educationalists, academics and school leaders. Membership of the group is listed in **Appendix A**. The group met between March and July 2018 to review evidence of the strengths and weaknesses of the current accountability system, consider alternative models of accountability and identify recommendations for change.

The Commission drew on a wide range of evidence to establish a secure case for change through reviewing published data and considering testimony from expert witnesses, including the Chief Inspector of Schools, Amanda Spielman; former Schools Minister, The Right Hon. the Lord Knight of Weymouth; and OECD director, Andreas Schleicher. A sub-group of the main Commission, chaired by Sir Robin Bosher, also met to consider leadership challenges and the potential role of peer review within future arrangements. The Commission is grateful for the open engagement of all those who contributed to the deliberations and developments of proposals. A list of contributors can be found in **Appendix C**.

The Commission recognised the range and importance of all forms of accountability, including financial oversight and governance and in particular the role of governing boards and Trusts. Although these were noted, the Commission determined that the main focus of its work should be on the aspects of the current system that were considered to have the greatest negative impact on schools and pupils: the use of performance data and the role of the inspectorate.

To guide its considerations, the Commission established a set of eight guiding principles against which to test alternative proposals and potential solutions, recognising that it was likely that there would be trade-offs between these principles in the search for workable recommendations. The guiding principles are included in this report as **Appendix B**.

The Commission's work was supported by research conducted by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) specifically for this project. The NFER provided the Commission with an overview of the key features of different accountability systems internationally, underpinned by a critical and independent evaluation of the research evidence of their impact. This evidence summary has been published by NFER alongside this report.

This report represents the broad collective view of the Commission. It should be made clear that individual involvement in the Commission does not equate to support for all statements or endorsement of the recommendations made within this report.



**IMPROVING
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The case for change

School leaders and governing boards want to build the greatest education system in the world. One that values academic achievement, personal excellence and the emotional and mental well-being of all young people in this country. One where all schools are good schools and those working within them have the skills, insight and capacity to provide the very best education for all children, irrespective of starting points or circumstances.

Yet too many of the incentives and sanctions in our system work against our ambition. Ofsted provides an important function, by identifying schools that are failing and prompting action to improve standards. Beyond this, there is little evidence to show wider benefit to the vast majority of schools that aren't failing and the pupils that attend them. Instead, there is evidence to show a deeply negative impact on the way schools are held to account, which affects the ability of the overall system to improve.

The current accountability system:

1. Limits ambition

The high-stakes nature of inspection has helped to create a compliance culture in many schools which disincentivises innovation and can limit ambition.⁴ The inspection framework is too often treated as a tick-list to be measured against. Securing a 'good' or 'outstanding' judgement from Ofsted has become a goal in itself, rather than simply being seen as a snapshot description of where the school is on their journey to excellence. 'Outstanding' does not describe the pinnacle of educational excellence – if it did, arguably no-one should ever achieve it. Yet at present, there are few incentives to look beyond it.

2. Incentivises self-interest

The way in which we hold schools to account encourages self-interest over the good of the wider school community. There are few incentives for strong schools to lend their strength to those that are struggling, if by doing so it weakens them at their next inspection⁵. Similarly, the over-reliance on pupil performance data to judge school effectiveness means there is little system incentive to put the interest of children with more complex needs first, for example in admissions or exclusion decisions, when doing so might result in an apparent dip in performance. Thankfully, the school system consists overwhelmingly of highly ethical leaders doing the right thing, in the interests of all children. At times, our system requires leaders to be brave and courageous in order to do the right thing for young people in the communities they serve. This needs to change so that doing the right thing is also the easiest thing to do.

3. Deters talented staff from working in more deprived communities

School leaders and teachers are put off teaching in schools serving more challenging communities because they do not believe they will be treated fairly by the inspectorate or performance tables. Research by the Education Policy Institute in 2016 found evidence to support this view and concluded “there is a clear and systematic negative correlation between school intakes with more disadvantaged children and more favourable Ofsted judgements”⁶. In other words, an inspection judgement can be as much a reflection of the area a school serves, as the quality of education provided within it. We will continue to struggle to close the attainment gap between pupils from poorer families and their more affluent peers unless we incentivise, not discourage, great people from working in the areas that need them most.

“School leaders and teachers are put off teaching in schools serving more challenging communities because they do not believe they will be treated fairly by the inspectorate or performance tables.”

“The inspectorate provides much less independent assurance about the quality of education provided by individual schools than was previously the case.”

4. Narrows the curriculum and encourages teaching to the test

What is measured is valued. The nature and weight of the accountability system has encouraged schools to focus on those areas that are critical as school performance indicators, such as Key Stage 2 SATs, EBacc subjects or Progress 8. Despite the importance of an academic core, an over-emphasis has skewed and narrowed the curriculum.⁷ “Drilling” for SATs has become increasingly common, with some schools operating revision classes and practice tests during the school holidays to prepare eleven-year-olds for an assessment that is primarily designed to be a measure of school accountability.⁸ The use of narrow data in this way impedes a broader evaluation of the effectiveness of a school’s curriculum in meeting the needs of the pupil cohort that it serves and the extent to which this prepares pupils for the future.

5. Diverts attention from teaching and learning

The value of a good inspection outcome and the fear of not being “Ofsted-ready” drives considerable activity in too many schools that could be better spent focused on improving teaching and learning. Tracking pupil progress and predicting outcomes have become an integral part of some schools to ensure they are prepared for Ofsted.⁹ The ability to show near real-time information on the progress of every pupil in a school, alongside predictions of future performance, has been interpreted as evidence of “leadership grip” by inspectors. Much of this analysis has been proven to have no validity or usefulness to teaching and learning. Too much time can be spent scrutinising data and too little on the leadership of learning. Moreover, the need to be “Ofsted-ready” and have evidence prepared creates significant workload burdens.¹⁰

6. Drives good people from the profession

Fear, or the impact, of inspection is regularly recorded as a significant factor behind head teachers choosing to leave the profession prematurely¹¹, as well as influencing middle leaders not to progress to senior roles.¹² School leaders recognise the risk of leading a school which may be “downgraded” by Ofsted, seeing this as a personal, high-stakes risk which is likely to have a long-lasting impact on their career. Head teachers report their reaction to dropping a grade as being one of panic and vulnerability and the pressure of accountability is felt by leaders of schools, regardless of grade. Head teachers also say that too often they are held to account before they have the opportunity to make an impact.¹³ Likewise, the result of not hitting the mark in the latest annual round of primary tests or public examinations, has been shown to be a major driver of stress and anxiety, which is far from conducive to improvement.

7. Provides less assurance of standards

The inspectorate provides much less independent assurance about the quality of education provided by individual schools than was previously the case. Ofsted no longer has the capacity or resources to inspect schools in any real depth. Even a “full” inspection only lasts for two days and this means that inspectors have to make significant, complex judgements about a school in a very short space of time with limited evidence to draw on. It is harder to make reliable and valid judgements about the quality of teaching in a school when often inspectors only have a few hours in which to do so.

Key findings and recommendations

PUPIL PERFORMANCE DATA

SUMMARY: Comparing pupil performance data between schools in different contexts has been proven to be inherently unreliable, yet this approach continues to drive judgements of school effectiveness. Teachers and leaders know this and are less likely to apply to work in schools in challenging areas because they have little confidence that the accountability system will treat them fairly. The Commission, therefore, proposes that comparative performance data, using families of schools, is used by the inspectorate to inform judgements. Using floor and coasting standards as the basis for intervention in individual schools are too imprecise to be useful and the Commission supports the commitment to reform them. We believe that the replacement trigger for support should come from inspection, not data alone.



1. Comparison between similar schools to inform, not dictate, inspection judgements of the quality of education

Data should only ever be the starting point in a conversation about school standards and effectiveness. Statutory tests and exams will never be able to capture all aspects of a young person's progress or a school's success. Nevertheless, academic success is vitally important to future life chances and the progress that young people make towards achieving it will always be a key indicator of school effectiveness.

Compelling evidence was presented to the Commission that demonstrated the limitation of both progress and attainment data and the way that poor interpretation of it has led to unfavourable judgements of schools serving disadvantaged communities. Presenting data as a three-year average will help to ensure that annual data is not skewed by simple cohort differences, year-on-year. However, the Commission concludes that this alone will not be sufficient to address the negative uses of data.

Comparing the rate of progress that young people make in one school with another, serving dramatically different communities, is inherently unreliable and has led to a bias within the accountability system. Performance data, and the inspection judgements that flow from them, have become as much an indicator of deprivation as an indicator of school effectiveness and impact.¹⁴ Relative performance data, in comparison to other schools serving similar communities, appears from evidence to be a more useful, fair and robust indicator of success or failure.

RECOMMENDATION ONE:

Comparative performance data (based on a three-year average) is the most reliable data indicator currently available and should be used by Ofsted to inform judgements of school effectiveness.

While recognising the inherent limitations in the use of any data, the Commission found that comparative performance data using families of schools was likely to be the most useful indicator for meaningful and ambitious comparison to inform a more nuanced view of school effectiveness. This approach itself is described within Box A (page 12). Accurate comparative data using valid families of schools can raise expectations by removing soft excuses for low ambition, through comparison with the norm for the group and the performance of the best. Crucially, this is as true for schools serving the most affluent areas as those in the most deprived communities. It provides a better recognition of the success of teachers and leaders in challenging circumstances who are working well to support their pupils to make good progress and achieve high standards. For schools serving communities that are less challenging, it will help to avoid complacency by providing a comparison of relative performance against other schools serving similarly advantaged pupil populations.

Comparative data has the potential to level the playing field between schools in differing circumstances whilst increasing, not lessening, ambition. However, to be confident in using families of school data for accountability purposes, further investigation should be conducted to reassure all schools that families of schools do indeed reflect groups that are sufficiently alike and take proper account of resourcing levels.

“Comparing pupil performance data between schools in different contexts has been proven to be inherently unreliable, yet this approach continues to drive judgements on school effectiveness.”

2. Replacing floor and coasting standards with a new trigger for support

Coasting and floor standards have cast a long shadow of fear over many schools and school leaders. In the 2017 Assessment Review Group report, ‘redressing the balance’, we said that the use of floor and coasting standards to determine intervention in individual schools should be stopped. We said that data from assessments should be used as part of the inspection process and that the results of the inspection may, if appropriate, trigger supportive intervention. This position has not changed.

In May 2018, the Secretary of State for Education confirmed that, in future, Ofsted alone will determine school effectiveness and the DfE would begin work to replace the floor and coasting standards with a new threshold for support, below which schools would receive additional support to improve.¹⁵ The Commission believes that a data-driven threshold for support would be at odds with the Secretary of State’s commitment that Ofsted will determine effectiveness, as the need for support on the basis of data alone suggests a judgement of underperformance has also been made. In order to align these potentially contradictory approaches, the Commission believes that the threshold, or trigger, should be determined through inspection.

RECOMMENDATION TWO:

The DfE should use a ‘requires improvement’ judgement as the trigger for funded support to replace floor and coasting standards.

The Commission recommends that a ‘requires improvement’ judgement is the most sensible trigger for additional support. Ofsted will continue to review performance data of all schools to determine which schools to prioritise for inspection. Significant and ongoing drops in performance will trigger an inspection visit to understand the context and story behind the change in data. Inspection could provide schools determined as requiring improvement with a precise diagnosis of areas for improvement, thereby enabling better targeting of relevant support to need. It is important that there is a change in tone for schools within this category – the old “clock is ticking” mentality is unhelpful to deep, sustainable improvement. Instead, the offer should be one of high-quality, funded support to schools requiring improvement which will help shift the narrative from sanction to support. The Commission does note that this approach requires Ofsted to reconsider how best to ensure swift conversion from the short inspection that identifies cause for concern, to full inspection that results in a school being judged ‘requires improvement’, to enable timely diagnosis of need and provision of early support to address the issues identified.

BOX A: Using family of schools’ data to provide meaningful challenge

Comparing the exam performance of two schools that serve different types of communities is impossible to do meaningfully. If one performs better than the other, we can say nothing about how much the schools are responsible for differences since the children’s experiences outside school are likely to be very different too. Even if we visit the schools and notice different practices, it is impossible for us to recommend that school practices that work for one type of community are likely to be suitable for a school serving a different type of community.

Schools are compared to around 50 other schools that are as close as possible to them in the kind of students they serve. The Education Endowment Fund (EEF) and FFT Education Datalab have worked together to create these families over a number of years and have demonstrated that the method is feasible.

If we were able to bring those primary schools who perform poorly compared to their family of schools up towards average performance within the group, the headline Key Stage 2 pass rate would rise from 62% to 68%. Raising their performance towards the top five schools within their family would increase this figure to 79%. Similarly, GCSE students’ grades would rise by over one grade in one of their subjects if underperforming schools were raised towards the average for their group and would rise by over one grade in five subjects if performance were raised towards the top performers in the group.

This approach provides challenging points of comparison for many schools, and especially for those schools serving disadvantaged communities, because the range of educational outcomes within the family of schools for these groups is particularly high. Using the families of schools’ approach to set realistic accountability targets, with clear information about which similar schools can provide suitable support and guidance, therefore provides a coherent approach to trying to close the national attainment gap.

INSPECTION

SUMMARY: Ofsted cannot provide the level of assurance of school effectiveness expected of it within the resources at their disposal. The Commission, therefore, proposes a more realistic role for the inspectorate, focused on identifying failure and providing stronger diagnostic insight to schools that are struggling. All schools should be subject to routine inspection, but for the majority of schools that are not struggling or failing then this should be light touch. The Commission proposes that the Ofsted category of 'outstanding' is removed and replaced with a more stretching criteria of 'excellence', not necessarily awarded by the inspectorate. 'Excellence' should be precise in the specific area of exceptional practice identified and the circumstances in which that success was achieved, in order to be a more useful aid to system improvement.

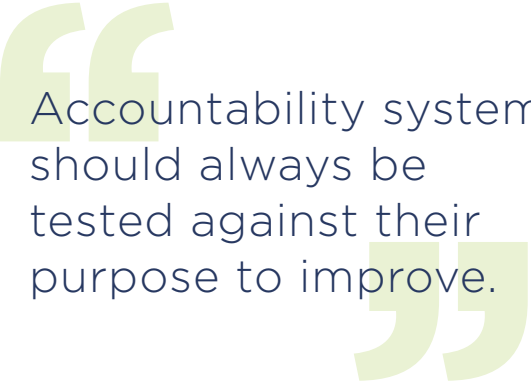


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3. Supporting all schools to be good schools

The Commission believes that schools should be held to account for the quality of education they provide, including the academic achievement of pupils, provision of a rounded education and how effectively they prepare all pupils for their next stage of education or employment.

Accountability systems should always be tested against their purpose to improve. Inspection provides an important function to the education system by identifying schools that are failing and prompting action to improve standards. However, there is little evidence to show a positive impact from inspection on school improvement in the vast majority of schools that aren't failing¹⁶. The Commission believes there is the need for an honest and realistic reappraisal of the inspectorate's capacity to have an impact as an agent of improvement on good or better schools in the system. Ofsted is now largely reliant on a one-day, short inspection model that provides little opportunity for an inspector to offer school leaders meaningful or detailed insight about how they might improve further¹⁷. The Commission fails to be convinced that inspectors will be able to make reliable judgements on the quality of teaching or curriculum in a one or two-day inspection.



Accountability systems should always be tested against their purpose to improve.

The Commission's view is that there is a clear choice to be made. Either there must be significant and sustained investment to ensure reliable and insightful inspection for all or a revision of what can reasonably be expected from inspection. Given the current financial challenges facing the education sector, it is unlikely that Ofsted will see a significant increase in their funding allocation any time soon.

RECOMMENDATION THREE

The Commission proposes a new role for Ofsted, focused on identifying failure and providing stronger diagnostic insight for schools that are struggling.

The Commission proposes that Ofsted's work should be refocused. It is well placed to continue its historically important role in identifying school failure, where it has a track record of both impact and added value. The Commission believes that the inspectorate should build on these strengths by providing a clearer, more detailed diagnostic analysis of the issues that have resulted in a school being judged as 'requires improvement'. By triaging the specific issues within a school, support can be better targeted to need (see key finding two). This may require a different approach to the current full section 5 inspection, in order to provide a secure evidence base to underpin the judgements made (see key finding six).

Beyond that, Ofsted should continue to have a role in supporting the ambition that all schools are good schools. It should do this by checking that no school is failing or at risk of decline; checking that standards aren't slipping; investigating the extent to which the school is outward looking and collaborative; and rooting out sharp practices and gaming, including off-rolling. Beyond this, as is the case now, there is little scope for inspection to provide significant insight for leaders of good schools. The Commission believes there are other actors better placed to identify excellence in the system, in order to unleash the potential of the school-led system, (see key finding five).

4. Inspection for all, no exceptions

In 2012, universal inspection ended when most outstanding schools were given exemption from routine inspection¹⁸. By August 2017, 1,620 previously ‘outstanding’ schools had not been inspected for between six and 11 years, of which 296 had not been inspected for over 10 years. There is, of course, a need to direct scarce resources to where they are most needed, but the current exemption of some ‘outstanding’ schools provides false assurance. The exemption is generally not understood by parents who rightly question the relevance of a historical judgement from a decade ago.

The ‘outstanding’ exemption is also increasingly unpopular with head teachers. Some have confirmed that exemption from inspection is confusing and unhelpful to parents. They say the lack of a current inspection report, based on the latest inspection framework and report format, makes it difficult for those parents who wish to make comparisons when choosing a school for their child. Also, new head teachers who have taken over ‘outstanding’ schools report that the historical badge can create resistance to change among longer serving staff and governors. Teaching and school leadership is a process of constant evaluation, development and improvement, this is as true in an ‘outstanding’ school as in any other. Exemption from inspection means that neither the school nor parents can be sure the school would still achieve the highest rating under current inspection arrangements.

RECOMMENDATION FOUR:

The DfE should end the exemption from inspection for previously ‘outstanding’ schools and commit Ofsted to inspect all schools on a transparent cycle of inspection.

Whatever form inspection takes, it must apply to all. Yet Ofsted is faced with the same financial constraints as schools within the current funding squeeze. It is unclear where additional funding would come from if the number of schools to be inspected were to increase. Revisiting the length between inspections for schools in different categories may provide some options here. Either way, the government and Ofsted will need to find a way through this issue that does not compromise reliability or equity.

“By August 2017, 1,620 previously outstanding schools had not been inspected for between six and 11 years, of which 296 had not been inspected for over 10 years.”

5. Develop a new approach for identifying excellence in the system

The intent behind the Ofsted ‘outstanding’ category, to stimulate ambition by recognising and rewarding the very best in the system, is sound. While 90% of schools are ‘good’ or better, not all schools are equal. It is right to recognise excellent practice where it genuinely exists. Indeed, many ‘outstanding’ schools in England are exceptional places that rival the very best in the world.

However, the ‘outstanding’ judgement was also intended to drive wider improvement in the system by mobilising the best to support those schools that were struggling. There are examples where peer support has been highly effective, but overall it has failed to have the impact on school improvement that was desired. In part, this is due to the broad, non-specific nature of an ‘outstanding’ judgement – it is never clear in what aspects that particular school was judged to be ‘outstanding’, in what context or circumstances that success was achieved, nor from what starting point. And it certainly does not follow that leaders who succeed in a single context could necessarily offer meaningful support to all schools, in all other circumstances.

Most worryingly of all, evidence has also shown that the ability of a school to achieve the ‘outstanding’ grade is significantly influenced by a school’s cohort. Research by the Education Policy Institute (EPI) has demonstrated a clear correlation between schools with more disadvantaged children and less-favourable Ofsted judgements¹⁹. In other words, an ‘outstanding’ judgement can be as much a reflection of the social advantage of parents and the quality of wider community services and early years settings, as the quality of education provided within the school. The Commission recognises the good intentions underpinning the ‘outstanding’ grade but has concluded that there are better ways to drive ambition and improvement in the system that will provide parents with a clearer, more accurate view of excellent practice.

RECOMMENDATION FIVE:

The ‘outstanding’ judgement should be replaced by a more robust system for identifying specific excellence within the sector, to increase take-up of highly effective, evidence-based practice.

The Commission supports the conclusion reached by Julian Astle of the RSA in his paper ‘The Ideal School Exhibition’ (2017), that the definition of educational excellence should be returned to the profession by abolishing the ‘outstanding’ category and ‘getting the inspectorate focused solely on identifying those schools that are either struggling to meet their students’ needs or putting those needs second to their own institutional interests by gaming the system’ (see key finding three).

The Commission believes that identification of excellence should be firmly anchored within school improvement rather than used as a measure of accountability. A mechanism that precisely identifies specific areas of excellence within individual schools and is clear about the context in which excellence was achieved, can facilitate the dissemination of leading-edge practice, foster collaboration and have a positive impact on school improvement. To achieve this, we need a shared understanding of excellence, shaped and agreed by the profession. The Commission recognises the challenge posed by this and proposes that further exploratory work takes place to consider how best to take it forward.

“Identification of excellence should be firmly anchored within school improvement rather than used as a measure of accountability.”

6. Improving the reliability of inspection

Ofsted re-inspects 'good' schools through a short one-day inspection. 'Good' schools are now the norm in the system – 65% of all schools are rated by Ofsted as 'good'; that is over 14,000 schools²⁰. Yet there is growing consensus that short inspection is of limited reliability and utility because there is so much to get through in such a short time. The National Audit Office (NAO) report, 'Ofsted's inspection of schools' (May 2018) concluded that "short inspections provide less assurance and allow inspectors less time to discuss with schools how they might improve". The efficiency gains of the short inspection model have been outweighed by a validity deficit.

The Commission recognises that this inspection model offers little in the way of reciprocal benefit or insight for these schools (see key finding three). Inspectors simply do not have the capacity to conduct an inspection that builds a comprehensive evidence base to support judgements on, for example, the quality of teaching across a school or the extent to which the curriculum meets the needs of learners. It is clear to the Commission that short inspection represents a well-meaning attempt to cover too much in the time available. In doing so it provides false assurance to parents and other stakeholders. Set against this is the growing evidence that the cost of inspection, in terms of workload, teacher attrition and unintended consequences, is very significant²¹. A central consideration, therefore, must be to determine the true scope and limit of what can be judged on a short inspection, and to be honest and clear about the insight that can be drawn from it, so that schools, parents and other stakeholders can have confidence that inspection findings make valid, reliable and consistent judgements.

RECOMMENDATION SIX:

Ofsted should commission research to determine the format and nature of inspection required in order to provide reliable judgements and reciprocal benefits for schools.

In order to fulfil the role set out for it by the DfE in 'Principles for a clear and simple school accountability system', inspection must deliver more consistently reliable judgements. To do so it is critical that inspection does not overbid or overstate the insight that it offers. When inspecting 'good' schools, Ofsted must be honest with all stakeholders about the depth to which it is able to inspect. Public reassurance should come from the knowledge that Ofsted is rigorously policing standards by focusing its work on inadequate and struggling schools, confident in the knowledge that the pathway to 'good' will be supported by Ofsted.



SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

SUMMARY: Tracking progress is not the same as improving learning, yet in too many schools pupil performance tracking has reached obsessive levels. This approach has been rewarded and encouraged through inspection and performance management processes and celebrated through CPD and national conferences. It is time for the profession to take back ownership of leadership standards and to define ourselves by the behaviours, practice and knowledge required for effective headship, to redress these skewed priorities and reassert the importance of the leadership of learning. Likewise, the profession should start laying the groundwork for robust peer review to become the norm across all schools, which in the long-term may enable the further reduction in top-down accountability.



7. Incentivising collaborative working and peer support

High-stakes accountability and the “marketisation” of the education system has driven unhealthy levels of competition between schools, resulting in behaviours that can block improvement rather than support it. The incentives in the system must be such that schools are encouraged to work together in the interests of all pupils within local communities. It is hard to argue that any school should be considered as high-performing if a neighbouring school is struggling and they are doing little or nothing to support it.

Peer review is an increasingly popular form of sector-led collaboration, providing “outside-in” support and challenge to schools²². It is a good demonstration of the profession stepping up to take responsibility for school improvement and accepting accountability to peers in their community. There is a wide range of peer review models, with different characteristics and strengths. However, a perception still exists that some models lack rigour or sufficient “teeth” to be a credible part of the school improvement and accountability landscape, something that those closely involved in delivery strongly refute.

RECOMMENDATION SEVEN:

Existing peer review programmes should be evaluated to identify characteristics of effective practice in order to develop national accreditation arrangements.

Many of the highest performing education systems across the world are moving to models of lateral accountability, to push beyond the limits of top-down accountability²³. The English education system is on a journey; too few schools currently engage in peer review, and not enough is yet known about the essential characteristics of effective review and the conditions in which it has an impact. We therefore propose that groundwork is laid immediately, by first understanding the characteristics of highly effective peer review, before establishing accreditation arrangements to oversee the expansion of suitable models that are proven to deliver tangible and sustainable benefits.

“Many of the highest performing education systems across the world are moving to models of lateral accountability, to push beyond the limits of top-down accountability.”

8. Skewed leadership priorities

The high-stakes consequences of poor inspection judgements have led to a defensive culture of compliance in many schools²⁴. We have heard that preparation for inspection continues to drive a significant volume of activity. An industry has emerged around the provision of "Mocksteds" (consultant-led practice inspections) organised to prepare staff for the sort of questioning they might experience during an Ofsted visit. Because of the perceived importance of a 'good' Ofsted rating, it has become a goal in itself, rather than an indication of how well the school is progressing on the journey towards delivering excellence for its pupils. The Commission concludes that this may well be limiting ambition within the system; the secret to great education cannot be found in the pages of the Ofsted inspection handbook.

Assessment for formative purposes is an integral and crucial part of teaching and learning. However, the Commission shares the concerns of the DfE's Workload Advisory Group, chaired by Professor Rebecca Allen, that the use of data and management information systems to track progress and predict outcomes are out of proportion to the gain that can be achieved from it. Excessive data tracking processes have become no more than a comfort blanket to those being held to account while offering little tangible benefit to those teaching or being taught. What may pass as examples of "leadership grip" to governing boards and inspectors appear, in many cases, to have little practical application as tools for improvement. It is not data or the manipulation of it that improves pupil performance, it is the series of interactions, actions and changes in behaviour that flow from it. Obsession with data alone is more likely to have a negative impact on pupil progress, as it distracts attention from other activities that may have a more positive effect.

The desire to make a direct difference to children and young people's lives is overwhelmingly the reason that the majority of school leaders entered the profession in the first place. What this means is that skewed leadership priorities not only limit the ability to improve standards but increase the likelihood that leaders become disillusioned with what the job has become and leave the profession prematurely.

RECOMMENDATION EIGHT:

An invitation should be extended to the Chartered College of Teaching, through the Leadership Development Advisory Group, to produce alternative national standards for head teachers that better reflect the professional behaviours, practice and knowledge required for achieving excellence.

The current national standards of excellence for head teachers have had little impact on practice in schools. They have lacked visibility but also lacked resonance with the profession, in that they do not paint a picture of successful leadership recognisable to many highly effective head teachers or emphasise sufficiently the leadership of learning. Alternative national standards would provide an opportunity to reassert the professional principles essential to leadership across different contexts and articulate a re-balancing of leadership practices and priorities that have become skewed in recent years. The Chartered College of Teaching would seem well placed to take forward this work, so that it is by the profession, for the profession, and based on reliable evidence.

To achieve behaviour change, these standards would need to be recognised and used universally — by governing boards, CPD providers and funders of training — to ensure consistency of message about the leadership behaviours we most value. In the long-term, by emphasising the importance of leadership of learning and the role of the head teacher in taking ownership of school and system improvement, we are more likely to keep leaders and their staff motivated, and more likely to strengthen the leadership pipeline by attracting leaders of the future, excited not demoralised by the potential of the role.

Over time, this work could further develop with the introduction of a Chartered Head Teacher Status (building on Chartered Teacher Status), open to experienced head teachers, offering recognition of their high professional status and sector leadership.

9. Preparation to lead

The DfE's recent commitment to support training and career progression for teachers is very welcome. The extension of the NQT period to two years, supported by an early career framework and better mentoring of recently qualified teachers, has the potential to ensure a more supportive start to a career in teaching. Currently, at the entry point to teaching, the skills, knowledge and experience that trainees will require in order to qualify are clearly set out and assessed through the award of QTS. However, for aspiring leaders, the offer is a range of highly variable non-mandatory training, but no requirement to be assessed as competent in the core expectations required to lead a school.

Too little attention is placed on the specific development needs of leaders new to headship. All too often a sink or swim mentality takes hold, and too many potentially great future leaders sink without the right support and advice²⁵. The government can better drive improvement in school standards by ensuring that teachers and leaders have the capability and capacity to do what is required of them, recognising and incentivising the actions and behaviours that have the most potential to transform the outcomes of learners.

RECOMMENDATION NINE:

The DfE should extend the career progression strategy to support recently appointed head teachers in the critical first years of headship.

As part of their career progression strategy, the DfE should develop a programme for deputies aspiring to headship and also a new heads' programme with the explicit aim of developing the skills, knowledge and resilience that new leaders require to improve career longevity. The Commission believes that there would be considerable merit in developing supportive national and local mentoring networks for school leaders and in developing an annual event that brings together all new heads. By building opportunities to meet and network; establishing a national network of mentors and coaches; and ensuring that there are "no islands" (a term coined by the education charity Future Leaders²⁶) much could be done to reverse the worrying trends in head teacher attrition.



Afterword

Nick Brook - Chair of the Accountability Commission



There are few, including those within the education profession, who would argue against the need for school accountability. Each child only gets one opportunity at an education. It is only right that we have systems in place to monitor the quality of the education they receive and to identify problems where they occur. Frankly, the stakes are too high not to.

A fair and proportionate accountability system can be a force for good; it can challenge underperformance and act as a catalyst for improvement.

However, we have heard repeatedly during the course of this commission that the current accountability arrangements in England are not working as well as they should. It is clear that change is needed. Not only are there question marks regarding how useful current arrangements are in terms of the information provided to parents, schools and policymakers, we have also heard compelling evidence of the negative effects of the current system. Whether it is perverse incentives, the unequal treatment of schools in different circumstances, or the negative impact on teacher workload. Too often the current arrangements cause harm rather than drive improvement.

We believe that the reforms outlined in this report can reduce and eradicate many of these negative impacts. But the report also goes further: it provides a compelling long-term vision for rebalancing top-down accountability with peer-to-peer improvement support. In doing so, the Commission proposes first steps to be taken but it does not attempt to identify every step on the journey. This journey is likely to take some time, but we need to be clear about our ultimate destination.

We also need to be aware that accountability arrangements sit within a broader context. Changes to inspection frameworks or how school data is presented and used will not be enough by themselves. Wider challenges remain that need to be addressed if such reforms are to have maximum impact, amongst these:

We need greater honesty when describing the causes of educational underperformance. Teachers and schools transform lives, but sometimes the scale of the challenge is too great even for the most accomplished professional. There are a number of wider factors at play over which schools themselves may have varying ability to influence, such as accessibility of support services, levels of poverty, and prevalence of crime and anti-social behaviour in the community. These and other factors have a significant detrimental impact on young people's ability to learn. If we do not challenge false assumptions of school failure we will never take the right actions required to deliver the improvement in standards desired. Good schools are part of the solution, not the problem, and success might require other services to address the root causes of the issues faced. However, in the absence of a credible middle tier between schools and central government, it is hard to see who at a local or regional level should be held to account for coordinating concerted action, across multiple public services, to enable all young people to succeed.

Our best teachers and school leaders should be actively incentivised to work in the most challenging areas. Good teachers and leaders should be recognised as such, irrespective of where they have chosen to work. This report sets out changes to the use of data and inspection to ensure a level playing field for teachers and leaders working in different circumstances. A strong moral purpose drives good people to work in schools serving the most deprived communities and the least they deserve is fairness when being held to account for their work. However, this may not be enough. There should be incentives and reward for those who take on the most significant challenges. The system should make the flow of the best people to where they are needed most as smooth as possible.

We need to focus on the quality of school improvement support offered to schools. An important aspect of any accountability system is to shine a spotlight on underperformance so that it can be tackled, but this in itself will not lead to sustained improvement. This report calls on the inspectorate to provide schools requiring improvement with an objective and sophisticated diagnosis of the areas in which they need to develop. Yet alongside this clearer understanding of the problem, we need a sharper understanding of what constitutes effective school improvement support. School improvement support is, at best, variable in quality and impact and there is no simple way for schools to distinguish between the good, bad and indifferent. The Education Endowment Foundation's teaching and learning toolkit provides easily accessible analysis of the value of different teaching interventions. There is, at present, nothing that comes close to this for assessing school improvement support, to inform development and investment decisions. Without this, schools, or any intermediary tasked with brokering support, may not necessarily be in a position to use evidence to select the resources best placed to help them.

Key to achieving this vision will be the profession itself. It requires a significant cultural and behavioural shift and for leaders and teachers to step up and take responsibility for one another and ownership over educational standards. This is not something that we, the profession, should wait for the government to mandate us to do. We do not need permission from the DfE to step into this space and do the right thing. And if we do not step forward, who will?



A timeline of changes to accountability

- 1988** Education Reform Act 1988 introduced:
- the national curriculum,
 - key stages of education,
 - local management of schools and
 - City technology colleges — grant-maintained schools beyond local authority control.
- GCSE qualifications introduced
- 1991** First statutory assessments based on national curriculum levels introduced
- 1992** Office for Standards in Education created (Ofsted) by Education (Schools) Act 1992
- Annual performance tables introduced
- 1994** Introduction of A* GCSE grade
- 1997** Key stage 3 SATs introduced
- 2000** Learning and Skills Act 2000 provided for the establishment of the first city academies, later known as sponsored academies
- AS levels introduced
- 2001** Ofsted's inspection remit expanded to include day-care and childminding
- 2002** Value-added progress measure introduced
- 2005** Education Act 2005 designed to strengthen accountability framework for schools
- More frequent, shorter inspections
 - Definitions for inadequate schools (special measures/significant improvement)
 - Statutory intervention powers for local authorities.
- Ofsted introduced a self-evaluation form for schools
- 2006** Education and Inspections Act 2006 introduced new powers for school intervention and changes to the functions of Ofsted and the Chief Inspector
- Value-added progress measure replaced with contextual value-added measure
- 2008** A* grade introduced at A level
- 2009** Ofsted introduced a new inspection framework
- Key stage 3 SATs discontinued
- 2010** Academies Act 2010 provided powers for the Secretary of State to make an academy order to create a sponsored academy (including a free school, studio school or UTC) and for maintained schools to 'convert' to become academies
- EBacc introduced
- Contextual value added measure replaced with expected progress
- 2011** Education Act 2011 provided for:
- the exemption of most 'outstanding' schools from inspection and
 - changes to the matters to be covered in the inspection report.
- 2012** Ofsted introduced a new inspection framework in January
- Ofsted replaced the January framework in September, introducing a 'requires improvement' judgement, monitoring inspections of 'requires improvement' schools and the three-strikes rule
- 2014** New national curriculum introduced and levels removed
- 2015** One-day short inspections of 'good' schools introduced
- Revision of all GCSE subjects including replacement of A* - G, with 9 - 1 grading
- Commencement of introduction of new linear A levels and start of separation of A and AS levels
- Final reporting of levels for SATs and teacher assessment tests
- 2016** Interim pre-key stage standards introduced in place of P scales
- New national curriculum tests introduced
- Progress 8 measure introduced
- Scaled scores introduced to measure school level progress in primary schools
- 2018** Significant changes to short inspection arrangements to reduce the number converted to full inspections. The three-strikes rule for 'requires improvement' schools was dropped.
- Pre-key stage standards formally replace P scales
- 2019** Final examinations for 'unreformed' A level courses
- 2020** All GCSE, AS and A level awards will conform to new requirements

Appendix A

MEMBERSHIP OF THE COMMISSION

Chair: **Nick Brook** (NAHT deputy general secretary)

Members: **Professor Rebecca Allen** (UCL IoE)
James Bowen (NAHT Edge)
Marie-Claire Bretherton (education director, CfBT)
Sam Butters (Fair Education Alliance)
Sir Kevan Collins (Education Endowment Foundation)
Amanda Hulme (head teacher, Claypool Primary School)
Emma Knights (National Governance Association)
Anne Lyons (NAHT immediate past president)
Andy Mellor (NAHT president)
Ross Morrison McGill (Teacher Toolkit)
Dame Alison Peacock (Chartered College of Teaching)
Tim Sherriff (head teacher, Westfield Community School)
Michael Tidd (head teacher, Medmerry Primary School)
Carole Willis (National Foundation for Educational Research)

Chair of peer review and leadership sub-group: **Sir Robin Boshier**


For NAHT: **Ian Hartwright** (NAHT senior policy advisor)
Lydia Vye (NAHT policy research manager)

Appendix B

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The Commission agreed on a set of eight guiding principles to act as tests to inform its recommendations, while recognising that it would be unlikely for any single model or recommendation to meet every principle. The Commission's discussions, therefore, explored the relative priorities, trade-offs and mitigations that would be needed when putting forward its recommendations.

The eight guiding principles for the development of a future accountability system are set out below.

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- 1. Judge schools on the impact they have, in helping to ensure that all pupils make the progress they should.** An accountability system should help not hinder the provision of excellent education for all.
 - 2. Be fair to all schools, irrespective of circumstance or context.** Good teachers and leaders should be properly recognised for, and not dissuaded from, working in tough schools.
 - 3. Accept the inherent limitations of data for accountability purposes** and recognise high-quality, on the ground review as the most effective way to form a sound judgement of any school's effectiveness.
 - 4. Identify signs of failure or decline** early to reduce the extent of remedial action required to address issues and to ensure supportive challenge characterises interventions.
 - 5. Encourage school leaders to take responsibility for their own school improvement** and not limit ambition for what is possible.
 - 6. Incentivise, encourage and value collective responsibility for pupil outcomes across schools** regionally and nationally.
 - 7. Be transparent and provide parents with easy to understand information,** to improve the clarity of meaning while reducing any associated unintended consequences.
 - 8. Reduce workload, relieve stress and dial down the anxiety associated with accountability for pupils, teachers and school leaders,** recognising the duty to safeguard mental health and well-being.

Appendix C

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