

Inspection

Accountability is an aspect of good governance of the system. For school leaders, accountability is the acknowledgment and assumption of responsibility for outcomes and encompasses the obligation to report, explain and be answerable for those outcomes. A self-improving system is not a self-serving system. Thus, inspection is focused on accountability to the public who are the users of the system and to government. In a system where schools are increasingly autonomous and diverse in their legal and operational structures, the case for an independent inspectorate to assure the public both as taxpayers and parents is stronger than ever.

Extract from ASCL's *Blueprint for a Self-Improving System*

First principles

- 1 Inspection is a key part of the accountability system of schools and colleges in England. Accountability is the obligation of an individual and organisation to account for its activities, accept responsibility for them, and to disclose the results in a transparent manner. As schools are publically funded organisations, it is right that school leaders and governing boards give an account of their actions and decisions to an independent inspectorate in order to ensure good outcomes for all children and young people in their institution.
- 2 The inspectorate's primary function should be to evaluate the outcomes and assess how school leaders (including governors) account for these. The inspectorate should reach conclusions about the effectiveness of the school. They exercise this responsibility on behalf of parents and children and young people.
- 3 Accountability should not be confused with improvement or support. The inspectorate's primary role is one of holding to account.
- 4 Likewise, inspection should not be confused with a school's or group of schools' own quality assurance mechanisms, including peer review, peer learning and peer accountability. These processes are essential in a self-improving system. It is only where quality assurance is strong and schools begin to hold each other to account in valid and reliable ways that the system will be self-improving. The inspectorate is the essential independent check that a self-improving system is not a self-interested or self-serving one.

Analysis of the current system

- 5 The boundary between holding to account and improvement functions has been eroded in recent years. The current school inspectorate, Ofsted, says it helps providers that are not yet of good standard to improve, monitor their progress and share best practice. The unintended consequence of this is that Ofsted is seen to mandate particular types of practices. This has led to a culture of compliance with what schools believe or imagine Ofsted expects to see. In a self-improving system, the locus of professional decision making cannot be located outside the system itself. Being held accountable for those decisions by an independent inspectorate however, is a necessary safeguard.



- 6 Recently, Ofsted has seen its role as making repeated visits to schools which are considered to be below standard. While frequent visits may be part of the exercise of accountability, Ofsted also sees its role as directly engaging with these schools in continuing support for school improvement. This is not the role of an inspectorate. It may be a role for other improvement agencies. It is a fundamental conflict of interest, with the inspectorate in the final instance making judgements about its own effectiveness in improving schools.
- 7 Ofsted has made a sensible and very welcome move towards a more risk-based approach based on an annual data assessment and also has a system for complaints triggering inspection.
- 8 Ofsted said in 2014 that it will move to contracting directly with inspectors rather than through a third party supplier, thereby ensuring that inspectors are effectively sourced, trained and deployed. Ofsted has also said it is a priority to continue to strengthen its regional structure and develop better local intelligence and stronger relationships with key regional partners. This is the right direction of travel; however, this new workforce needs to be lean, efficient and effective.

Inspection in a self-improving system – policy proposals

- 9 The inspectorate should be lean, efficient and effective. This is especially important in the current fiscal climate. In a system where schools are increasingly autonomous and diverse in their legal and operational structures, an independent inspectorate should assure the public both as taxpayers and parents by holding schools to account their outcomes.
- 10 School leadership necessarily includes governance. The vision, character, values and provision in a school is determined by its governing board. Governors have a leadership role alongside paid professionals and must be held to account for provision and outcomes. In an academised system, ultimate responsibility for the provision and outcomes lies with the academy trust. It follows that the academy trust is the accountable body. Where a trust is responsible for more than one school, the inspectorate should be able to inspect the trust.
- 11 Inspection should be proportionate. The inspectorate should risk assess schools on an annual basis. The criteria for this risk assessment should be decided in consultation with the profession, be published and transparent. We now have rich sources of data to enable this. Where progress and outcomes are secure, schools or groups of schools should not be inspected.
- 12 Where outcomes do not look secure, the school should be inspected. While school outcomes cannot be interpreted solely on the data¹, rich data offer a reliable and valid way of starting the professional dialogue about the effectiveness of the school.
- 13 The inspectorate should not (and indeed cannot) make requirements on schools. It is there to hold to account on the principles identified above. It cannot and should not mandate or sanction particular practices or processes other than those that are legally binding on schools, like safeguarding or health and safety. Where processes or practices are not safe, fail to safeguard or are not legally compliant, clearly the inspectorate needs to report this promptly. However, evaluating student outcomes rather than evaluating process should be the key principle of inspection.
- 14 Inspection should not be burdensome or onerous on teachers. For that reason, individual lessons should not be judged. Inspection should be the process for holding school leaders and the governing board to account for the provision and outcomes. It should be an evaluation, scrutiny and validation of school

1 For example, where a school is undergoing rapid improvement and the progress of students is ahead of the published data.

leaders' own evaluation of the provision and outcomes. In this sense, it does not make sense to have separate grades for different aspects of provision. There should be a single grade reflecting the overall effectiveness of the school based on a valid and reliable evidence.

- 15 The inspector workforce should be respected and credible. There should be a rigorous recruitment and training process. Inspectors should only be allowed to inspect a school when they have relevant and recent leadership experience and a secure knowledge of assessment, pedagogical practice and the relevant phase. The inspection team should be a strong balanced team and must be perceived to be respected peers.
- 16 Taking into account the principles articulated above, the inspectorate should develop a framework that is slim, smart and stable. The framework for inspecting schools should be in place for at least the term of Parliament.

