

# A new vision for inspection in education



# Contents

Foreword.....	1
What is effective accountability?.....	2
The case for change.....	4
Our vision – inspection and improvement.....	6
The inspection process.....	8
Ensuring quality.....	10
Conclusion.....	12

# Foreword



The time has come for a radically different approach to school inspection. ATL believes that schools must be accountable for their use of public money; school leaders and teachers must be accountable for the work they do with children and young people who get only one chance at education. It is not the principle of accountability that ATL is contesting, it is the current practice of accountability and its effects on the education system.

It is not the principle of accountability that ATL is contesting, it is the current practice of accountability and its effects on the education system.

ATL proposes a new approach to inspection, an approach that is tailored to school improvement; proportionate in its impact; works with, not against the teaching profession; is conducted by experts in the subject/age phase being inspected; and which results in carefully calibrated, nuanced inspection judgements that acknowledge the complexity of effective teaching, learning and assessment practices.

Some elements of ATL's proposals are challenging. We propose no overall inspection judgement – we argue that the inspection categories conceal more than they reveal about a school's quality. This would be a major change for parents and for the education system. There are aspects of this debate that rightly require wider discussion to build consensus.

But the time is right, now, to think creatively and to ask ourselves the question: do we want under-confident, constrained school leaders and teachers, or do we want a creative profession, held rigorously to account, but confident in the exercise of its own professional agency? ATL believes we need the second option and so we have developed the following proposals for the alternative to Ofsted inspections.

*Mary W. Bousted.*

# What is effective accountability?

An education system should be accountable at many levels, through democratic systems and more directly to particular stakeholders. ATL believes central government should not attempt to manage local issues of school provision and quality, except by the creation and review of a national framework. The government should be held accountable for system performance and policy. In that case, central government needs system data, not individual school data. The simplistic, misleading and unreliable grading of schools is unnecessary and invalid. It does not reflect the much greater variation of teaching quality within schools.

Local communities should be able to hold local government to account for schools in their area, particularly the provision of school places. ATL believes that school quality should also be a local responsibility with appropriate accountabilities. Local government should be accountable to central government for the exercising of these responsibilities.

Individual schools must account to a range of stakeholders such as their governing body, the local community, parents and pupils, as well as local and central government. It is important to remember that central government is not the only body with an interest in the quality of education provided by schools, the accountability system – including inspections – must be designed with the needs of all stakeholders in mind.

Parents in general desire accountability in respect of the progress of their own children, but that is not all. We know that their concern is for ‘the whole child’, their happiness, sociability and freedom from bullying, as much as their progress in school subjects. Parents often get this information informally and this may inform school choice. However it is too easily forgotten that school choice and school accountability are not the same thing.



## **An effective accountability framework**

Evidence from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) suggests nine features that should underpin an effective accountability framework with pupils at its centre.

Effective accountability must do the following:

- 1.** Support and challenge the work of teachers and leaders and assist schools to support and improve their performance.
- 2.** Encourage teacher creativity and local innovation and promote teacher self-efficacy and agency.
- 3.** Be founded on a shared understanding of effective practices in teaching and recognise that this is the subject of ongoing research and discussion, can be highly contested and is open to interpretation and new developments.
- 4.** Reflect the complexity of teachers' professional understanding and practice and not be driven by summative performance measures.
- 5.** Support teaching quality by not increasing bureaucracy but making best use of sustainably generated information.
- 6.** Be conducted by well-trained evaluators who are accountable for their contribution to quality education. The practice of any external evaluators must be monitored by consistent and effective quality assurance procedures.
- 7.** Support the development of schools as professional learning institutions with collegiate relations and professional dialogue between teachers and leaders.
- 8.** Be compatible with well-aligned procedures for teacher recruitment, registration, induction and mentoring, support structures and professional instruments of evaluation.
- 9.** Make connections between the different evaluation components to ensure that those components are sufficiently linked in order to avoid unnecessary bureaucracy, unhelpful duplication, and so that there are no conflicts between accountability processes.

# The case for change

Since its inception in 1992, Ofsted has been subject to a sustained critique of the reliability and validity of its inspection judgements on schools.

Comparing Ofsted inspections in England to the nine features of effective accountability demonstrates clearly that current arrangements are a flawed part of the education system.

Ofsted's inspections:

- over-simplify the nature of teaching practice while simultaneously failing to build consensus around what effective practice is and how research informs that
- generate workload without supporting teaching and learning; put strain on in-school relationships
- limit innovation and professional agency and put undue pressure on new teachers
- use – by Ofsted's own admission – ineffectively trained additional inspectors with quality assurance not held up to external scrutiny
- are inconsistently understood and poorly valued by a profession seeking to improve.

Compounding these problems is deep mistrust between the inspectors and the inspected. This breakdown in professional relationships has led to a deepening lack of support for the current inspection regime from those working in education and a lack of faith in Ofsted inspectors' prescriptions for school improvement.

## Ofsted inspections put children's education at risk because:

- The difference of one grade in an Ofsted inspection can precipitate much greater decline in education quality as it can lead to teachers leaving to seek work in more supportive, less pressured environments.
- The workload implications for teachers are not just extensive but unnecessary. When Ofsted inspections cause teachers and lecturers to jump through hoops and produce additional forms of data and evidence for what they do, it detracts from time and energy spent on planning and teaching high-quality, inspiring lessons.
- Teacher stress risks pupil achievement and Ofsted is deepening this problem. In ATL's 2014 survey, almost four in 10 members noticed a rise in mental health problems among colleagues over the past two years. Six in 10 cited inspections as a factor affecting the mental health of education staff.
- They turn schools into a poor example for children of workplace culture and the value of learning; the dangers of a culture of compliance are serious. OECD evidence shows pupil achievement rises when, as workplaces, schools embrace democratic values with teachers participating in whole-school planning and decision-making, and being places of learning for staff as well as pupils. But adherence to Ofsted's high-stakes inspections constrains innovation and diminishes skills and knowledge among the teaching profession – exactly the skills the children they teach must develop.

In ATL's 2014 survey, almost four in 10 members noticed a rise in mental health problems among colleagues over the past two years. Six in 10 cited inspections as a factor affecting the mental health of education staff.

### **Ofsted inspections are ineffective because:**

- Ofsted has failed to address long-standing problems of quality assurance: direct contracting is not the same as using in-house HMIs; it is a step in the right direction but amounts to a delay in properly addressing a huge issue.
- Ofsted is inconsistent and uses non-expert inspectors: teachers and leaders continue to report inconsistencies between inspections and during inspections, and non-expert inspection of certain subject areas or age groups, particularly in early years education.
- Ofsted has failed to prove its inspections are reliable and valid. As Professor Robert Coe has argued, this has heightened importance because of the high stakes for schools, their staff and their pupils, but since grades are actually a numerical expression of a judgement, or indeed a large number of small judgements, statistical reliability and validity is impossible.
- The focus on producing a single overall grade is meaningless and outmoded: data on pupil achievement in schools falling below current floor targets shows little difference between schools that Ofsted says 'require improvement' and those schools Ofsted has judged 'good'.
- Ofsted is not compatible with a common desire for self-improving schools: this will continue to be the case while the inspectorate can say "however well you think you're doing, we'll come and tell you otherwise", which disempowers teachers and leaders.
- Ofsted has produced a compliance culture: school leaders seek to provide what they think inspectors will want rather than what they think is good for pupils and learning. At the same time teachers comply with instructions from leadership and too often do not feel suitably empowered to exercise their own professional judgement.
- Too often feedback from Ofsted is not provided in an environment of trust and support, and teachers are not encouraged to be continual independent learners: Sutton Trust research highlights these factors among its six principles of teacher feedback that support the development and sustainability of great teaching.
- Neither Ofsted inspectors nor schools can keep pace with the regularity of change in the content and form of inspections: change in inspection frameworks is rarely based upon external research evidence and regularly appears faddish or subject to party political whim.
- Decisions made about what to inspect and the consequences of inspections graded below 'good' are politically and ideologically driven; the inspectorate takes a pro-academy position lacking democratic consensus within local communities. There is a deficit of current professional input and recent research evidence in respect of what raises standards of teaching and learning.

# Our vision – inspection and improvement

## **ATL's alternative can hold schools to account – and help them improve**

ATL believes it is necessary for education to have an effective system of accountability. Children and young people only get one chance to receive a good education. As a nation we are forecast to spend £53.5 billion on education through the Department for Education (DfE) budget in 2014-15. Taxpayers must be assured this money is being spent to good effect to meet the global challenges of the 21st Century.

We currently spend £142 million per annum on an inspection agency that fails to provide this assurance. It is for these reasons ATL is setting out a vision for a more effective inspection and improvement system. It has become increasingly clear Ofsted cannot be relied upon for its judgements and cannot be counted on to play a role in helping schools improve. The inconsistency in quality and accuracy of inspections creates confusion and doubt for teachers and leaders. These issues are compounded by the teaching profession's ever-increasing lack of respect for Ofsted.

It is no longer politically acceptable, nor is it value for money, to provide a simple grade as a result of an inspection without being able to offer appropriate, respected support and empowerment of teachers and leaders that results in school improvement. ATL believes the result of the inspection process should provide a clear focus on the steps the school should take to improve.

An alternative must address these issues. ATL proposes a model built upon local systems of inspection and improvement with collaboration driving the spread of good practice. Led by partnerships of professionals, with a newly defined role for a national agency to provide quality assurance.

## **A culture change in inspection**

It is clear from the current situation that a culture change is required to enable the sector to focus on educational improvement, rather than the latest change in government policy, the resulting changes in the Ofsted framework, or the less publicised but more regular changes in guidance for inspection teams.

This culture change must increase the teaching profession's agency and support the profession in its ability to identify and support the highest standards of education through reflection on, and identification of, effective teaching, learning and assessment practices. This culture change must offer a proportionate approach through an inspection system, where conduct and impact is in proportion to schools' (and pupils') needs.

Taken together, these factors will increase the capacity and freedom for innovation in teaching and learning and limit the disruptive effect inspection has on pupils, including the distraction from learning priorities.





change

improve

**Our vision for inspection would be based on five key principles:**

- 1 High quality education would be defined by what is right for pupils in a given school, not by centrally determined criteria chosen because they are easy to measure, nor by benchmarks or a focus for short-term political or media appeasement.
- 2 Its nature would be supportive not adversarial; advisory not dictatorial; empowering not punitive.
- 3 Self-assessment and professional dialogue would be central. Data would be used to guide, not decide.
- 4 Inspection teams would have a continual relationship with schools, supporting the improvement of individuals or teams as necessary, and constituting a type of formative assessment. It would not be necessary to look at all provision on each visit – for example, there could be a subject focus to a given visit.
- 5 Full inspections, as a summative assessment, would take place only occasionally. They would be triggered by a local stakeholder request, the inspection and improvement partnership determining that capacity to improve is limited or that a sufficient number of areas of provision causing concern warrant whole-school inspection. Findings under a full inspection would be able to offer a clear public signal when there is severe weakness causing the quality of education to be below a good standard.

# The inspection process

The inspection and improvement process would prioritise professional dialogue between inspectors and inspected. Handled sensibly, educational data can be useful. Data, self-evaluation and inspection would be used together for accountability and improvement. The data would be used to pose questions during the initial phase of the inspection process, the answers to which would be used to determine the make-up of the local inspection and improvement team.

For teaching, learning and leadership, the inspection process would begin with professional discussions led by relevant school staff outlining strengths, weaknesses, and external contexts and difficulties that impact on teaching and learning. The school would also highlight areas it would like specific help to evaluate and improve. Ideas for how to address improvement – across the whole life of the school – may be included at this stage. This would result in the development of a mutually agreed action plan and identification of where collaboration and/or outside help can be sought to support this plan.

Evidence from the London Challenge shows that where schools collaborate, education standards rise and children's achievement rises. The local inspection and improvement partnership could help broker school-to-school arrangements.

While it is recognised parents and other stakeholders are attracted to the simplicity of a single grade, in reality, evidence shows that variation in pupil achievement is greater within schools than between schools.

It is more meaningful to evaluate and improve based upon strengths and weaknesses within a school than give the misleading headline impression that all provision is of the same standard. Schools can learn from their own good practice and use the action plan to deal with in-school variation, which is an important driver for improvement. It is for this reason that, in a similar way to current practice by the Independent Schools Inspectorate, the inspection would not produce a single overall grade for each school.

Following the inspection, two documents would be produced by the inspection team. A short document equivalent to an executive summary and a full report for use by the school and inspection team to monitor progress against the agreed action plan. Both documents would have a clear focus on highlighting strengths, areas for improvement, steps the schools and its partners have agreed to take to address areas for improvement and sustain or boost strengths, including a monitoring timeline. These documents would be publicly available.



## **The benefits of new local inspection and improvement partnerships**

By being designed locally and with the involvement of current classroom teachers:

- the subjectivity of judgements would be understood and interpreted by all involved
- unique school circumstances would be better understood
- improvement plans would be relevant and effectively supported; a local inspectorate would be a local improvement agency
- higher standards could be built by fostering the expertise of teachers and leaders in an environment of professional respect, appropriate challenge and clear accountability
- unnecessary stress and pressure would be reduced and freedom and trust to innovate would be increased
- teachers would direct time and energy towards what pupils need, not what inspectors need
- priorities and change would be defined by what is right for children, not what is politically convenient
- it would be easier for schools to react to local and individual needs.

# Ensuring quality

## Who will make up inspection and improvement teams?

Each inspection team would be selected based on the key issues identified in the pre-inspection evaluation. Every member of the inspection team would have recent and relevant experience of the area they are inspecting and would need high-quality, evidence-based training (for example, see Robert Coe, 2015) in effective evaluation and in equality and diversity for education. Current practitioners' teaching experience would bring credibility and rigour to the inspection team. Crucially, the whole team would have strong professional knowledge of the area and know where support and advice could be provided.

Every member of the inspection team would be drawn from an area similar to the local government region but with networks across the wider region. For example, in certain circumstances the partnership would need to call upon non-teaching expertise on safeguarding.

To assess, discuss and advise on teaching and learning, the inspection team would need to be able to call upon, for example, subject specialists, age-phase specialists and experts in specific areas such as special educational needs or faith-based education.

To be clear, the expectation would be that only vocational education and training specialists would evaluate vocational education and training, individual subject provision would be looked at by those working in that subject area, early years teachers would conduct the partnership's assessment of early years teaching, and so on.

The role of senior leaders would be to assess, discuss and advise on strategy, leadership and management in education and the implementation of positive working cultures and a whole-school ethos.





## How to ensure robustness

Government, parents and local communities would have a clear interest or responsibility to ensure this new arrangement is effective. The correct way of assuring these processes would be for a 'middle tier' indisputably in the public sector and able to act reactively and proactively, without undermining the principles of local profession-led inspection and improvement.

The inspection and improvement process needs its own middle tier between schools and national government. This would involve different institutions with clearly defined roles:

- Parents and the community could request an inspection or review of previously approved arrangements if they felt the inspection teams were too close to schools rather than constructively critical.
- The local authority would act as the contact point for parent/community requests for inspection and improvement visits. It would be held democratically accountable for its decisions and its role in school improvement.
- Appeals regarding unsuccessful inspection requests could be heard by a national body independent of government, reporting to Parliament and with the role of evaluating local

inspection arrangements to instil confidence schools are properly accountable. Led by experienced HMIs, it would consider how well concerns are raised during inspection and the impact on raising quality.

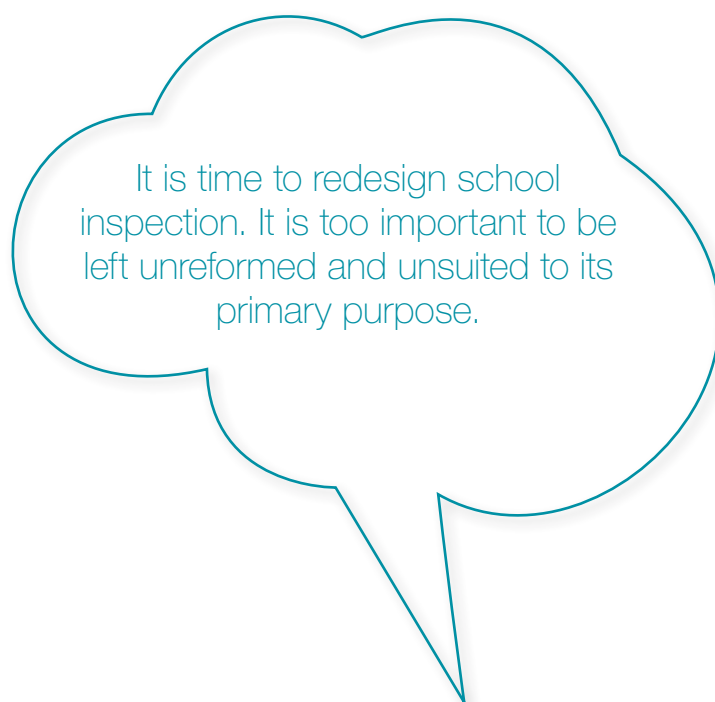
- Appropriate weight would be applied by this middle tier to isolated complaints about schools and unsubstantiated complaints would not form a part of the inspection and improvement process. The collection and collation of stakeholder perceptions must ensure they are representative and verifiable as well as allowing for confidential comment.
- Any existing or proposed middle tier structures with wider remits must hold a democratic link. On this basis, they could sign off on newly developed proposals for local inspection and improvement arrangements, and be consulted on the 'action plan' agreed between schools and inspectors.

# Conclusion

While many stakeholders have identified problems with the current system of inspection conducted by Ofsted, few have articulated in detail exactly what they would prefer in its place. Though there are aspects that rightly require wider discussion to build consensus, ATL has sought to start that process in this paper. We have provided a model that can answer the many criticisms made of current Ofsted inspections and satisfy the demand for effective accountability with an emphasis on professional agency.

Local inspection and improvement partnerships, with a new culture of collaboration and robust national quality assurance, will best provide accountability to a range of stakeholders by understanding and responding to local need. The teaching profession would lead this process, working closely with other experts, in a system designed to take into account local circumstances, underpinned by nationally agreed principles that are based on research and public and political agreement.

It is time to redesign school inspection. It is too important to be left unreformed and unsuited to its primary purpose – raising further the standards of education in all our schools, for the sake of all who learn within them.



## References

*Equity, Excellence and Inclusiveness in Education – Policy Lessons from Around the World*, Andreas Schleicher, OECD, 2014

*Evaluation of the City Challenge programme*, DfE Research Report, Hutchings M et al, 2012, DFE-RR215 – [www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/184093/DFE-RR215.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/184093/DFE-RR215.pdf)

<https://news.tes.co.uk/b/opinion/2013/10/24/critics-should-not-have-to-prove-ofsted-s-judgements-are-wrong-it-should-be-up-to-ofsted-to-prove-they-are-right.aspx> and [www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-24079951](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-24079951)

*Pisa in Focus*, 2013/14 (April)

*Schools Learning from their Best (the Within School Variation Project)*, Reynolds, D – NCSL, 2007

*Schools Week*, Friday 6 February 2015

*Teachers for the 21st Century – Using Evaluation to Improve Teaching*, OECD, 2013

*Teachers Matter: Attracting, Developing, Retaining Effective Teachers*, OECD, 2005

*The Middle Tier: A Voice from the Profession*, ATL, 2012 – [www.atl.org.uk/publications-and-resources/research-publications/middle-tier.asp](http://www.atl.org.uk/publications-and-resources/research-publications/middle-tier.asp)

[www.cem.org/blog/414/](http://www.cem.org/blog/414/)

[www.suttontrust.com/researcharchive/great-teaching/](http://www.suttontrust.com/researcharchive/great-teaching/)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/workload-challenge-for-schools-government-response>

ATL is the union for education professionals. Active in the maintained, independent and post-16 sectors, we use our members' experiences to influence education policy, and we work with government and employers to defend pay, conditions and career development. From early years to HE, teachers to support staff, lecturers to leaders, we support and represent our members throughout their career.



the education union

ATL – the education union  
7 Northumberland Street  
London WC2N 5RD

Tel: 020 7930 6441  
Fax: 020 7930 1359  
info@atl.org.uk

[www.atl.org.uk](http://www.atl.org.uk)  
[twitter.com/atlunion](https://twitter.com/atlunion)  
[facebook.com/atlunion](https://facebook.com/atlunion)

---

**Cardiff**  
Tel: 029 2046 5000  
cymru@atl.org.uk

**Belfast**  
Tel: 028 9078 2020  
ni@atl.org.uk