

# Restoring School Accountability

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The current accountability system for schools is ineffective and inhumane. **Professor Colin Richards** considers how we can fix the system and bring back trust as a guiding principle.

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**A**s every year, the administration of this year's SATs raises issues of how our current accountability system can be rendered more useful, trustworthy and humane. For primary and secondary schools, change at three levels, and in relation to three questions, is required. It will not be easy or uncontentious. Realistic compromises will have to be made by government, by Ofsted and by the teaching profession. The present fraught and febrile situation cannot continue. It is serving to inhibit innovative practice as well as contributing massively to the current malaise affecting both primary and secondary education.

In order to secure accountability at the **national level**, the government needs to work with professional associations and academics to devise a non-intrusive system for assessing pupils' performance over time.

This would require the setting up of an independent national body to oversee periodic national assessments of children's performance—ideally in both tested and non-tested areas of the curriculum at ages 11 and 14, and based on sampling of assessment items or activities and on representative samples of pupils. With results published periodically, this would answer the legitimate accountability question: 'Are national standards across the board rising or falling?'



At the **individual level**, parents need to be assured that their children are making appropriate progress. To provide this information without excessive workload, primary and secondary teachers need to engage in ongoing assessment against a limited number of assessment criteria per year and to report results. Item banks could be drawn on to help teachers make those assessments. This would require more valid and reliable forms of teacher assessment than in the past and would need some sort of external moderation.

More controversially, while this work is being undertaken, there would be a need to retain some limited form of national testing of primary pupils focussing on parents' main concerns— their child's performance in reading, mathematics and basic writing skills. Such national assessments might be administered only twice in a child's career—certainly not in the form of a national base-line assessment, but first conducted on a one-to-one basis at or towards the end of year 1, and secondly, in written form at the end of year 5 (followed where necessary in both cases by more remedial or more challenging work within the same school).

The assessments and test results would be reported to parents, to governors, to LAs and MATs and to schools to which their children transfer but would not be collated as a public 'measure' of school effectiveness, thereby contributing to the end of 'teaching to the test' and the narrowing of the school curriculum.

These changes in primary testing would need to be complemented by a wide-ranging, independent review of the secondary examination system which includes relevant international comparisons.

Reform along these lines would help answer a parent's legitimate, accountability question: 'How is my child progressing?'

In order to secure accountability to parents at **school level**, the government needs a system which assures that individual schools are providing a suitable quality of education and which triggers action should that quality not be evident. The most obvious and longstanding way of judging school quality is inspection by suitably qualified and experienced inspectors—the Ofsted

model currently being reviewed and re-orientated. Almost certainly, whatever the strongly held views of professional associations such as the National Education Union, it would not be politically realistic to press for Ofsted's abolition—certainly in the short-term, though the long-term survival of the organisation in its current form is problematic.



However, alternatives to Ofsted inspection need to be explored, albeit cautiously and without claiming too much initially for their effectiveness. For example, it would be important to complement the new curriculum-oriented inspection regime with pilot schemes of school self-evaluation moderated externally by HMIs in the hope that in due course they might eventually be trusted to provide robust accountability of schools without the need for old-style formal inspections, apart from exceptional cases. But that prospect is a way off. In the meantime, parents will expect a reliable answer to their legitimate accountability question 'How good is my child's school?' This would be provided by a short, pithy bespoke inspection report without a simplistic overall grade and provided every four or five years for all schools.

Without overloading the system, this proposed three-level solution would provide government, schools and parents with appropriate information about progress and performance of the system as a whole, of individual schools and of individual pupils. It inevitably involves compromises, but it is offered here as a way of reconciling teacher professionalism with reasonable accountability to parents, politicians and the wider public.

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