

# Ofsted inspectors 'lack skills to assess schools'

**M**any Ofsted inspectors lack the skills to properly and fairly analyse a school's performance, a new report has warned.

According to the scathing review by think tank, Policy Exchange, Ofsted is staffed by inspectors whose judgement of lessons is so unreliable, 'you would be better off flipping a coin'.

The study said Ofsted should consider 'abolishing or radically reducing' the large number of inspectors it contracts from private firms, claiming that many lack the 'ability to analyse data' or do not have the specialist knowledge in primary or special needs teaching to make a fair judgement.

There is also evidence, the report adds, that inspectors prefer certain methods of teaching, which has resulted in a number of schools being reluctant to change how they work for fear of getting a bad rating.

Author of the report, Jonathon Simons, said: 'More needs to be done to drive up the quality of inspectors. Heads and teachers must feel confident that the person running their eye over their school is a specialist, preferably with recent teaching experience.'

'Inspectors don't need to be rocket scientists but they must also have the ability to interpret the increasing



amounts of data on the performance of schools, and understand the different ways in which schools are now operating.

'Schools should not be forced to second-guess what the inspector coming through the door will be like.'

The report calls for all inspectors to have relevant and recent experience in the type of school they are assessing, and to pass exams on interpreting data.

## Extra cash for the poorest-funded schools

**A**n extra £350 million of funding is to be available in the next two years to local authorities at the lower end of the school funding league table, which means schools in different local authority areas will continue to receive different amounts per pupil.

Announcing the extra £350m, schools minister, David Laws, said 40 per cent of these areas would gain funding in 2015-16 and none would have less per pupil.

He said: 'This will be the first time in a decade that funding has been allocated to local areas on the basis of the actual characteristics of their pupils and schools, rather than simply on the basis of historic levels of spending.'

Ivan Ould, chair of the campaign group, f40, which represents the local authorities with the poorest funded schools in England, said: 'The coalition government is the first administration in the past 20 years to even acknowledge that the existing formula is unfair and inequitable, so we are pleased that it has now acted to start to rectify the situation.'

However, the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) says the budget increases will be swallowed up by rises in pension contributions and salaries, because

schools have faced 'four years of static or falling funding, coupled with rising costs'.

Deputy general secretary, Malcolm Trobe, said: 'The reality is that all schools and colleges will have a huge hole in their budgets caused by the pensions contribution rise. This will have a catastrophic effect and lead to larger class sizes and reduced curriculum choice.'

'We want the government to ensure that this increase in contributions is fully funded so that children's education is not compromised.'

A Department for Education spokesman said the announced budget would remove the historic unfairness of the funding system and was the biggest step toward fairer funding in a decade.

He said: 'Crucially, we have ensured no local authority will see a reduction in its budget, while 62 local authorities will get a cash boost.'

'Our protection of the schools budget means schools are well positioned to cope with the reform of employer pension contributions that is taking place across the public sector.'

# Touch-screen gadgets help children read

Smartphones and tablet computers can encourage poor pre-school children to read, according to a report by the National Literacy Trust, because they offer a route into reading.

The research has found that technology can have a 'new and important' role to play in getting children as young as three to read.

The findings, based on a poll of around 1,000 parents of three to five-year-olds, show that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to have access to touch screens – for example through tablet computers – than their richer peers. However, of those children with access to touch screens, pre-schoolers from lower socio-economic backgrounds are twice as likely to look at stories using this technology on a daily basis than those from more privileged homes (16 per cent compared to 7.2 per cent).

It goes on to say that children are more likely to enjoy reading if they use both books and a touch screen than simply reading books alone (77.4 per cent compared to

70.8 per cent). The study also found that poorer children who use both books and touch screens to look at stories are less likely to perform below the expected standard for their age than if they only look at books.

The study reveals that overall, children are still more likely to read using a physical book, with almost all (95.2 per cent) looking at print-based stories on a typical week.

In comparison, just over one in four (26 per cent) use a touch screen at home to look at stories.

And it suggests that parents are keen on their youngsters using the latest gadgets, with nearly three quarters (73.7 per cent) agreeing that it was important for their son or daughter to learn to use technology from an early age to help them get on at school.

The trust has suggested that technology should be exploited as a basis for reading, but the recommendation has provoked criticism from nursery leaders who warned that exposure to technology at a young age risks damaging children's development.

# Support for schools to deliver free school meals to infants

A package of measures to help support schools to deliver free school lunches to all infant children has been launched by schools minister, David Laws.

Under the measures, all infant children in state-funded schools in England will be entitled to a free school meal from September 2014. Each small school will receive a minimum of £3,000 funding to extend or improve kitchen facilities, and address transitional costs, in addition to the £2.30 per child per day revenue funding. Overall, the government is providing £150 million to help schools expand their kitchen and dining facilities, where needed.

Other measures include:

- a support service, including a national helpline, run by the Children's Food Trust, to help and support schools across the country – giving advice on the various issues that may arise including visits and one-to-one help where needed
- support from Magic Breakfast to set up breakfast clubs in schools where children are coming to school hungry
- support from charities to help increase school meal take-up in 2,000 junior and secondary schools that currently have low take-up.

The National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) welcomed the announcement, but said there was still a lot of work to be done before the scheme is implemented in September.

Russell Hobby, the NAHT's general secretary, said: 'There are practicalities remaining to be addressed on how every primary will be able to deliver the full service by September, especially for those without existing catering facilities on site and with so many other initiatives hitting schools at the same time.'

The Department for Education is also launching a consultation to simplify school food standards – cutting bureaucracy for schools. The current standards are overcomplicated and can involve schools verifying the amount of nutrients such as zinc and vitamin A that are in meals. The new standards will be simplified and manageable, focusing on tasty healthy meals for all children.



# Financial education still being left to chance

**P**lanned delivery of financial education through maths and citizenship is unlikely to be as effective as through a standalone subject, according to a recent report.

The “Young Persons’ Money Index” released by financial education specialist, ifs University College, reveals that financial education currently delivered through wider subjects is often piecemeal, unstructured and has no real impact on financial decision-making among teenagers.

From September, schools following the national curriculum will be obliged to provide lessons in finance through maths and citizenship, but, as the report found, students currently learning about finance through these subjects are likely to be less confident, less financially active and likely to have had the fewest hours of classroom time covering finance.

Alison Pask, Vice Principal at ifs University College said: ‘The planned inclusion of personal finance into the national

curriculum through maths and citizenship from September 2014 is clearly already a positive step, but the curricula in both of these subjects are very crowded which raises questions as to how much money and finance content can be incorporated – and how effectively.’

The research found that the more structured financial education a student receives, the greater levels of financial understanding and accompanying ‘positive’ behaviours they demonstrate. Students who have taken dedicated personal finance qualifications are more likely to be confident in managing money, less likely to rely on their parents to make financial decisions and more likely to save.

The report concludes: ‘What is clear is that for financial education to succeed, it needs to be structured, regular and meaningful. Our report should be seen as a warning on the dangers of delivering it in a piecemeal and unstructured fashion. Otherwise we are leaving our students’ financial futures to chance.’

## Secondary schools face 80,000 place shortfall

**U**rgent action is needed to prevent a shortage of secondary school places in a third of local authorities in England within five years, according to a report by the Local Government Association (LGA).

The new figures show schools are facing a potential shortfall of 80,000 new places by 2020, with 49 out of 152 councils affected.

Peter Fleming, of the LGA, said: ‘Local government has been working really hard, particularly in primary schools. Over 90,000 primary school places were created last year.

‘But of course, those kids are going to grow up. And what we are concerned about is that those kids have places in secondary schools in the future.

‘Free schools open wherever they want, and may not open where the demand is. This free-for-all is all very well, but without a planned approach, it will mean that in certain areas, you won’t have enough places for all the kids.’

David Simmonds, chairman of the LGA’s children and young people board, said: ‘The challenge for councils is making sure places are delivered on time and in the right places, in a context where some of the decision-making about new school places is now in the hands of the government.’

Schools have been struggling to keep up with a surge in population, with high birth rates and immigration boosting population in many towns and cities. The government has already provided funding for 260,000 new



school places in areas facing a shortage.

Now, the LGA says changes in school policy, which mean local authorities cannot create new schools but instead rely on free school and academy providers – who are not accountable to councils – are compounding the problem.

The Department for Education has said it has provided local authorities with the funding they need for new places, and that it is now up to them to spend this money efficiently and effectively.

A DfE spokesman said: ‘We are giving local authorities £5bn to spend on new school places over this Parliament – double the amount allocated by the previous government over an equivalent period.

‘This funding has already led to the creation of 260,000 new school places, all of which are in areas where there is a shortage of places, and many more new places are planned.’