

School accountability reform consultation: United Learning response

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This paper provides a response on behalf of United Learning¹ to DfE's consultation, 'School accountability reform – school profiles, improvement and intervention'. We are submitting our response in writing in this format rather than via the online portal as the main points we wish to make go beyond the specific questions there. We are responding in parallel to Ofsted's consultation 'Improving the way Ofsted inspects education' and there are a number of related points across our two responses.

This response addresses the proposals in each of the three chapters of the accountability consultation in turn.

Chapter 1 – Accountability in the state-funded school system

Overall, it is good to see the Department set out a direction of travel on standards and school improvement. We welcome, and were reassured to see, the emphasis on standards, improvement and strengthening accountability. We support a drive for high and rising standards in every school.

We broadly agree that the purposes of school accountability are as described in Chapter 1 of the consultation, and support the principles of effective accountability listed there. We described the principles of accountability in similar terms in our policy paper on inspection last year, *Supporting Schools: how school inspection could be improved*².

Whilst we broadly agree with the principles, we have reservations about the effectiveness of what is proposed to implement them.

Chapter 2 – School Profiles

We have no particular objection to what is proposed here specifically, but do not think it would improve upon current arrangements or reduce the number of different places that parents and the public find information about schools. There would still be the Ofsted website for report cards and inspection outcomes, the DfE website for the school profile with performance information, and schools' own websites for other information about the school – exactly as now. The consultation says that school profiles will incorporate school report cards, but this is not different in principle to the existing 'Compare school performance' website, which already includes a direct link to the inspection report.

However, we think that these proposals represent a significant missed opportunity to develop one single coherent product, as seemed to be intended by the Labour manifesto commitment. Two rival products now appear to be being developed: Ofsted's school report card (produced at the time of inspection) and the DfE's school profile ('updated regularly'). It is unclear exactly how they will relate to each other. As currently envisaged they will contain similar or overlapping information – both are proposed to contain inspection outcomes, performance data and 'other' information. This suggests that they will include data on the same performance measures but reflecting different timeframes (for example if the most recent data is different to that available at the time of the last inspection), which could be confusing for parents and the public. We do not understand the purpose of creating two separate but similar products and neither consultation explains how the risk of increasing confusion for parents would be avoided.

¹ United Learning is a national group of over 100 schools founded 130 years ago, now with 75,000 pupils and 12,000 staff.

² <https://unitedlearning.org.uk/Portals/0/unitedthinking/improving-inspection.pdf>

If done well, we are supportive of a single report card for each school, and there is still scope to salvage something more coherent – a definitive single product. The Labour manifesto seemed to indicate that there was interest in producing something similar to the proposals for an annual school report card developed under the last Labour government³. That previous draft had been worked through to a near final stage and is in the public domain.

Those plans were of course developed in a different context, with different priorities, so the detail on the measures, indicators and areas of focus which are most important now will be different. But with the development of a different set of individual indicators to reflect the current government's programme and priorities, it is still very much fit for purpose as a concept. The benefit of an annual report card as a single product is that it is produced for all schools on the same basis. Going back to what we understood to be the original idea of a report card has merit.

Chapter 3 – Intervention

It is welcome that the government still sees a role for structural intervention in failing schools, and we are reassured to learn that this will continue to be the default for schools found to require special measures. In our experience, failings in leadership and governance are always at the centre of the most difficult cases and, equally, securing the right leadership and governance is key to turnaround. So we agree that within the current system this is the best and quickest route to securing improved provision and outcomes for pupils in these cases.

Now that the policy intention on school improvement has been helpfully clarified, we are even less clear why the Department is in the process of repealing the legal duty to issue academy orders in these situations. This is weakening and slowing down the government's ability to implement its stated policy, and seems likely only to result in pupils being left in poor provision for longer.

We have reservations about the proposed amount and frequency of Ofsted monitoring for schools causing concern, as noted in our response to Ofsted's consultation. This could only be done with appropriate additional resources and given the pressure on Ofsted's resources, we question whether Ofsted has capacity for this. More seriously, we doubt that it is conducive to effective school improvement for schools facing the biggest challenges to be inspected 5 times in 18 months.

Concerningly, Ofsted's have said that 'These schools need more support to improve', suggesting that they see their proposed monitoring inspection as a school improvement activity or part of that support. But that is not Ofsted's role or expertise. Constantly inspecting a school and expecting to see change is pointless if there is no time or space for change to be implemented.

RISE teams – targeted support and intervention

We remain concerned about the proposals in the consultation document for RISE teams. We do not see evidence that the RISE policy is well designed or thought-through. The approach does not take sufficient account of how the school system has changed in the last two decades, seems not to reflect today's landscape of schools, trusts and school improvement support and doesn't sufficiently articulate a workable model of school improvement.

³ <http://data.parliament.uk/DepositedPapers/Files/DEP2009-1851/DEP2009-1851.pdf>

First, the consultation document is written on the basis that the new Ofsted report cards will give schools and their responsible bodies more, or more granular, information about their own performance. But this simply should not be the case for any competent responsible body.

Ofsted report cards may give the DfE, parents and the public more granular information than current Ofsted reports do, and that may well be a positive development. But school leaders themselves, and those responsible for governance, should already have far more information about their school's performance than will be reflected in the report card.

This is a material point partly because the suggestion in the document that an Ofsted report card will give an external RISE adviser sufficient information to judge what needs to be done ('delivering a bespoke package of challenge and support to target areas of weakness identified in Ofsted report cards') is not right or realistic. There will need to be proper detailed diagnostic work in the school by anyone looking to support improvement.

Even more important, though, is that any such detailed diagnostic work should start from an analysis of what governors and the responsible body understood about the school before the inspection. Did Ofsted in fact give them new information? If so, what does that tell us about governance; do the governing authorities have the ability to improve the school; and what does that tell us about the right school improvement approach?

This brings us to our second, most important, point. The government's professed 'agnosticism' about school structures and about academy trusts – which we understand to mean that the government has no 'in principle' preference for any particular structure – obviously makes sense as an overall policy stance. But when considering the improvement of any particular school, it makes no sense to ignore that school's governance and organisational context.

When considering how to approach improvement in a real school, its actual leadership and governance arrangements are not irrelevant – in fact, they are likely one of the most important factors. So analysis of the situation at the level of the individual school is insufficient – government needs to be thinking a level above as well and designing the approach accordingly. Is the school part of a local authority or trust with the capability to improve it or not?

For example, if the school is part of a big trust and not doing well, then there are two possibilities: either the trust does have the capacity to improve the school or it does not. If it does, then government ought to be holding that trust to account and challenging it hard as to what it is now going to do to improve the school: is action already in hand, is it sufficient and comprehensive, done rigorously and with pace? In this scenario, funding separate support at school level is duplicatory, wasteful and potentially counterproductive.

If government is not convinced that the trust has the capacity to do what is needed, then the central question is whether that capacity can be built quickly in the existing trust. If so, then that might be a reasonable thing to fund, but the bar for that should be high and if not, government should quite quickly be starting a conversation about moving the school to another trust – and indeed about whether there are other schools in the trust also lacking the support they need, which also need to move. In this case, funding should be directed towards the school moving into a stable, long-term support structure.

A similar analysis to this surely applies to a substantial local authority. Somewhat differently, if a school which is a SAT requires significant improvement, then if there are not extenuating

circumstances and/or new leadership and/or governance in place, then the starting assumption must be that the SAT does not have the ability to do what is needed. If this is confirmed, then the right action will surely in general be to require the SAT to join a trust which does have the necessary capability. Again, a separate school-to-school support model which does not also create a sustainable long-term support structure looks ill advised.

In a small trust or local authority which is otherwise doing well but for whatever reason lacks a specific capability, then it still makes sense to ask whether keeping the existing structure in place makes sense or not. It could be entirely reasonable for the DfE to conclude that a specific failure should trigger a needed consolidation or other change in a local area. If the existing structure makes long-term sense, commissioned support may well be a good approach, but the aim should still be to build capability within the trust or local authority structure to avoid similar problems in future.

In these scenarios, looking solely at the school and then funding external support without a corresponding consideration of the trust or authority level is likely to lead to poor decisions. Funding may be compensating for a failing or oversight by those responsible for the school, and may 'paper over the cracks' in propping up the school, while overlooking fundamental issues of governance and oversight which led the school to be in a mess. The reality of a school's governance structure has obvious implications for who should intervene, how and when.

Thirdly, based on extensive experience, we are sceptical that providing 'getting alongside' support in the absence of genuinely good leadership and governance is likely to have the necessary impact. It is critical that support is not set up in way which ties good quality professionals working to support a school into an extended period of advising and supporting leaders who are not prepared to make necessary decisions. In our experience of delivering support to schools not joining our Group, we have found that success relies on the whole-hearted commitment of leaders and governors and a capability and willingness to take action on the most difficult challenges – otherwise, this work is a time and energy trap.

Universal support

The universal support role envisaged for the RISE teams does not yet seem sufficiently thought-through. Issues like SEND, attendance and recruitment and retention are affecting schools in all regions, but they are not fundamentally 'regional issues'. On these big issues, it is important that there is a clear national policy position before any further 'regionalisation' can add value. It would not be helpful to have multiple regional variants of policy on issues where there are not genuinely regionally distinct issues; and if a national policy is to be delivered regionally, it is important that there is a reasonable level of consistency in national approach.

Where there are genuinely unique or distinct regional issues – problems that affect schools in one region specifically and aren't a manifestation of a national issue – it will be unusual for the answers to lie solely in sharing good practice or organising events and conferences. There may need to be interventions to grow capacity and a substantial and considered response to change the conditions in which schools work. For example: in London Challenge the issues of weak middle leadership stemmed from a tendency for young teachers to leave London after a few years – and so a series of strategic changes to create an Inner London pay scale, the Chartered London Teacher and the London Key Teacher Homebuy programmes were carefully designed to tackle this problem. It is probably unrealistic to think that a similar scale of change can be undertaken in every region now, but the sharing of practice alone is unlikely to be sufficient to tackle deep-seated regional issues, which will tend to have roots beyond the school system.

There is undoubtedly specific thinking of a more operational type that *can* very usefully be done at regional level, in a way that has been done in recent years in the South West DfE region, for example. This has to be rooted in a well-informed and fairly detailed understanding of what's actually going on in that area and include consideration, for example, of trust size, trust strength, whether there is sufficient school improvement capacity where it is most needed, and so on, as well as how to 'grow the top' and build on areas of strength. These things ought to be brought into thinking about regional strategy.

It is unclear how a greater 'signposting' role will work in practice or add value. Where a securely effective school is looking for support with an identified improvement priority, it is hard to envisage what a regional RISE team would add to what that school would already be able to find via its trust or local authority, informal local and professional networks, DfE resources and general internet search. And conversely, where a school is unaware that it needs support and therefore isn't looking, it is not clear how a RISE team would have access to greater insight.

There is space for good regional strategy and opportunity to improve support for schools through this mechanism, but the consultation document doesn't articulate this yet. In any regional strategy, the Department should be unafraid to make a public priority of tackling the least well performing regions and place any investment there, rather than feel that there must be 'something for everyone'.