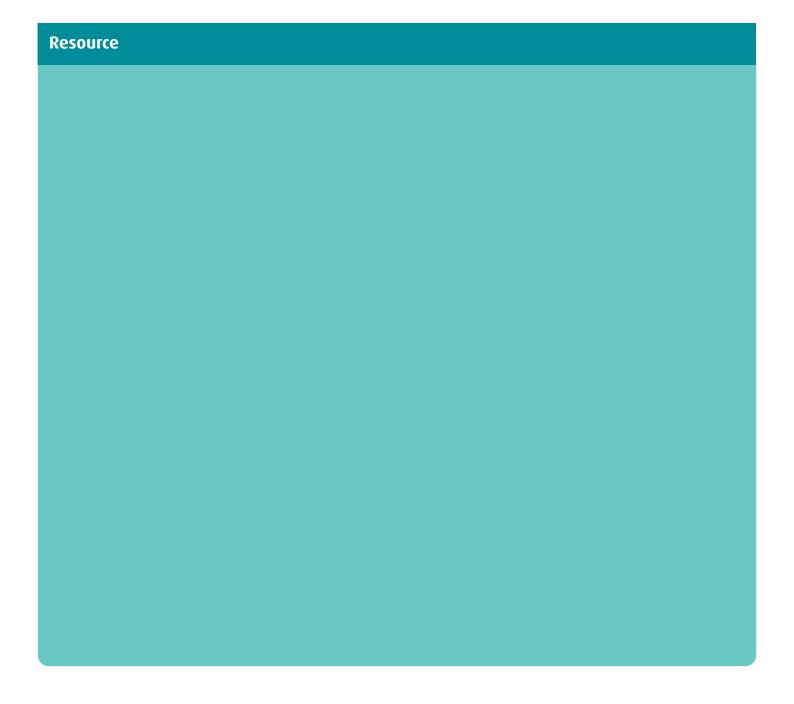National College
for School Leadership

Schools and academies

Towards a self-improving system: the role of school accountability

Christine Gilbert

Resource

Better is possible. It does not take genius. It takes diligence. It takes moral clarity. It takes ingenuity. And above all, it takes a willingness to try.

Atul Gawande, Better: a surgeon's notes on performance, 2007

The power of collective capacity is that it enables ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things - for two reasons. One is that knowledge about effective practice becomes more widely available and accessible on a daily basis. The second reason is more powerful still - working together generates commitment. Moral purpose when it stares you in the face through students and your peers working together to make lives and society better, is palpable, indeed virtually irresistible. The collective motivational well seems bottomless.

Michael Fullan, All systems go: the change imperative for whole system reform, 2010

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Introduction

It is hard to imagine any discussion of education reform among policymakers or professionals where the word 'accountability' would not be used. Usually, it is interpreted negatively as pressure on schools and teachers. Given the history of public accountability in this country, generated by a centralised system, that is not surprising. But accountability in its broadest sense provides important support for school improvement and is more critical than ever as we move to establish a truly self-improving system. A decentralised system of accountability, operating at the level of the individual school but more particularly across networks of schools, can provide a source of professional aspiration and improve teachers' knowledge, skills and practice so that children are supported better in their learning. As such, it deserves championing as an essential and even energising element in the broader accountability system.

This thinkpiece does not argue for the removal of the current framework but for re-balancing it, so that it is able to give greater support for the school system to become self-improving and achieve more. To use a common analogy, re-balancing would lift the ceiling without losing the current focus on raising the floor. In exploring how to develop a system that gives greater leverage for change, I have:

— outlined the history of accountability as we know it today

— presented a broader definition of accountability

— explored the key elements of school-led accountability

— suggested ways in which Ofsted might support a self-improving system

— proposed that groups of schools themselves take on accountability for ensuring all schools have the support they need to improve

Issue and context

The school system in England is currently experiencing the most significant period of change for a generation. Schools and school leaders are being offered unprecedented levels of autonomy, although how they are responding to that differs by phase and context. With greater freedom comes the expectation that schools and school leaders will be the primary drivers of systemic improvement.

Research suggests a link between positive outcomes and school autonomy but only if combined with sufficient accountability (OECD, 2010; 2011). Changes to the public accountability framework are already underway. We have seen the removal of routine inspection for outstanding schools and 2012 sees two new inspection frameworks introduced in one year. Changes to the national curriculum, tests and examinations, and the way school performance is reported, are on-going. As at 1 April 2012, there were 1,776 academies, a huge increase from the 270 or so that had been open or planned at the last election. Federations, multi-academy trusts and chains are all growing fast, as is the number of headteachers and principals holding leadership roles across more than one school. And the role of local authorities in this increasingly autonomous landscape is unclear. **The key question is this: how should the current accountability system evolve to support a more autonomous and self-improving system?** The challenge is to develop an approach:

> in which the elements of a devolved system are held in creative tension, with checks and balances to make sure that autonomy does not lead to isolation, that diversity does not become a barrier to collaboration and that accountability does not slip into regulation.

National College, 2012a:3

The need to be clearer about what we mean by accountability is compelling. Accountability is not just the preserve of government, its agencies and Ofsted. This thinkpiece has been written to encourage professional debate about the ways in which accountability can be better shaped to support not only a school-led, self-improving system but also to serve the public interest.

The origins of accountability as we know it today

The concept of school accountability as we know it dates from the 1980s. The 1975/76 William Tyndale affair, relating to a school of the same name in the London borough of Islington, tested the limits of school autonomy, led to a public inquiry and is seen as a defining moment in the accountability of public services (Riley, 1996). In the famous Ruskin speech of 1976, James Callaghan, the then prime minister, criticised the 'secret garden' of education and asserted the need to open schools to those with legitimate interest in education. This triggered a long-running debate about how things should change to make schools and teachers more accountable.

Generally, the literature points to 1988 as the key date when accountability became established in the education system but governors' responsibilities were identified even earlier. The Education Act 1980, which made it mandatory for each school in England and Wales to have a governing body, was driven partly by the determination to promote local accountability. A further Act in 1986 required the governing body to publish an annual report and arrange a meeting for parents whose children attended the school. However, it was the Education Reform Act 1988 that led to huge system change and set in train the public accountability framework still operating today.

The 1988 Act fundamentally altered the power structure of the education system laid down in the 1944 Education Act. It increased the power of the secretary of state, strengthened the role of central government, limited the functions of what were then local education authorities (LEAs) and gave considerable powers and responsibilities to governing bodies and headteachers. The Act's main provisions relating to schools concerned:

— the establishment of a national curriculum and national testing

— the open enrolment of pupils

— local management of schools (LMS)

— the establishment of grant-maintained schools

These four elements were part of a coherent government package designed to improve the quality of education by reinforcing the accountability and responsiveness of schools. Parallel legislative provisions clarified responsibilities and established an integrated approach to change in schools. The increased power of the secretary of state over a centrally directed system of curriculum and assessment and, indeed, over teachers' conditions of service, made it 'safe' for government to increase the managerial autonomy of schools. The balance between autonomy and accountability became enshrined in legislation and remains strong in our culture and practice today.

The 1988 Act intensified the competitive pressures already experienced by many schools as a result of falling rolls throughout the 1980s. By delegating resource management from LEAs to governing bodies and, de facto, headteachers, schools certainly became more autonomous. However, their autonomy was held in check by a highly developed centralised framework that held schools accountable for school performance, subjected them to national prescription in a number of areas and made them responsive to, and reliant on, parental choice.

The accountability system was strengthened further four years later when Ofsted was established and with it a completely new national inspection regime. In this brave new world, all schools were to be inspected regularly and the inspection reports were to be made publicly available. This, together with the publication of performance tables, provided a standardised package of information for parents in their role both as citizens and consumers.

By the mid-1990s, the accountability framework in England was established on the basis of:

— national tests and examination results

— published performance tables

— inspection

These pillars remain in place to this day.

Publishing information on all schools had a profound impact on the national debate around education. In particular, it shone a light on poor performance and poor service. Intervention by central or local government is the model of school improvement most closely linked to this framework of accountability.

The Labour government of 1997 came to power determined to tackle the problems it saw in education. It introduced a huge range of initiatives, such as the National Strategies, designed to tackle long-standing problems and failures, particularly in urban areas. An immediate addition to the public accountability framework was the nationally prescribed benchmarks and targets for Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4. The Schools Standards and Framework Act 1998 redefined the power of local authorities and required them to prepare education development plans which included school and LEA targets. While the intention behind top-down initiatives and targets was admirable and, indeed, the impact on performance in some urban areas dramatic, the criticism of micro-management by government grew.

In 2004, David Miliband, the then schools minister, sought to redress the balance by a commitment to streamline the accountability framework and to give greater emphasis to more personalised education:

> We set ourselves the task of delivering an intelligent accountability framework, a simplified school improvement process and improved data and information systems.

Miliband, 2004

The 2005 Education Act sought to reduce the burden of inspection while at the same time retaining rigour. It introduced shorter inspections and placed greater emphasis on schools' self-evaluation and the importance of benchmarked national data. Nevertheless, all three elements of the 1990s' public accountability model – tests, tables and inspection – continued.

So, by the time the coalition government came to power in 2010, the school accountability system established in the 1980s and 1990s was still broadly in place. The improved results in the national tests and at GCSE level since the mid-1990s owe much to that regime.

The commitment of the current secretary of state to increasing autonomy for schools could not be clearer and he has emphasised his intention to decentralise, 'reducing central and local government prescription for all schools to give heads and teachers the space to focus on what really matters' (Gove, 2012a). The coalition government very quickly made clear its intention to simplify the accountability system and make it more accessible to parents. The national curriculum was to be slimmed down. Ofsted inspection was to be even more proportionate, with no routine inspection of outstanding schools. The school inspection framework was to focus on just four areas: achievement, teaching, leadership and management, and behaviour. Parents were promised information in 'an easily accessible online format' to help them choose schools and hold them 'properly to account'.

Floor targets, as introduced by the Labour government in 2000, were retained by the coalition government but a more ambitious and escalating scale of minimum standards of attainment was set. Unsurprisingly, the government has continued to use the levers of the centralised accountability framework to support its policy imperatives.

It is clear that dismantling the current public accountability framework is not an option for this government and is unlikely to be pursued by any alternative government. It is entrenched and well supported by the public, particularly by parents. It is, however, a highly centralised framework which, by itself, gives insufficient leverage for reaching the goal, set out in *The Importance of Teaching* (HM Government, 2010), of becoming one of the world's fastest improving systems.

A broader definition of accountability

English schools have a level of autonomy not matched in many other countries. The belief is (and this is endorsed by international evidence) that when autonomy and accountability are intelligently combined, they tend to be associated with better student performance (OECD, 2010; 2011).

Drawing on evidence from 22 evaluations in 11 countries, the World Bank (2011) highlights the importance of the following for better pupil outcomes:

— information to strengthen the ability of students and their parents to hold providers accountable for results

— schools' autonomy to make decisions and control resources

— teacher accountability for results

But accountability is more than the centralised accountability framework suggests.

At its simplest, the term 'accountability' describes a relationship whereby one party – sometimes interpreted as an individual, sometimes an institution – has an obligation to account for their actions or performance to another (Brundrett & Rhodes, 2011). The obligation assumes that whoever is giving account, and being held to account, has some responsibility for the actions or performance. So accountability involves both responsibility and accounting, which may be evaluated against established or expected standards and action taken. Responsibility is the more personal concept, with people feeling an intrinsic sense of responsibility, for individual children, for example. Giving an account is seen as a less personal, more systemic concept (Mongon & Chapman, 2012).

Earley and Weindling (2004) identify four key accountability relationships for schools. Schools have responsibilities for and have to account to:

> — **pupils** – and, I would add, to parents and the local community (*moral accountability*)
>
> — **colleagues** (*professional accountability*)
>
> — **employers or government** (*contractual accountability*)
>
> — **the market**, where clients have a choice of institution (*market accountability*)

In a self-improving system, each of these relationships remains important. The focus of the last 30 years has been on the latter two, which are well embedded. But if we are to create a self-improving system, leverage can come from greater use of moral and professional accountabilities. During his appearance at the education select committee in January 2012, the secretary of state indicated that some change was necessary:

> Under the last government, accountability was all about accountability upwards, either to the local authority or to the Department. We believe that accountability should also be downwards to the community and to individual parents, and that is why we have published far more data than ever before about the performance of schools.

Gove, 2012b

These four relationships are managed through two key approaches to accountability. The first is a performance or productivity model which emphasises outputs such as test and exam results (Elliott et al, 1981). The second is an improvement or process model which emphasises school evaluation, opening practice to debate and critique. The purpose of the first approach, which would be characterised as a summative model, is to prove quality – it emphasises what has been achieved. The purpose of the second model is more formative as it is designed to improve quality (Hopkins, 2007).

At its best, school accountability in a self-improving system reflects both models and must capture both purposes. The best school leaders embrace both forms of accountability. They benchmark their schools against the best practice that is reflected in the Ofsted inspection framework; they evaluate their performance and are honest about their school's strengths and weaknesses; and they use both stakeholder and peer review to open up their practice to help them develop teachers' capacity and children's learning.

The first model is well embedded in the current public accountability framework but, in a self-improving system, the second needs to assume greater importance as it offers more leverage for change. The challenge is to achieve balance between the two approaches in a way that energises schools. The result should be that they feel greater ownership of accountability and see it as something that supports them in their work. This should also begin to shift the perception that accountability is based just on a centralised regime of data and inspection, set by government and invariably negative, mechanistic and stressful.

Towards greater school-led accountability

Moving the lever on the accountability fulcrum so that greater importance is given to a school-led approach that is more supportive of teachers sounds appealing but how can it happen? If the processes underpinning a more decentralised approach to school accountability are strong, the hope is they would feed effortlessly into the public accountability framework. Indeed, the two approaches become mutually reinforcing.

School-led accountability requires us to move forward in a number of ways:

— increasing teacher and school ownership of accountability as a support for their professionalism and pupils' learning

— ensuring school evaluation is a dynamic and inclusive process involving pupils, parents, staff, governors and the community that leads to better practice

— establishing a culture of professional reflection, enquiry and learning within and across schools that increases teachers' aspirations and the development of better practice in teaching and pupils' learning

— embedding collaboration within and across schools as a rigorous and effective tool for improving practice

— using school networks to develop capacity and ensure all schools are engaged

— focusing inspection to give greater support to school-led accountability

Professional ownership of accountability

There is a strong correlation between an education system's point on the improvement continuum and the level of control and prescription. Systems at the poor end exercise tight control whereas good systems provide:

> only loose, central guidelines for teaching and learning processes, in order to encourage peer-led creativity and innovation inside schools, the core driver for raising performance at this stage.
>
> Mourshed et al, 2010:26

Such systems, to use Joel Klein's phrase, 'prescribe adequacy but unleash greatness' (cited in Barber et al, 2010:20).

We know that, in any system, it is the difference in teachers – most particularly the quality of their teaching and the relationships with their pupils – that makes most difference to children's learning. Teachers themselves have to be at the centre of a self-improving system. They have to own it and drive it.

The key unit within the public accountability framework remains the individual school. Although there is considerable talk about moving beyond this and using the unit of the federation or cluster, the individual child and parent relate to the school and, indeed, to the teachers most concerned with that child's education. At this level, too, the teacher's moral and professional accountabilities are not only clear, but inextricably linked to and focused on real children and young people. The GTC's research study (2009) into accountability showed that teachers felt accountability most strongly in relation to their pupils. They felt particularly accountable for the quality of their own teaching and they acknowledged that maintaining public confidence in standards of teaching was an important part of this. Good leaders are able to build on these individual feelings of professional accountability so they become collective and an essential part of thinking and practice in the school.

As we move forward in establishing a self-improving system, teachers' accountabilities will move beyond the unit of the individual school. Indeed, many leaders, and the staff in their schools already involved in system leadership, have already made this shift and have extended the range of their moral and professional accountabilities. The Compton School in Barnet exemplifies this approach. It is evident the staff enjoy a culture of trust and co-operation; they feel accountable to each other personally and professionally. They feel accountable for all the children in the school, not just those they teach. The school has been a national support school (NSS) for some years and staff felt accountable for the achievements of the pupils in the other schools with which they had worked. This stemmed from knowing the children and groups in the schools they worked with and from professional pride in what they were doing. They see the benefits of their school-to-school work as reciprocal and use a number of partnerships to challenge themselves to do better still.

There is already debate in the system about what an agreed model of professional accountability might look like in a school-led system. In trying to reconcile school autonomy and school-to-school collaboration, the executive principal of Comberton Village College drew up the following duties for discussion with headteacher and teacher colleagues. He based the list of duties on those for a doctor registered with the General Medical Council:

The duties of a teacher (draft)

Students and parents must be able to trust teachers to provide a good education for children and young people. To justify that trust, you should:

— make the education and care of students your first concern

— protect and promote the education of students both within your school and across the schools system

— provide a good standard of education and care by

  · keeping your professional knowledge and skills up to date

  · working collaboratively to improve your practice

  · working with other colleagues and schools/colleges in ways that best serve the interests of all students

— treat students as individuals and respect their dignity

— recognise that every student has a right to learn and your top priority is to help them learn well

— work in partnership with students and parents/carers

  · establish positive relationships with them

  · listen to students, particularly their feedback on their learning

  · help students to contribute to the process of their own learning

  · seek to involve parents/carers in the education of their own children

— be honest, open and act with integrity

  · never discriminate unfairly against students and colleagues

  · never abuse your students' trust in you or the public's trust in the profession

— take personal responsibility for your professional practice and be prepared to justify your actions and decisions

School leaders have a particular duty to both uphold and promote these duties within their own schools but also across the school system.

Stephen Munday, 2012

This list of duties is rooted in the teacher's moral and professional accountabilities to children, to parents and to colleagues. It is clear that this executive principal sees these operating both at the level of the individual school and across schools. Implicit here is the point made by Elmore (2008) that a system perspective encourages teachers to treat their skills as a collective good that can be shared.

Within-school collaboration: accounting for quality

The challenge for leadership is to make individual moral and professional accountability collective. Schools that do this nurture a continuing process of review and dialogue about learning and achievement. This becomes an essential part of their culture and practice and an inherent part of teachers' professionalism. As John West-Burnham (2011) suggests:

> Creating a culture of personal accountability and holding others to account in a consistent and transparent way is one of the most significant elements in securing and sustaining outstanding performance.

West-Burnham, 2011

Schools do this in a range of ways that blend summative and formative accountability.

At the beginning of 2012, I visited a number of first-tranche teaching schools. Each had been involved in system improvement for some time. All these schools:

— expected teachers to be accountable for the quality of teaching and the impact it was having on the learning of individual pupils

— were creating strong professional communities, where peer learning was central and focused on the detail of practice and pedagogy

— used school-to-school support to strengthen their review of practice and pedagogy

— were engaging pupils in reviewing their own learning

— targeted resources flexibly to meet both pupil and staff needs

— were giving regular accounts to parents of their children's progress

— gave regular accounts to governing bodies about progress and performance at school level and, increasingly, about the progress and performance of the schools with which they were working

All of these were outstanding schools with a level of professionalism that could be described as mature. Many expressed resentment of the pressure they felt from the public accountability framework but had the confidence and motivation not to be weighed down by it. Teachers talked with enthusiasm about working in schools with the best professional practices but they were also motivated by the impact of their work on children. It was a mark of their professionalism that they moved comfortably between formative and summative accountability; they saw the need for each, and several teachers described both approaches as 'feeding each other'. At the same time, they welcomed the opportunity to develop their schools as teaching schools without detailed prescription from the National College. Several explained that this gave them the opportunity to be more creative and break new ground, even if they made mistakes along the way. These schools had a confidence that is still too rare. Ways need to be found of enabling more schools to ease their anxieties about a more vigorous approach to formative accountability and to help them see its potential as an aid to improvement and not a risk to test results and the outcomes of Ofsted inspection. A thematic survey of interesting and effective practice in a range of schools, undertaken by Ofsted, might be a helpful signal of the importance of this approach.

In their analysis of system leadership, Higham et al (2009) point to the importance of strong internal accountability within schools. The authors looked in detail at three schools in challenging circumstances where improvement had been sustained. Staff in these schools reported feeling very accountable. Sometimes this stemmed from what they perceived to be managerial pressure but over time the pressure shifted to something more professional:

In particular, regular peer observation and collaborative planning helped to create a shared language about what was being found effective in engaging students in their learning.

Higham et al, 2009:50

In schools where professional accountability is well established, teachers see themselves as responsible for the quality of their teaching and its impact on pupils' learning. They see learning from each other as routine. They welcome opportunities to engage pupils, peers and their own managers confidently and openly to generate greater intelligence, which they use to develop their knowledge and skills. They see such engagement as important not only in offering them practical insights into their work and pupils' learning but a good platform for developing better and sometimes innovative practice. This approach is central to their professional accountability and in particular, their accountability for improving quality. It is separate from the school's formal performance management processes although of course, may feed into these.

School leaders who take collective professional accountability seriously know that it cannot be short term and is certainly not a quick fix. Collaborative practice, especially when it is rooted, as it should be, in a culture of classroom observation, learning and development, requires organisational investment. Professional development, and in particular peer learning, requires resourcing. For example, time has to be found for teachers to work together, to reflect on the detail of their teaching and pupils' learning and then (which takes even longer) to shift deeply embedded practice. Resources invested in better formative accountability are likely to strengthen not just the school's performance, but also its confidence about summative accountability.

The best schools know themselves well; this is an essential base for good accountability. The staff see the process of review and evaluation as fundamental to the way the school works and an essential discipline in improving practice. Good self-evaluation is also a tool to help redress the balance between summative and formative accountabilities. The removal of Ofsted's school self-evaluation form (SEF) gives schools an opportunity to refresh their approach to self-evaluation so that it achieves a better balance of accountabilities. Undertaken as a collaborative exercise, the school's self-evaluation should capture clearly, and with confidence, the school's moral and professional responsibilities as well as those reflected in the centralised framework. If the school were to do this with external support and sufficient rigour, it could lead to significant changes in the external inspection process. For the best schools in the system, as I outline later, Ofsted might adopt a more cost-effective, quality assurance role.

More rigorous self-evaluation demands the engagement of key stakeholders. Schools that take professional learning seriously are more responsive to parents and to their communities and understand their accountabilities to them. Good schools find ways of establishing effective communication with parents, including those who do not readily engage. If moral accountability is to be more meaningful, pupils as well as their parents have a key role to play in driving improvement and quality. The federation of Challney High School for Boys and Denbigh High School in Luton operates a rigorous self-evaluation and quality assurance cycle. It is linked both to performance management and improvement planning, and includes school and staff development. The executive headteacher believes, rightly, that her involvement in this process is vital and she gives it a high priority as she sees the process as central to the success of the federation. The views of pupils and parents influence decision-making about team and themed audits and they are also important in shaping improvement planning. Generally, the voice of professionals within schools is heard more clearly in self-evaluation than the voices of either pupils or parents. Important though professionals are, their accountabilities to pupils, parents and communities need to be built into their thinking, planning and action.

If the profession is to take greater ownership of accountability, data remain key. It is data that will challenge thinking and stimulate discussion leading to improved practice. It is data that enable progress to be monitored. The role of quantitative data as a tool for school improvement is well rehearsed and widely accepted but data can emerge from a range of activities, principally observation, but also others, such as analysis of problems and case studies, or from interviews or focus groups. This sort of data supports professional accountability within and across schools.

Brooke Weston Academy in Corby models the very best practice in its management and use of data and this services a strong school accountability framework. The principal sees the latter as the bedrock of the school's success. Brooke Weston's quality assurance calendar is based on an eight-week cycle that takes account of:

- stakeholder views

- the learning environment

- results, analysis and testing

- a series of audits

It blends the formative and summative to serve all four accountability relationships identified earlier – moral, professional, contractual and market – with distinction. Although a sophisticated system, it is highly personalised and well able to engage pupils, parents and teachers regularly in reflection and debate about past and future progress. Things happen, both inside and outside the classroom, as a result of this regular review so children can learn better, and they do. The system gives no room for any child to fail. The school is organised on a five-term year so each of the summative reviews, undertaken at eight-week intervals, feeds formatively, at a range of different levels, into the coming term's work. In addition to very regularly mentoring a group of pupils, the principal's personal commitment to individuals extends to meeting each pupil in Year 11 three times in the year to talk about their progress, aspirations and future plans. The pupils value this as an important measure of the school's concern for them.

Collaborating across schools

As an NLE, I find school to school support challenges my thinking about my own school and gives an opportunity for reflection. Practitioner led development has credibility and fast impact.

Sally McFarlane, NLE and headteacher of Ladywood School, a special school in Bolton

The calibre of school leadership in this country has never been as strong. Increasingly, more and more school leaders see system leadership as an essential part of their role and central to their professionalism. The term system leadership encompasses a range of different collaborative activities across schools. It is this lateral collaboration that will build the individual and collective capacity to sustain a self-improving system and push the boundaries of good and outstanding. Such collaboration is underpinned by professional accountabilities with an emphasis on improving quality but will ultimately have to evidence quality too, principally in the achievement of better outcomes for children and young people. They blend formative and summative accountabilities.

Over the last few years, we have seen increasing numbers of system leaders giving very focused school-to-school support. This is an important strand of lateral interaction across schools. There are now almost 700 designated national leaders of education (NLEs) and national support schools (NSSs) and it is a measure of their effectiveness that the secretary of state has increased target numbers to 1,000 by 2014. There are over 2,000 local leaders of education (LLEs). By 2014/15, the intention is that there will be 500 teaching schools and 5,000 designated specialist leaders of education (SLEs), outstanding professionals in middle and senior leadership roles, who have the capacity and skills to support others in similar positions in other schools. Both research and anecdotal evidence suggest that most of those involved in system leadership care deeply about the schools they are working with and want the best for the students in them. As in the earlier example of the Compton School, many of these leaders have extended the base of their moral and professional accountabilities – and that of many of their staff – and in doing so have increased collective capacity. And, even when giving intensive support to a poorly performing school, these leaders identify reciprocal benefits for their own schools.

Good leaders establish a culture of supportive review, of disciplined enquiry leading to professional learning and action for improvement within their own schools. This is what sustains formative accountability and, ultimately, produces good outcomes to be used to evidence quality. Increasingly, good leaders know that if this culture is to be driven by the best knowledge and understanding, lateral interaction beyond the school is vital. They are keen to seek excellence by extending their knowledge and thinking and use that to improve their practice. This resonates with Mourshed et al (2010:81) who report leaders' identification of three key changes brought about by collaborative practice:

- teaching practice is made public and the entire teaching profession shares responsibility for student learning

- there is a cultural shift from an emphasis on what teachers teach to what students learn

- a normative model of pedagogy develops, with teachers the custodians of that model, much as 'doctors, lawyers and accountants establish norms of good practice and hold each other accountable for following them'

Hargreaves (2010; 2011) sets out a persuasive argument for clusters of schools working in partnership to improve teaching and learning for them all. He emphasises a practice model of professional development where the focus is on mutual observation, coaching and learning-by-doing:

> joint practice development... captures a process that is truly collaborative, not one-way; the practice is being improved, not just moved from one person or place to another. Joint practice development (JPD) gives birth to innovation and grounds it in the routines of what teachers naturally do. Innovation is fused with and grows out of practice...

> Hargreaves, 2011:11

This sort of development is hard but likely to lead to better and better practice. It is rooted in the best of formative accountability across schools.

Federations, groups of schools and some academy chains provide a ready base for professional collaboration and lateral accountability which can be supported well through governance and the work of the executive leadership. So, for example, the role of the federation strategic leadership team at the Cabot Learning Federation is to:

- agree common goals and shared practice across the academies

- identify areas of focus where support from another academy might be helpful

- check the federation's vision is owned across all academies

- monitor and quality assure the performance of schools across the federation

In the Harris Federation, the heads of English, mathematics and science from all the schools in the group come together to study data about relative performance. They observe lessons in each other's schools to provide challenge but also to grow and learn professionally from each other's practice. Both these examples reflect a culture of collective professional accountability rooted in self-review, learning and development.

ARK has a tradition of developing practice through both research and strong collegial networks where leaders and teachers from the group's schools collaborate to develop ideas and practice. Working together in this way encourages the development of a culture of collective moral accountability for all children in ARK schools but also collective professional accountability focused on improvement. A recent example is the curriculum initiative, Mathematics Mastery, based on an approach to teaching mathematics originally developed by the Singapore Ministry for Education. The approach requires the mathematics leaders and teachers involved in the initiative to assume responsibility for meeting the aspiration of success for every child. A fundamental part of the mastery approach is the belief that classroom-based professional development has the greatest potential for impact. A daily cycle of review, adaptation and practice is built into the programme but so too is support across the schools. Professional ownership, responsibility and accountability are therefore being steadily established. Beyond its own community of schools, ARK demonstrates a moral and professional commitment to wider system leadership in the development of initiatives such as Future Leaders. This trains and develops teachers to take up headships and other senior positions in challenging schools.

Many federations, groups and chains (Hill et al, 2012) now involve both governors and professionals from beyond the individual school in a range of formal reviews. This practice has developed as federations and chains have become more established.

The benefits of lateral engagement across schools, not only to strengthen the rigour of review but also to build capacity across a self-improving system, are beginning to be well evidenced. Senior and middle leaders, especially in secondary schools, are engaging increasingly in such collaboration, but to create a self-improving system more teacher interaction has to occur. Peer review and support across schools, at a range of levels, offer scope for greater interaction. They also have huge potential for increasing confidence in and ownership of school-led accountability.

Challenge Partners is a collective of schools not only challenging each other to do better but also supporting weaker schools to improve. It seeks to 'serve as a benchmark for professionalism, underpinned by an ethos of open accountability and quality assurance systems'. Its focus is on three strategic areas:

- **a network of excellence**: a school improvement network, led by schools, improving whole-system performance through effective learning partnerships, using rigorous methodologies and quality assurance processes for school-to-school work.

- **an engine of improvement**: using the strong to help the weak, turning failing schools around and reducing the disparity in performance through effective learning partnerships, mainly internal, learning partnerships.

- **a source of efficiency**: through collaboration, sharing of resources and group purchasing; enabling greater and more effective investment in teaching and learning.

Challenge Partners, 2011

It uses peer inspection, supported by experienced inspectors, as a way of raising aspirations and driving professional accountability. The Ofsted inspection framework is used to support them in doing that. The schools involved in Challenge Partners are explicit about their moral and professional accountabilities and see themselves as working together to strengthen all four key accountability relationships.

Opportunities to engage in rigorous school-to-school peer evaluation and reap the benefits are still far from the norm. The benefits need to be shared more widely across the system as the profession as a whole is still nervous and wary of opening itself to scrutiny in this way. Interestingly, it is outstanding schools that have been quickest to see the value of this approach. Teaching schools, for example, are using peer review as part of their quality assurance processes. They see formative accountability as particularly important at this early stage of establishing the teaching school partnerships. An annual peer review is likely to enable better challenge and support for their development. The peers involved in the review will also learn from their training and the insights gained from undertaking the process itself. At the end of three years, each teaching school will be subject to external review.

Teachers who have been involved in peer review talk about it with enthusiasm. For many, it has been the first time they have been engaged in such an intense process of formative and summative evaluation and although they found it challenging professionally, they also described it as very rewarding. Those involved in the Challenge Partner activities describe peer review as the best professional development they have ever had, even when the overall grade of the peer inspection is lower than they might have hoped.

If Ofsted were to take a different approach to the inspection of those schools that had undertaken a strong self-evaluation process, tested out laterally with peers, change would be dramatic. This notion is explored further below.

I like the idea of peer review. It's a good way of moving forward and our teaching school alliance is considering it. I think many primary heads may find it hard to challenge one another and will need persuading by experience that it is positive and will bring benefits for their school.

Pat Smart, NLE and Headteacher, Greet Primary School, Birmingham

The role of the governing body

Accountability also needs to be owned by the governing body which should be professional, even if all are volunteers.

Chris Williamson, NLG and chair of the governing body of Howard of Effingham School, Surrey

The governing body has a strong leadership role, enshrined in legislation, to give strategic direction, to act as a critical friend and to ensure accountability. As might be expected, the National Governors' Association (NGA) sees governing bodies as central to good school accountability. At its best, the governing body can have a pivotal role in ensuring each of the four accountability relationships described by Earley and Weindling (2004) – moral, professional, contractual and market – are well managed. Governors know and understand the school well, they look inside and outside with some objectivity and are able to ask the sort of questions likely to raise expectations.

Certainly as a governor, I have noticed a profound change in attitude. Governor visits used to be like treading on eggshells because teachers were so unused to being observed that it felt like a dreadful ordeal being forced upon them. Nowadays, I don't think any of them would be at all put out if I wandered in unannounced. This, of course, makes visits more open and informative. It also makes teachers and middle managers feel more accountable to the governing body directly. Greater knowledge and understanding of the school naturally makes governance more effective.

Deborah Bruce, NLG and chair of the governing body of Claremont Primary School, Tunbridge Wells

Ofsted's evidence points to a strong correlation between effective schools and effective governing bodies. Where governance is strong, this inevitably means a good grip on data and issues relating to the school's performance. In any system where self-evaluation is important, the role of the governing body in making it more rigorous is significant. As headteachers themselves testify:

Governance supports honest, perceptive self-evaluation by the school, recognising the problems and supporting the steps needed to address them.

National College, 2012b

Governing bodies are often seen as having a distinct contribution to make to strengthening the school's approach to moral accountability – in particular, to ensuring effective review of the experiences of students, of parents and indeed, members of the school's local community – and ensuring their findings feed into development planning and action. It is less common, but equally important, for the governing body to reflect on the degree to which professional accountability operates within its school or across the group of schools for which it is responsible. Governors would value the publication of case studies which demonstrate ways in which governing bodies hold the leadership of their school(s) to account for the strength of their collective professional accountability.

Research has shown (Earley & Weindling, 2004) that the attitude of the headteacher is a crucial factor in influencing the behaviour and the effectiveness of the governing body. Many of the heads in the teaching schools I visited spoke of the need to persuade their governing bodies that their school would indeed benefit from broader and more extensive work at the whole-system level. All governing bodies had agreed to this way of working, but some with a lack of enthusiasm and even anxiety. All these teaching schools had been working for some time to support other schools. It may be harder still to persuade many other governors, particularly parent governors, that they have responsibilities for system-wide improvement.

The role of the recently designated national leaders of governance (NLGs) is important here, particularly in raising awareness of current policy developments and in developing a self-improving culture, but this role will take time to be established across the system. The NLG programme is designed to enable very effective chairs to use their skills and experience to support other chairs.

Models are emerging of a different approach to governance and these are generating support for stronger internal and external accountability. Examples can be seen in developments in various alliances, federations and chains where groups of schools often have a single strategic governing body. Hill (2010) reports smaller and more focused governing bodies in some of the chains which are providing a 'sharper and more driven form of accountability' (Hill, 2010:4). Part of this improvement stems from a clearer distinction between strategic direction and more operational accountability, with 'the former being exercised at chain level, and the latter at school level' (ibid:23).

It would be useful to draw out some of these findings for governors themselves and generate debate about the advantages and disadvantages of new forms of governance. This might be of particular benefit to small primary schools which struggle to fill governor posts and might well welcome one governing body operating across a group of schools with, perhaps, a school-based parents' forum offering more operational support.

This government has committed itself not only to reforming achievement and attainment targets but to making them more accessible too. A clear and simple performance profile focusing on key data, a 'national data dashboard', as suggested recently by a group of headteachers involved in the Fellowship Commission on good governance (National College, 2012b), would not only support parents in making decisions about schools but would also support peer review across schools.

It is clear that some governing bodies operate so effectively that they add considerable value to the quality of the school's accountability relationships, including holding the head to account. For a range of reasons, many governing bodies do not. Governors working across networks of schools offer yet-untapped potential for more rigorous and, indeed, supportive accountability and for strengthening a self-improving system. A more open culture rooted in lateral activity across schools is likely to develop the skills and expertise of governors as much as it does those working in schools.

The role of Ofsted in a self-improving system

External inspection is central to the current accountability framework and its popularity with parents is likely to ensure it remains part of the school system in England for some time. The challenge now is to make it work as positively as possible to strengthen a self-supporting system. Ofsted has significant potential to support and encourage school-led development.

The importance of the school inspection framework to all aspects of accountability cannot be overestimated. In publishing the criteria by which inspection judgements are made, Ofsted identifies expectations or benchmarks that make a good or outstanding school. These can be, and are, used to support self-evaluation and on-going development.

Of course, the criteria for making judgements are not fixed. They are responsive not only to the higher expectations that society has of publicly funded services but also to our increasing understanding of the key features of effective practice. For example, the school inspection frameworks introduced in 2012 reflect a further shift in the way inspection focuses on the impact of teaching on the quality of learning and pupils' progress. The 2009 inspection framework was as strong as previous ones in terms of expectations, challenge and pace but greater focus was given to the direct observation, analysis and evaluation of teaching and its effect on learning.

The 2012 frameworks build on this approach and highlight two important assessment and feedback loops in teaching and learning. The first relates to a more specific focus on the on-going formative assessment of progress. This entails identifying what each pupil is finding difficult, where the barriers lie, helping them to identify how to overcome these barriers and what they need to do to improve and make progress. The second loop is feedback that comes from the response of pupils to what they are being asked to do, how well the teaching is working for them in helping them learn and the extent to which the teacher can adapt her or his practice to this information. This emphasis on perceptive and reflective teaching was not so explicit in earlier frameworks.

Every school I know that is involved in lateral, peer evaluation uses the framework as the basis for its work. This is not as a trial run to prepare for the inspection test – most are outstanding schools not expecting routine inspection – but because they see it as the best available tool for identifying effective practice and what might be learned from it. The framework needs therefore to be reviewed regularly so that it captures the most current knowledge we have. Does it, for example, capture sufficiently the expectations we now have of school-led improvement? Does it allow recognition of innovation and the potential transferability of that practice to other schools?

The importance of self-evaluation has been emphasised in every school inspection framework over the last 10 years. The 2012 frameworks demonstrate this same commitment even though the requirement for schools to complete the standard school self-evaluation form (the SEF) has been removed. Inspection tests the rigour of a school's self-evaluation. If school-led accountability is to develop to support a self-improving system, there are two key ways in which inspection might encourage it. The first is formal acknowledgement of high-calibre self-assessment involving external scrutiny by peers; the second is greater recognition in Ofsted's reports of the role played by school-to-school support.

In relation to the first point, some of those involved in peer-to-peer support are themselves likely to have trained as inspectors, and many more are likely to be involved, given the new chief inspector's initiative to encourage more good or outstanding heads to take on that role. For good schools, Ofsted might spend up to a day in a school, testing the rigour of its annual, summative self-evaluation and the processes underpinning it. If inspectors found this to be accurate, they would write formally to the school endorsing the school's judgements and evaluation of itself. The school, and most importantly, parents, would therefore have formal and public confirmation by Ofsted that it was good or outstanding. However, if, in undertaking the scrutiny of the self-evaluation, inspectors had concerns about judgements or process, they would extend their time in the school to carry out a full inspection and produce a full inspection report. This approach might be introduced gradually for all outstanding schools, so parents can be reassured that the judgement

of 'outstanding' for overall effectiveness is still current. This would enable Ofsted's inspectors to retain a focus on what the very best practice looks like. It would also strengthen their capacity to capture good and emerging practice and share that across the system through their recommendations for individual schools, through Ofsted's good practice database and a range of reports, and through seminars and presentations.

The chief inspector has signalled his intention to increase the frequency of inspection for satisfactory and inadequate schools. This frees up resources to enable him to do this more rapidly. It would also respond to the wish of parents to continue to have an independent judgement on all schools. It would be of significant importance in establishing the concept of a self-improving system, as Ofsted would be seen as valuing and encouraging school-led accountability.

The second point relates to Ofsted's reports. In a self-improving system, the reports could give greater recognition to the role played by school-to-school support in the school's progress and indeed, to the school's support for system development. In addition, reports on weaker schools could contribute further to a culture of system-led improvement by setting out explicitly the school-to-school support needed to keep the school improving. This might range from a recommendation relating to where expertise in a particular subject area could be found or the opportunities available through a local teaching school to more focused support from an NLE, or even a recommendation suggesting the school might benefit from a more substantial partnership with a group of schools operating in a formal network, a federation or a chain. The changes planned to the inspection of satisfactory schools from September 2012 are likely to create a greater sense of urgency for improvement. If tougher judgements are to translate into real and demonstrable action for those schools requiring improvement, support for their development needs to be identified quickly and made available.

Where a school is judged inadequate and is already part of a network, federation or chain, Ofsted could comment on the quality of support provided to the school. This might well entail an explicit criticism of a federation or chain. Networks such as Challenge Partners see themselves as equally accountable. What action is then taken as a result of poor support is a separate issue.

As the number of federations and chains continues to grow, calls for Ofsted to inspect them as an entity also continue to grow. Parents, however, still want to read individual school reports to help them make choices, so it is hard to see that a group inspection report would generally satisfy their needs. However, it is right that any school or group of schools taking on others should be subject to a due diligence process. This might entail scrutiny of a range of factors, including the school or group's track record in improving schools and its current capacity to effect improvement. Consideration of Ofsted's judgements on either the lead school itself or on the schools within the group would obviously be a key part of the due diligence process.

Schools leading locally

The evidence I have seen up and down the country, from my visits to schools and my discussions with leaders and teachers, persuades me that we have already reached a tipping point in favour of schools themselves as the primary drivers of systemic improvement. There is no turning back from that. The logic of a self-improving system is that schools themselves become accountable for ensuring that all schools have the school-to-school support they need to improve. This accountability might well be discharged locally with other partners in the public, private or voluntary sectors, but it would be driven by schools themselves. This model gives proper recognition to the growing role of leaders, teachers and schools in system leadership but it holds them to account for what they are achieving without creating a potentially more costly, and inevitably more bureaucratic, middle tier which has its roots in centralised thinking.

For over 30 years, successive governments have reduced the responsibilities of local authorities for education. They survive, nevertheless, and in some places continue to make a marked difference to the lives of children and young people living in that area. Their statutory responsibilities remain significant but how they discharge these is where the differences will emerge. My recent visits to the first tranche of teaching schools indicate that many local authorities are struggling to adapt to the new educational landscape and have yet to grasp the implications of their changing role in a self-improving system. Given the speed of change and the significant budgetary reductions they have had to manage, this is hardly surprising.

Recent research (Isos, 2012) indicates there is no single strategic response from local authorities to a more autonomous system. It is likely that a range of models will begin to emerge with a sharper focus on the local authority as a commissioner, shaping and raising aspirations for learning and education. Councillors know that local communities, in particular parents at local schools and prospective parents, care about education. They know too that education is a powerful force for local regeneration. Regardless of the make-up of schools in their area, the most effective local authorities will want to continue to play an important role in raising expectations and aspirations. Alan Wood, director of children's services in Hackney, neatly encapsulates the relationship with headteachers in the Learning Trust in Hackney as '**Your school, our children**'. This sense of moral accountability is captured too in the London borough of Sutton's response to all its secondary schools seeking academy status:

> The prospect of all Sutton secondary schools becoming academies is very real. The partnership between each other and the Local Authority is critical to ensure that all children and young people who are both resident and educated in Sutton receive the best possible education and holistic development to prepare them for life after school.

London borough of Sutton, 2011

It is right that their democratic base gives local authorities this leverage and that they should also act as champions for the interests and needs of children and young people, particularly those most at risk. This will include articulating concerns about the quality of school provision.

Some local authorities are working with schools in their area to extend the notion of professional accountability to ensure no school misses out on the opportunity to work with and learn from colleagues. They are not necessarily interested in providing school improvement services themselves but in supporting schools, particularly primary schools, to take greater ownership and responsibility. The newly established Kent Association of Headteachers sees this as a way of raising standards and improving the quality of education across the county. A key part of its remit is:

> to encourage, develop and facilitate arrangements and mechanisms for schools supporting schools, peer review, self-assessment, support and challenge as the role of Kent County Council changes to one of brokerage, facilitation and trading.

Kent Association of Headteachers, 2012

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One of the fascinating aspects of collaboration across schools is its bureaucratic messiness. Many partnerships originate from strong personal relationships between headteachers where there has been long-standing trust and confidence. One teaching school I visited had, as an NSS, provided support to a number of schools in disparate places with no apparent ties. It emerged that the common characteristic was that these were all schools where the heads had previously been members of staff at the teaching school. Schools should have the freedom to forge whatever partnerships work best for them, and these may change over time.

As I have indicated earlier, there is a demonstrable commitment from many good leaders to contribute to a self-improving system. In my visits, I have seen excellent examples from schools within federations and chains; from other less formal collaborative alliances and networks; from teaching schools; and indeed, from local authorities. However, it is also the case that secondary schools are far more engaged in such collaborative activity than primary schools.

It is clear that not all schools are yet working in active partnerships. The risk here is that the weakest lack the confidence to invite support, still less challenge from their peers, and, even if they wanted support, do not know where to find it. Using broad regional areas, a number of excellence networks could be established. These would be school improvement networks charged with improving school performance at a regional level by developing capacity and targeting support. They would therefore hold both formative and summative accountabilities. For example, they could ensure that robust arrangements for peer review were in place for member schools, in line with the recommendations above. Excellence networks would:

— offer all schools access to a professional learning partnership rooted in peer learning and development

— build knowledge, capacity and practice across the region, using all available resources

— ensure training is available in the methodologies and quality assurance processes necessary for school to school work

— broker partnerships for peer review, as required

— ensure underperforming schools had targeted support

— ensure schools in the region improve

Excellence networks of this kind could reduce the risk of isolation by offering all schools access to a professional learning partnership and opportunities for working laterally, but would also provide targeted support for schools that needed it. The latter might be identified by self-referral, referral by the local authority or the Department for Education (DfE), or from regular scrutiny of up-to-date data. High-quality, school-led partnerships could apply to run these networks on a contractual basis for a fixed period of time and as with any contract, would have to operate within agreed accountability measures. Bids might come from teaching schools, from National College licensees, from federations or chains, or from groups of schools with other private-, public- or third-sector partners. Given the views expressed by its general secretary at its annual conference in May 2012, they might even come from a group of schools in collaboration with the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT). The network would be expected to use whatever resources already existed in the region, for instance, NLEs and NSSs, LLEs or teaching schools, but also from clusters of schools, chains and federations. In creating a self-improving system, there are significant benefits to be gained from strong federations, groups of schools and chains working with schools outside their particular community.

Moving forward

The public accountability regime established by the 1988 Education Reform Act challenged the view that professionals alone could be trusted to deliver high standards and good-quality education. That regime has been a key driver for reform and few would argue for a return to a self-defining and self-regulating professionalism. However, 30 years on, with a self-improving system well under way, it is time to re-balance the current framework by giving greater emphasis to school-led accountability that is rooted in moral purpose and professionalism. This will require:

— a shift in mind-set and culture so that accountability is professionally owned rather than being seen as externally imposed

— a greater emphasis on formative accountability as an essential complement to summative accountability

— capturing the benefits more fully of within-school and across-school collaboration, in particular peer review, for challenging and developing the work of teachers and the learning of students

— realising the value of governance more effectively within and across schools

— new approaches to inspection in support of a self-improving system

— exploring the changing role of local authorities as champions for children and commissioners of services for them

— using school-led excellence networks to develop capacity and ensure support for all who need it

The secretary of state has made clear his commitment to a self-improving system and to creating the conditions to enable this to become established. Many school leaders have shown they are willing and able to develop a culture and practice of reflection and enquiry within and beyond their schools that underpins self-improvement. No school has all the answers and the very best schools are eager to do better still. When all schools are challenging each other and using that challenge as a support for better practice, accountability will be seen as a positive and practical tool to raise aspirations and accelerate improvement.

Acknowledgements

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