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Research and analysis

# Schools commentary: Alignment between inspection grades and headline data measures

Updated 7 November 2023

**Applies to England**

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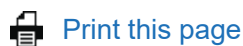
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# Background

This data commentary looks at the degree of alignment between a school's performance data and their Ofsted inspection judgement. It also explains why alignment is not always helpful and should not be an end in itself.

Our inspections are designed to get 'under the bonnet' of a school; to really understand what it is like to be a pupil there. Test and exam results are a vital part of that picture, but we look at so much more than just these outcomes. This is why we have judgements not just for quality of education but also for personal development, behaviour and leadership.

If inspection grades always or nearly always aligned with test and exam results, that might suggest that we do not look deeply enough at all the other things that parents care about. On the other hand, too little alignment would raise questions about the inspection model.

As well as taking account of performance data in quality of education judgements, we also look at it when we plan inspections, because it is one of several factors that can inform lines of enquiry and inspection conversations.

## Alignment is broadly good

With up-to-date outcome data now available to Ofsted, we have been looking more closely at the relationship. We have compared actual inspection grades with the grades that would have been hypothesised from data alone at the end of 2021/22 academic year.

For primary schools, we compared inspection judgements with the proportion of pupils reaching the expected standard in key stage 2 reading, writing and mathematics (figure 1). For secondary schools, we compared inspection grades with Progress 8 scores achieved at the end of key stage 4 (figure 2).

To do this, we have ordered all the schools inspected in 2022/23 based on their results and then classified them into one of 4 'data bands' that correspond to the proportions of outstanding, good, requires improvement and inadequate grades.<sup>[\[footnote 1\]](#)</sup> The data bands are shown on the left-

hand side of the charts below, and inspection judgements are on the right.

Schools that received the same inspection grade as their data band are represented by a horizontal bar between data band and judgement (for example, schools in data band 2 that were judged 'good' on inspection). Bars which move up or down indicate inspections where the grade was higher or lower than the data band. The thickness of the bar represents the proportional number of schools in that category.<sup>[footnote 2\]](#)</sup>

### Figure 1: Alignment rates for primary schools inspected in 2022/23



Note: This analysis only includes inspections of primary schools that took place within the 2022/23 academic year. It excludes inspections of schools where no key stage 2 reading, writing and mathematics attainment scores are available for 2021/22 (for instance infant schools). It also excludes inspections of schools where inspectors did not yet have access to the 2021/22 primary outcomes data via the Inspection Data Summary Report, which only became available to inspectors on 19 October 2022.

View [data in an accessible table format](#).

In 2022/23, for around two thirds of primary (68%) and secondary (64%) school inspections, the inspection grade was the same as the data band.

### Figure 2: Alignment rates for secondary schools inspected in 2022/23



Note: This analysis only includes inspections of secondary schools that took place within the 2022/23 academic year. It excludes inspections of schools where no Progress 8 scores are available for 2021/22. It also excludes inspections of schools where inspectors did not yet have access to the 2021/22 secondary outcomes data via the Inspection Data Summary Report, which only became available to inspectors on 16 November 2022.

View [data in an accessible table format](#).

These are broadly the alignment levels we would expect. They indicate that pupils' outcomes are strongly reflected in our judgements but that our inspections see more than just this snapshot of one year group's data alone.

When looking at the inspection grades and headline outcomes of schools inspected in 2018/19 – the last time a full year of inspections took place where inspectors had up-to-date data – we found a similar level of alignment. In 2018/19, 65% of primary school inspections and 67% of secondary school inspections had inspection grades that aligned with their outcome data.

This demonstrates that since the introduction of the education inspection framework, later in 2019, we have not seen much difference in levels of alignment, despite inspections being less reliant on performance outcomes in coming to their judgements.

Performance data from the end of 2022/23 is now available, which inspectors did not have at the time of the 2022/23 inspections as they took place afterwards. Looking at this updated performance data, we can see that the alignment rates for inspections that took place last year were similar compared with the 2021/22 performance data – 68% for primary and 64% for secondary. This suggests that inspectors are identifying the quality of education in schools, even when outcomes data lags behind what is actually happening at the school at the time of the

inspection.

## **There are good reasons why there is not always alignment**

Overall, over 90% of those schools that do not align between their data band and inspection grade are only one inspection judgement grade away – and fewer than 100 school inspections are more than one inspection judgement away from their data band.

The quality of education judgement, which is the biggest contributor to ‘overall effectiveness’ judgements, is about more than just results (see below), but lack of alignment can also arise when:

- the latest results no longer reflect a school’s quality of education
- other key judgements (such as behaviour and attitudes) influence the overall effectiveness grade
- a school has a small number of pupils, leading to volatile performance data
- a school’s results are close to the data band thresholds

## **The quality of education judgement is about more than results**

It is important to remember that an inspection judgement reflects what is currently being taught and how it is being taught, including what is happening in year groups that have not yet taken tests and exams.

Published outcomes can lag behind changes in a school. A school that has made a lot of improvements over the previous 2 or 3 years may not yet have seen the full impact on its improvements. Conversely, schools can deteriorate. For example, if a primary school has just lost a particularly strong Year 6 teacher on whom key stage 2 results depended heavily, the current quality of education may not be as strong as it might appear from the previous year’s results. If a school’s special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) provision is weak, that may affect the quality of education judgement, even if other pupils are generally doing well.

We also know that schools with high levels of disadvantage are more likely to have lower performance data compared with those with fewer disadvantaged pupils. Inspectors always consider the education being given to all pupils, and consider outcomes in context.

## **Other key judgements carry weight**

Inspection is based on a broad conception of school quality that encompasses behaviour and

attitudes, personal development and leadership and management. In graded inspections, we judge each of these separately. Sometimes, the profile of these judgements means that the overall judgement is lower than the quality of education judgement.

For example, 72% of secondary schools graded lower than their data band had a behaviour and attitudes judgement that was also lower than their data band. The same applied in 39% of primary schools. This demonstrates the wider value that inspection can bring, ensuring that if any aspect of the school is of concern – in particular, those not related to the education quality – they are rightly called out.

## Small schools and other school types have low alignment

Attainment scores in many small schools – which are mostly primary schools – can be ‘noisier’ relative to the underlying quality of education. Even with consistent quality of education, one or two outliers in a particular year group can have a substantial impact on reported results. For example, small primary schools inspected last year are more likely to be placed in data bands 1, 3 and 4, compared with other schools. [\[footnote 3\]](#)

As a result, smaller schools’ results are a less reliable indicator of underlying quality. Inspectors take this into account when they interpret performance data, because it is factored into the analysis in the Inspection Data Summary Report. [\[footnote 4\]](#) Small primary schools are therefore more likely to have a different inspection judgement to their data band.

We also see this volatility in a small number of secondary schools. A very small number of secondary schools in data band 4 received a good judgement on inspection. Around half of these inspections were of university technical colleges, which often give a good technical education but that is not always well reflected in Progress 8 scores.

## Some schools are close to threshold for the data band

In describing alignment between data bands and inspection grades, we have ranked every school based on its 2021/22 headline measure. There are many schools which have very similar headline outcomes but are classified into different data bands, on each side of the cut-off thresholds.

For example, the difference between being in data band 1 versus data band 2 is whether a primary school received above or below 81% for reading, writing and mathematics. A school with a score of 80% would be placed in data band 2, while another school with a score of 81% would be placed in data band 1. If both received an outstanding judgement, one would appear to be aligned and the other not aligned, despite the results for the 2 schools being statistically indistinguishable.

## Conclusion

In most cases (around two thirds of inspections), there is clear alignment with published data outcomes. Furthermore, the overall level of alignment is very similar to that recorded under the previous inspection framework, providing reassurance that the link between performance outcomes and inspection grades has not materially changed.

Where grades and outcomes are not aligned, there is generally a clear reason why. The breadth of the education inspection framework is designed to reflect what parents and government expect of schools – and while headline performance measures play a role, inspection brings a greater depth of understanding of what is happening within a school that data alone cannot tell us.

We will continue to analyse the relationship between inspection grades and headline data measures, and intend to repeat this analysis again to ensure that we continue to have a good understanding of the various factors that contribute to a schools inspection grade.

## Annex – Data tables for figures

### Data for figure 1: Alignment rates for primary schools inspected in 2022/23

Data band	Judged outstanding	Judged good	Judged requires improvement	Judged inadequate	Total of rows
Data band 1	83	204	27	0	314
Data band 2	225	2519	365	19	3128
Data band 3	6	387	216	27	636
Data band 4	0	18	28	3	49
Total of columns	314	3128	636	49	4127

See [Figure 1](#).

### Data for figure 2: Alignment rates for secondary schools inspected in 2022/23

Data band	Judged outstanding	Judged good	Judged requires improvement	Judged inadequate	Total of rows
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Data band 1	49	44	1	0	94
Data band 2	45	359	68	7	479
Data band 3	0	65	67	18	150
Data band 4	0	11	14	4	29
Total of columns	94	479	150	29	752

See [Figure 2](#).

1. This analysis only includes inspections of primary and secondary schools that took place within the 2022/23 academic year and where the inspection report was published by 30 September 2023. It excludes inspections of schools where key stage 2 or 4 outcomes data is not available for 2021/22 (for example infant schools). It also excludes some inspections which took place at the start of the 2022/23 academic year, because inspectors did not have access to the 2021/22 primary or secondary outcomes data at this time. [↩](#)
2. This analysis includes both graded and ungraded inspections. Since a judgement for a good or outstanding school cannot change on an ungraded inspection (unless it converts to a graded inspection), we have equated schools where the ungraded inspection reported the school to be 'remains good (improving)' to be an outstanding judgement, 'remains good (concerns)' to be a requires improvement judgement, and 'remains outstanding (concerns)' to be a good judgement. All other ungraded inspection judgements remain as the previous grade for the school (good or outstanding). [↩](#)
3. A small school is defined here as one with fewer than 20 pupils in the 2021/22 key stage 2 cohort. [↩](#)
4. The [Inspection Data Summary Report](#) is a data document used by inspectors before and during a school inspection. [↩](#)

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