

Schools' views of their LEA 2003:

the national school survey

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As an independent watchdog, we provide important information on the quality of public services. As a driving force for improvement in those services, we provide practical recommendations and spread best practice. As an independent auditor, we monitor spending to ensure public services are good value for money.

I The school survey is completed by the headteacher, who is encouraged to consult other staff and governors.

II Schools are asked to rate aspects of the support and advice provided by their LEA on a five-point scale ranging from very good (1) to very poor (5). Satisfactory is at the mid-point (3) of this scale.

Introduction

- 1 The primary purpose of the school survey is to act as a source of evidence about schools' perceptions of their local education authority (LEA) services and the support that they provide. The survey results help to identify areas of both good performance and potential areas for improvement. The survey therefore provides local authorities with an important self-evaluation tool and is a key component of LEA inspection evidence. The Audit Commission, Ofsted, Estyn and 150 LEAs across England and Wales collaborated to carry out the second annual national survey of schools' views in the summer term of 2003 – the overall findings of which are examined in this briefing. This is the third Audit Commission report on the survey.
- 2 This briefing identifies what schools see as the strengths and weaknesses of the support they receive from their LEAs. The survey looks at five areas: LEA strategy, support for school improvement, facilitating access to services, access/promoting social inclusion and special educational needs. It also, for the first time, looks at issues of particular importance to schools in Wales, such as support for Welsh-medium education. Responses from schools of different types and from schools in different types of LEAs are examined, as well as key changes since the first national survey in 2002.
- 3 The overall response rate was 38 per cent (8,394 out of 21,956 schools responded), though this varied significantly between LEAs – from 6 per cent to 95 per cent. The proportions of responding schools of each type (community, voluntary aided, voluntary controlled and foundation), and within each type of LEA (county, unitary, metropolitan borough, outer London borough and inner London borough), reflect those found nationally.
- 4 The findings will be of interest to officers and elected members in councils – both those that participated in the survey and those which did not – to headteachers and governors of schools, to education policymakers and to anyone interested in the relationships between LEAs and schools. The detailed analyses upon which this briefing is based are available on the survey project website at www.audit-commission.gov.uk/schoolsurvey. This briefing and analyses, together with the local survey results received by each participating LEA, should allow authorities to compare national and local issues.

Key findings

- 5 Overall, the survey shows that schools continue to rate their LEA support as at least satisfactory in a majority of areas,^{II} although the variation between LEAs is still marked.
- 6 Of the questions applicable to both England and Wales, the items on which schools gave their highest and lowest ratings were similar to those in 2002, although there have been some movements within the top or bottom ten.
- 7 LEA support for numeracy and literacy, personnel advice and casework, and financial support and advice remain the items rated highest by schools.

- 8 Schools continue to value highly the leadership proved by senior LEA officers.
- 9 Support for bidding for external grants is now the lowest-rated item in the survey.
- 10 Schools remain dissatisfied with the level of support they receive for pupils with special educational needs: only one-half of the questions under this heading received an average rating of satisfactory or better. Schools also gave low ratings to building maintenance and the programming and management of building projects.
- 11 In Wales, the LEA's arrangements for securing access to Welsh-medium education and curriculum support, and the quality of support for the Welsh language all received very positive ratings from schools – with the item relating to access to Welsh-medium education achieving the highest average rating of all the survey questions.

Changes over time

- 12 Schools' views were generally more positive in response to the 2003 survey than the 2002 survey.
- 13 In particular, schools have become more positive about questions relating to the use of data and information and communication technology: the strategy for managing information and data; the effectiveness of electronic communication between schools and the LEA; the support for ICT in the curriculum and technical support for ICT all showed comparatively large increases in the average ratings given by schools.
- 14 Schools' responses showed small decreases in a few areas. These included LEA support for literacy and numeracy and the definition of monitoring, support and intervention – suggesting that, although these have consistently been among the highest-rated items overall, LEAs face a challenge in maintaining good ratings as schools' expectations rise.

Differences between schools

- 15 Primary schools overall were more positive than other phases of school, although special schools have become more positive about support from their LEA. Secondary schools gave the least positive ratings overall, especially to questions relating to behaviour support, bidding for external grants and special educational needs support. The quality of technical support for ICT is no longer an area that secondary schools rate particularly negatively (from 59 per cent to 66 per cent satisfactory or better). This could reflect secondary schools' growing capacity to provide their own technical support in-house.
- 16 Foundation schools remain less positive about their LEA than other types of school.

I JRSs record the judgements made during the inspection of LEAs in England on a scale of 1-7 where 1 = Very Good and 7 = Very Poor. JRS 52 is a composite judgement about the overall effectiveness of the LEA. The inspection system in Wales operates in a way which makes comparison impossible.

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Differences between LEAs

- 17 Overall, schools in Wales rated their LEAs the most positively on every section of the survey. This was particularly the case on questions relating to communication, ICT, support for school leadership, finance and payroll.
- 18 Of the schools in England, those in county and inner London authorities rated their LEA the highest on most questions, particularly in relation to the leadership provided by elected members. Schools in inner London authorities in particular gave the highest ratings to the support provided for the recruitment and retention of teachers and to the support for raising attainment at Key Stage 3.
- 19 As in 2002, outer London authorities were rated the most negatively by their schools – on every section of the survey (54 of the 68 questions applicable to both England and Wales). In particular, schools in outer London gave the lowest ratings to the support available for education for 14-19 year olds.
- 20 There remains a strong positive relationship between LEA effectiveness (as judged in LEA inspections in England)¹ and more positive ratings by schools.

The survey project

- 21 The national survey aims simultaneously to meet the needs of inspection, local authorities and other stakeholders in taking account of the views of a key group of local service users – while reducing the survey burden on schools themselves. It is an ongoing project that has been carried out annually since 2002. The vast majority of LEAs in England and Wales took part in the 2003 survey and a high proportion took the opportunity to include additional questions in the survey instead of running separate local surveys.
- 22 The survey is evaluated annually by inviting feedback from LEAs and from responding schools. This feedback has been very positive. The survey will be repeated in summer 2004 in England and Wales, and nearly 150 authorities have indicated that they would like to participate. The Commission will continue to consult stakeholders, LEAs and schools about the survey process and will continue to develop the outputs from the survey. For instance, we recently launched an online guide to the authorities given the highest ratings by their schools for each question in the survey. This will help to identify areas of good practice across England and Wales. We will also circulate to LEAs a guide to maximising survey response rates and utilising the survey results. Further information on the survey project can be found at www.audit-commission.gov.uk/schoolsurvey.