

General Election 2019

An analysis of manifesto plans for education

Priority 2: School accountability

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Research Area:
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Priority 2: School accountability

The school system in England is underpinned by a system of accountability in which schools are compared through performance tables and Ofsted inspections. By international standards, England's system is defined as one of high autonomy, with high accountability (OECD, 2015).

The accountability system that we have today is not simply a vehicle by which the public (primarily parents) are able to judge the performance of individual schools. It also: provides the key data on which the government can identify poorly performing schools which are then subject to direct intervention including, if a maintained school, forced academisation; provides the mechanism by which the government of the day can shape the qualification and subject choices of schools and pupils; and gives one way in which the success of overall government policy is measured (for example, the proportion of pupils in good and outstanding schools).

We therefore have an accountability system with multiple different users, with multiple different purposes. But the system can also have unintended consequences on schools, being associated with issues around teacher recruitment and retention, and potentially acting as a disincentive to inclusive education.

The current landscape

Importance for school standards

International evidence suggests that school accountability which allows the direct comparison of schools has a positive impact on pupil outcomes, with standardised testing achieving better results than localised or subjective information.¹ The removal of formalised testing also risks introducing biased assessments – by gender, ethnicity, special educational needs, and socio-economic factors.²

Research suggests that the removal of published information about individual schools – such as through the school performance tables – could lead to a fall in school standards. The abolition of performance tables in Wales led to a “marked reduction in school effectiveness”.³ This was particularly the case for schools at the lower end of the performance distribution and so is likely to be felt disproportionately by pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Use of accountability by parents

One of the key reasons for the system of public accountability for schools is its role in school choice, allowing parents to compare the performance of schools. Less than half of parents nominate their nearest secondary school as their first preference, and families for whom the nearest school has low

¹ Annika B. Bergbauer, Eric Hanushek, Ludger Woessmann, *‘Testing with accountability improves student achievement’*, (September 2018)

² Tammy Campbell, *‘Stereotyped at Seven? Biases in Teacher Judgement of Pupils’ Ability and Attainment’*, (July 2015)

³ Simon Burgess et al, *‘A natural experiment in school accountability: the impact of school performance information on pupil progress and sorting’*, (October 2013)

attainment as reported in school performance tables are the least likely to nominate their nearest school as their first preference.⁴

Ofsted's most recent Parental Annual Survey found that 68 per cent of parents believed that Ofsted provided a valuable source of information of education standards in their area.⁵ More broadly, the vast majority (84 per cent) had read an Ofsted report at some stage.

However, some felt that the report was redundant as they would send their child to their preferred school anyway. In fact, despite their long-standing status as a key indicator of school performance for parents, there is surprisingly little evidence on the impact of inspection outcomes on parental choice. The perceived performance of a school does appear to affect the extent to which parents involve themselves with their child's education. For example, if school performance increases, parents become less likely to help with homework (though the converse is not true).⁶

Relationship with teacher retention

A poor Ofsted judgement can have serious implications for schools, not only in terms of direct intervention in the school, but also amongst the teaching workforce. Lower Ofsted ratings in schools are associated with higher rates of teachers moving to other schools, or leaving the profession altogether.⁷ For example, in 2015, around 10 per cent of teachers in primary schools rated as outstanding left the profession, in schools rated as inadequate it was over 15 per cent. Whilst not necessarily causal, a school being downgraded to inadequate is associated with a 3.4 percentage point increase in teacher turnover.⁸ Of course, such staff restructuring may be part of trying to improve standards in the school.

Fairness

The fact that there are high stakes associated with Ofsted means that it is important that their judgements are fair. However, schools with more disadvantaged pupils have been less likely to be rated "outstanding" while schools with low disadvantage and high prior attainment are more likely to receive positive judgements from Ofsted.⁹ This holds even when controlling for the progress pupils in the school made relative to pupils with similar prior attainment.

While the government has signalled its intention to remove the exemption for outstanding schools, no significant action has been taken to address the apparent bias against schools with disadvantaged cohorts.¹⁰ Ofsted has recently implemented its new inspection framework which will focus more on curriculum intention and breadth, than attainment outcomes. However, the new framework does

⁴ Simon Burgess, Ellen Greaves, & Anna Vignoles, *'Understanding parental choices of secondary school in England using national administrative data'*, (October 2017)

⁵ YouGov, *'Annual parents survey 2018, parents awareness and perceptions of Ofsted'*, (April 2019)

⁶ Iftikhar Hussein et al, *'How do parents respond to Ofsted reports?'*, (2019)

⁷ Jack Worth et al., *'Teacher Workforce Dynamics in England: Nurturing, Supporting and Valuing Teachers'*, (March 2018)

⁸ Sam Sims, *'High-Stakes Accountability and Teacher Turnover: How do Different School Inspection Judgements Affect Teachers' Decisions to Leave Their School?'* (October 2016)

⁹ Jo Hutchinson, *'School inspection in England: is there room to improve?'*, (November 2017)

¹⁰ Department for Education, *'New drive to continue boosting standards in schools'*, (September 2019)

not fully acknowledge the multi-faceted causes of poor behaviour amongst disadvantaged and vulnerable pupils.¹¹

“Progress 8” is the government’s headline measure for assessing performance in secondary schools. Progress 8 measures the progress that pupils make between the end of Key Stage 2 and the end of Key Stage 4 and benchmarks schools against the national average. While this is a better measure than the previous 5+ A*-C threshold measure, it only considers the context of pupils in terms of their Key Stage 2 scores and not other factors that are widely understood to be associated with education performance, including the prevalence of special educational needs, ethnicity and poverty. Because pupils who have one or more characteristics which make them more vulnerable are likely to make less progress than their peers, Progress 8 benefits schools with more affluent intakes.

Implications for subject and qualification choices

Both Progress 8 and the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) require pupils to take certain subjects and can therefore limit their opportunities to take others. While Progress 8 is the measure by which government assesses school performance, the proportion of pupils entering into the EBacc also features on school performance tables. Taken together, Progress 8 and the EBacc have attracted criticism that pupils are being forced into taking more “academic” subjects and dropping more creative subjects, including the arts.¹²

Between 2010 and 2014 the proportion of pupils entering at least one arts subject increased from 55.6 per cent to 57.1 per cent, but by 2016 it had fallen to 53.5 – its lowest point in a decade. It is not necessarily accountability alone that led to a fall in the study of the arts, our research suggests that the fall was also associated with financial pressures.¹³

Implications for inclusion

There are also concerns amongst the sector and parents that accountability measures are not only affecting the curriculum, but also the inclusion of pupils, particularly the most vulnerable. The practice of ‘off-rolling’, where pupils are moved out of a school without a formal exclusion, has been under scrutiny for some time now though there has been a lack of data to show precisely how often it is happening and where it is taking place.

Once apparently legitimate, family-driven, moves out of a school, are taken into account, around 61,000 pupils from the 2017 GCSE cohort, equivalent to one in ten pupils, experienced an unexplained exit during their time in secondary school.¹⁴ Around three quarters of these moves were experienced by vulnerable pupils, predominantly those in social care, those with mental health needs, those with special educational needs and disabilities, those pupils living in poverty, and those from Black ethnic backgrounds (see Figure 2.1).

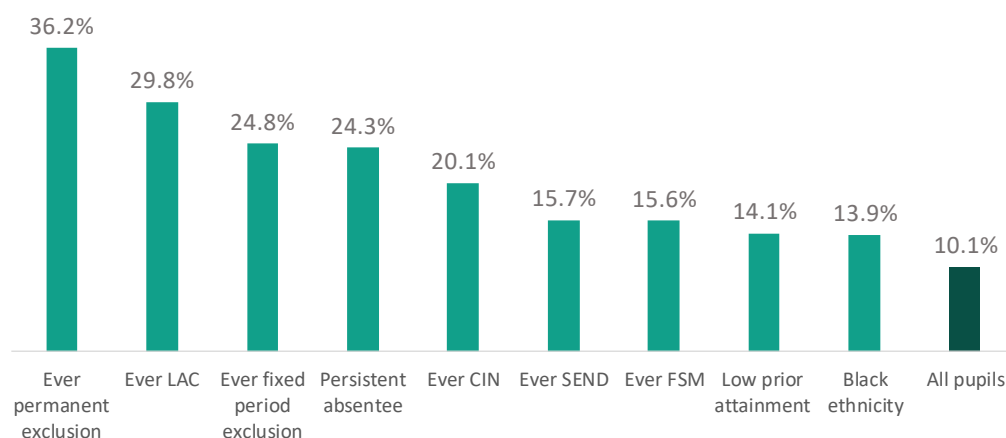
¹¹ Jo Hutchinson, *‘Improvements and errors: Ofsted’s new framework is difficult to grade’*, (May 2019)

¹² Eleanor Busby, *‘Decline in creative subjects at GCSE prompts fears that arts industry could be damaged’*, (August 2018)

¹³ Rebecca Johnes, *‘Entries to arts subjects at Key Stage 4’*, (September 2017)

¹⁴ Jo Hutchinson and Whitney Crenna-Jennings, *‘Unexplained Pupil Exits from Schools: Further Analysis and Data by Multi-Academy Trust and Local Authority’* (October 2019)

Figure 2.1: Percentage of the 2017 Key Stage 4 cohort who had at least one unexplained exit by pupil characteristics¹⁵



It is important to note, however, that challenges to inclusion do not arise from accountability alone and recent trends could be because of a range of pressures on schools including funding, teacher recruitment and retention and weakened local authority support services.

What should a new government do?

Education research suggests that policies should:

- recognise that an autonomous school system needs robust and intelligent accountability systems to help drive improved outcomes; and
- ensure that accountability systems take the vulnerability of the school's pupil intake into account and do not incentivise the removal of pupils whose attainment might otherwise be poor.

Manifesto commitments

Some of the manifestos include significant changes to the public accountability of schools in England and provide a clear dividing line between the parties. This includes the abolition of Ofsted, after being a feature of the school system for nearly thirty years, and a move away from statutory assessment in primary schools.

Testing and school performance tables

The Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats, and the Green Party propose abolishing statutory end of key stage tests in primary schools. Labour would refocus assessment on pupil progress. The Liberal Democrats would replace tests with a formal, moderated, teacher assessment at the end of each phase and “some lighter-touch testing”. The removal of formalised testing risks introducing biased assessments – by gender, ethnicity, special educational needs, and socio-economic factors.¹⁶

Neither the Conservative Party or the Brexit Party propose any changes to assessment.

¹⁵ Note that LAC refers to ‘looked after children’, CIN refers to ‘children in need’.

¹⁶ Tammy Campbell, ‘Stereotyped at Seven? Biases in Teacher Judgement of Pupils’ Ability and Attainment’, (July 2015)

The Labour Party aim to tackle the practice of “off-rolling” in school performance tables, where pupils are moved out of a school without a formal exclusion. Labour say they will do this by making schools accountable for pupils who leave their rolls. Attempts to address this are welcome, however the proposed approach may also introduce perverse incentives into the accountability system. For example, one option would be to weight pupil outcomes by the length of time that they were in the school.¹⁷ But this does risk incentivising schools to remove pupils early during secondary education, or to not admit vulnerable pupils altogether.

The Liberal Democrats would replace performance tables with a broader set of indicators including pupil wellbeing. At this stage there is no indication of how that data would be collected, though it is likely to place additional burdens on schools. Attempts have been made in the past to provide a broader picture for school performance, for example the ‘school profile’ introduced by the Education Act 2005.¹⁸ However, this did not appear to be widely used, with nearly three-quarters of schools not updating it in a given year.¹⁹

The Liberal Democrats would also end the EBacc as performance measure as part of their support for the arts in schools. However, the relationship between arts entries and reforms to the performance tables is complex.

The Green Party would end the publication of performance tables altogether. Given that the Labour Party have also proposed the end of National Curriculum testing in primary schools this would suggest that primary school performance tables might also end under a Labour government. Research suggests that this could lead to a fall in school standards. Neither the Conservative Party or the Brexit Party make any reference to school performance tables and so we assume that the current arrangements will remain. Overall, where parties have generally implied that performance tables would remain in some form, efforts to address the unfairness of performance tables measures are lacking.

Inspection

Ofsted currently inspects 6,100 schools a year in a combination of short inspections (3,800) that last one day and full inspections (2,300) that last two days.²⁰ The Conservative Party manifesto re-stated their support for Ofsted, saying that it is not only important for standards but also behaviour. However, Ofsted themselves have in the past said that they do not necessarily believe inspection outcomes fully reflect standards of behaviour.²¹ Since the publication of their manifesto, the Conservative Party have pledged to increase the number of days that Ofsted spends in schools with an increased focus on behaviour and wider wellbeing, at an estimated cost of £10m a year.²²

Both the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats propose abolishing Ofsted and replacing it with a new body – in the case of the Liberal Democrats an HM Inspector of Schools. However, neither is

¹⁷ Rebecca Allen, *‘Schools should be accountable for all pupils they teach’*, (March 2017)

¹⁸ Education Act 2005, Part 4, Maintained Schools, Section 104

¹⁹ Response to a Freedom of Information request published on www.whatdotheyknow.com, (October 2010)

²⁰ Ofsted *‘State funded schools inspections and outcomes: monthly management information (2017/18)’*, (December 2018)

²¹ Fraser Whieldon, *‘Harford: Ofsted has ‘real issues’ inspecting behaviour’*, (June 2019)

²² Richard Adams, *‘Conservative pledge to boost Ofsted’s power to inspect schools’*, (November 2019)

proposing the ending of independent inspection of schools and both seem to be unclear as to what the functions of these new bodies would be and how they would differ from those of Ofsted.

The Liberal Democrats further propose inspection on a three-year cycle, increasing the number of inspections by around one thousand each year. If such inspections were of a similar length to current inspections then they would come at a cost of around £8m a year.²³ Neither the Labour Party or the Liberal Democrats have provided an estimate of the cost of closing Ofsted and establishing a new body in its place.

The Green Party would abolish Ofsted and replace it with a collaborative system of assessing and supporting schools locally. A challenge here may be the variation between different areas in terms of high performing schools. The distribution of high performing secondary schools has become more geographically uneven in recent years, with a 2017 study finding that there were some local authority areas that did not have any high performing secondary schools.²⁴ In other words, local schools may not necessarily have the capacity themselves to aid school improvement. The Labour Party proposal of peer to peer support sitting at a regional level may go some way to address this.

Curriculum

Both the Conservative Party and the Labour Party propose an arts pupil premium – the former would target this at secondary aged pupils, the former at primary aged pupils. The Liberal Democrats say that they would protect the arts, though no further details are given beyond removing the EBacc from performance measures. The Conservative Party would also provide additional funding for physical education. The Liberal Democrats propose establishing an independent panel for any future changes to curriculum. The Labour Party say that they would carry out a review of the curriculum.

Overall assessment

The manifesto commitments from the opposition parties suggest significant changes to school accountability but they are not necessarily rooted in reforms that would lead to higher standards. The abolition of standardised tests by the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats, and the Green Party would run counter to evidence that suggests that they are more beneficial to pupil outcomes than locally administered tests or subjective outcomes. This is particularly the case for the Green Party which would abolish school performance tables despite evidence that suggests this would lower standards, particularly in the lowest performing schools.

The Liberal Democrat proposals to move towards teacher assessments do come at the risk of increased bias in pupil outcomes, particularly by ethnicity and for low income groups.

Announcements prior to the election that the Labour Party would abolish Ofsted generated headlines. However, their manifesto commitments, and those of the Liberal Democrats, do not mean an end of school inspection. It is, however, unclear at this stage what those new inspections would look like and how their operation would differ from that currently carried out.

The Labour Party proposes to address the issue of ‘off-rolling’ in school performance tables – though their solution is not without challenges – and the Liberal Democrats would broaden the remit of

²³ Based on an average inspection cost of £7,200 as estimated by the National Audit Office, uprated for inflation.

²⁴ Jon Andrews and Natalie Perera, ‘Access to high performing secondary schools in England’, (December 2017)

inspections to include pupil wellbeing and development. But beyond that, the main parties do little to address some of the key challenges in accountability; namely how both the performance tables and inspections could be made fairer to all schools. In fact, the Conservative Party included nothing on accountability beyond their support for Ofsted.