

15 April 2015

Dear Secretary of State,

Proposed changes to inspection and the accountability framework

I have been a teacher since 1979, had experience of headship at two contrasting primary schools and was the architect, as a senior HMI, of the two most recent school inspection frameworks. My teaching experience is not unique but my time with Ofsted probably was, or at least few others would have been charged with the task of developing an important pillar in the accountability framework. I have a firm belief that inspection, when done well with a school that has a secure understanding of its strengths and weaknesses, can be a constructive and helpful process. There comes a time, however, when an inspection system that was designed for all schools needs a radical overhaul. I believe that time has arrived. I would urge you to consider withdrawing the expectation that all schools will be inspected within a predetermined period. This pressure on schools is intense and increases as the date of the anniversary looms. It also seriously affects recruitment into senior posts of schools at or close to the time of the inspection. In addition, there is a sense that the system will not give sufficient time for real improvement to be embedded and effective school leaders are wary of taking on what they may describe as 'a disaster waiting to happen'. I know that change in school performance can be dramatic and improvement secured quickly but there are circumstances when this is achieved and it is simply not sustained. Ofsted's evidence of slippage back into a category of concern proves the point. Getting 'real' and sustained improvement takes time and a fair dose of talent and energy. We need to create the time but not lose the accountability. My proposal is that a stratified sample of schools are identified for inspection each year. The number of inspections would be relatively small and would perhaps mean that schools had a 1 in 10 chance of being selected. These odds would be sufficient to maintain a certain level of healthy pressure on schools but would provide sufficient evidence for the chief inspector to report on the quality of education each year. Where a school was found to have been inaccurate in its self-assessment then a warning notice would be issued providing a window for reflection and reassessment. A follow up inspection within six months would have the power to judge a school as 'requiring special measures to provide a satisfactory education'. Inspection would continue to have bite but it didn't jolt the system so heavily and would encourage school leaders to embark on sustained improvement rather than 'quick wins'. Two additional benefits of a system that relies on less inspection are the cost savings that it would produce but also it would require fewer inspectors. I was fortunate in joining as HMI in 2001 at a time when I benefited from a year-long induction programme. I had previously been trained in the mid 1990s as an Additional Inspector so I was reasonably familiar with the inspection process but I was still given a mentor for the entire year. My mentor shadowed me on inspection and checked that my judgements were sound and secure. I benefited greatly from inspecting abroad, in prisons, secure units, private schools and universities. The purpose was to make me a more rounded and reliable judgement maker. The current programme of utilising existing school leaders to undertake inspections for a relatively short period of time and with relatively little in-house training seriously jeopardises the quality of the evidence gathering and judgement making. I don't think I am alone in believing that not all outstanding leaders always make strong inspectors. The skill sets required for both roles are different so let's have some current school leaders involved but let's do it in such a way that their judgements are reliable and the system is not damaged by removing some of the great leaders from front-line work at

a time when there are clearly not enough to go round. The decision to remove the expectation that schools complete annually an electronic self-evaluation form was misguided. Suggesting that this was an attempt to reduce bureaucracy signified a complete lack of understanding of the form and the process undertaken by senior leaders and their governors. In addition, I find the current stance on 'outstanding' schools difficult to stomach because from my extensive experience of inspection these schools tend to be less strong than the external data often suggests. I urge you to adopt an approach that treats all schools in the same way and helps to eradicate some of the professional arrogance that can emanate from an 'outstanding' judgement. We also need to do more to create an expectation that all schools will support others and not just those deemed to be effective. I have gained as much from visiting schools what were deemed to be weak as those judged by someone else to be 'outstanding'. I have always found effective practice in schools in 'special measures' and the opportunity to put myself in the shoes of others has always been a humbling experience. Some of the most brilliant and dynamic school leaders are in the most challenging of schools and we need to support and challenge them through less inspection rather than more. School self-evaluations need to demonstrate how expertise is being shared across the school system and inspectors need to drill down into these relationships so that we can get a real sense of how effective and sustainable they are. The Secretary of State needs to know whether we are deluding ourselves that school-school support is feasible. You are no doubt told regularly that it can work but I am not convinced we have a picture of this working in all of our communities. Making school-school support work in the far reaches of Cumbria is very different from a London or Manchester Challenge scenario. I would urge you to expect every school to undertake confidential annual surveys of staff, pupils/students and parents/carers views. The analysis of these surveys needs to be undertaken by an independent body or group and must be reviewed by governors as part of the self-evaluation process. I have considerable experience of this work and would be happy to chat to you about it. The current approach adopted by Ofsted with its Parent view questionnaire is scandalous and I would suggest that this is closed down with immediate effect. It provides little in the way of qualitative information and is open to misuse. I have many other issues about accountability issues that I would love to discuss with you. I don't suppose you will have much time as you take up your role but if you are near to Manchester I make a decent coffee.

Yours faithfully,

Frank Norris
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