

SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY INQUIRY

Response to the Children's, Schools and Families Select Committee 'New Inquiry into School Accountability' on behalf of EDEXCEL Ltd at 27th February 2009

Summary points:

- Edexcel believes that publicly funded schools should be publicly accountable for their contribution to the wellbeing, progress and achievements of all their young people.
- The overriding purpose of all accountability processes should be the enhancement of all young people's wellbeing, progress and achievement.
- Accountability should be according to standards and criteria which accord schools a level playing field, enabling fair comparison of like with like.
- The proposed School Report Card offers the opportunity for real progress in consolidating the reporting of differentiated school performance to communities, both national and local.
- Edexcel looks forward to supporting Government initiatives in developing accountability mechanisms.

Introduction: Edexcel Ltd:

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Accountability

Is it right in principle that schools should be held publicly accountable for their performance?

1.1 Absolutely.

What should be the fundamental purposes of an accountability system for schools and, in particular:

To whom should schools be accountable?

1.2 Publicly funded schools should be accountable to the young people who are their immediate client group, parents/carers, governors, taxpayers, employers, local and central government.

For what should they be held accountable?

1.3 Schools should be held accountable for the wellbeing, progress and achievement of all their young people, as elaborated below.

How should they be held to account?

1.4 Schools should be held accountable for the wellbeing, progress and achievement of all their young people, to standards comparable with those of our major competitor nations through accessible public reporting. 'Wellbeing, progress and achievement' should be defined

according to standards upon which there is a social consensus, which are stable, long-term, differentiated and internally consistent. The use of undifferentiated standards like the 30% GCSE grade A*-C criterion of the 'National Challenge', has had damaging consequences for pupil intake, parental engagement, staff recruitment/retention, governor authority/accountability and local authority joint area review action plans. (This is because the benchmark does not take account of the value added by schools, contradicts published Ofsted judgments and results in a focus of resources on sub-threshold achievers to detriment of other learners). Public accountability should therefore be according to performance indicators which take due account of selection, per capita funding and socio-economic advantage/disadvantage, so that schools may be compared with one another on a 'level playing field'.

- 1.5 Schools should be accountable for the wellbeing, progress and achievement of all their young people as reflected by an appropriate blend of quantitative data, pupil and parent satisfaction surveys and professional assessment of the quality of their services, taking account of locally specific circumstances, all gathered into a single easily-understandable and available report. This is preferable to the disparate range of reporting information presently available, which is also inaccessible to certain sections of the community. The School Report Card has the potential to meet these requirements.

What should be the consequences?

1.6 The consequences of the accountability process should be sustained and evidenced improvements in the provision of education and care for all young people, according to criteria which meet the above standards, within a 'reasonable' time-frame such as one year. The consequences should not be a flight from allegedly 'underperforming' schools of able learners, affluent parents, skilled and experienced practitioners, committed governors, and engaged employers. (These have all been unintended consequences of present accountability arrangements, arising from negative publicity). A responsibly managed accountability process impacts young people's experiences beneficially, eg by developing rather than undermining the recruitment and retention, confidence and expertise of the practitioners central to young people's lives in school.

How do other countries hold their schools accountable for their performance and against what criteria?

1.6 No comment

Is the current accountability system of inspection and performance reporting for schools broadly fit for purpose?

1.7 No. The current system is fragmented with schools accountable to Ofsted, local authorities and central government, local communities and public opinion. Ofsted reports may not consistently feature CVA so that raw achievement data fails to take account of disadvantage, funding differences and the incidence of selection among neighbouring schools. Light touch attention for high-performing schools can reinforce funding advantage and encourage 'coasting' while close scrutiny of low-achieving schools can reinforce funding disadvantage and undermine professional confidence, leading to a counter-productive flight of skilled and experienced practitioners.

1.8 Moreover 'league tables' reflecting achievement and attainment scores fail to differentiate between schools according to their intake, resourcing and value added. These tend to increase the demand for places at schools which are thought to be 'high-performing' and away from

those which are perceived as 'low-performing', in raw terms only, with damaging consequences for learners, communities and social cohesion.

1.9 Furthermore the application nationwide of arbitrary benchmarks such as 'National Challenge' has led to the reporting of performance at variance with judgments made by Ofsted and local authorities and raises questions as to whether there exists, in fact, a coherent accountability 'system'.

How should schools be held accountable for their performance in the context of increasing collaboration in education provision?

1.10 The encouragement of open competition between schools over many years has impeded the growth of trust and collaboration at a local level. Collaboration in provision is yet to be translated into collaboration over outcomes, not least because colleges are central to such partnerships for learners aged 16 and under, but are not included in current proposals. A workable model illustrating the contribution of collaborative providers towards the shared achievements of learners has yet to be published for consultation. There is no easy answer to this question given the climate of competition between schools which has arisen.

1.11 Moreover the integrated nature of 14-19 learning is not reflected in the proposal to apply the Card only to schools and across the 11-16 secondary phase. There is broad agreement in the learning community that 14-19 is an integrated phase and that colleges (both GFE and Sixth Form) play a central role in local 14-19 partnerships. A unified 14-19 reporting mechanism is therefore required which is fully inclusive.

School report card

What might a school report card usefully provide that is not covered by the current performance reporting system?

2.1 The School Report Card may usefully consolidate into one easily understandable compilation, a wide variety of information relating to children's attainment, welfare and progress which is currently found in many different contexts. The US model illustrates the application of value added data as an approach to 'narrowing the gap'.

Are there any issues which the school report card should avoid or seek to inhibit?

2.2 The Card is likely to reflect a blend of both quantitative and qualitative information; eg assessment metrics alongside parent satisfaction ratings. The allocation of weightings to these various components will require detailed consultation as there are likely to be highly contrasting stakeholder perspectives at both national and local levels. The challenge facing those who populate the Card template will be to weave together both objective and subjective information into a single coherent narrative in order to provide a final grade which commands credibility and is seen to be just. This will need to be underpinned by appropriate and responsible explanatory comment. The process of consolidation and distillation to 4 sides of A4 carries the danger of some simplification and could easily provoke public and media over-reaction to a single summative grade, as has been the case in the US. It is likely to form the basis of substantial public discussion and should encourage responsible ownership of outcomes.

Is the school report card potentially a sound basis for:

informing parents;

2.3 Yes, providing the Card is made available in a wide variety of community languages, and with appropriate explanation.

providing a set of prioritised outcomes for schools;

2.4 Yes, but only as a contribution towards school action plans.

providing a starting point for Ofsted inspection;

2.5 Yes, insofar as it will contain information routinely collected through Ofsted desk-research. The Card may play a useful role in contributing to Ofsted Risk Assessments

providing a management tool for government?

2.6. No. The Card will however provide information which managers may wish to take into account when planning strategically

Could the school report card appropriately replace some Ofsted reporting?

2.7 Yes. Consolidation of the current system means the Card should contain key Ofsted report messages.

2.8 In summary, Edexcel believes the School Report Card offers many opportunities to support the quality of all children's learning and care if sensitively and carefully developed and applied. Edexcel looks forward to working closely with Government in this new phase of reporting publicly the results of the efforts of all children, parents/carers, educators and local authorities alike, in an inclusive and carefully considered long-term implementation plan.

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