


*The Virtue of Accountability: System Redesign, Inspection, and Incentives in the Era of Informed Professionalism**

MICHAEL BARBER

*Accountability has become
synonymous with testing. But there's more
to it than that, as an architect of the
British accountability system explains.*



INTRODUCTION

In the new century we are all aware of the centrality of school systems to the future well-being of our societies as well as our economies. The shared moral purpose of almost every educator I know is to improve outcomes for all students and simultaneously promote equity. As Michael Fullan puts it, we want a system which raises the bar and narrows the gap. This is the ethical context for my discussion of accountability and inspection. Since the mid-1980s the development and implementation of strong accountability systems has been one of the most powerful, perhaps **the** most powerful, trend in education policy in the UK, USA and many other countries including Holland, Australia, Canada, Sweden and Russia. My central point in this lecture is that a system of strong external accountability, correctly designed, can make a decisive contribution to the achievement of that widely shared moral purpose.

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The 1980s were the decade in which politicians in many countries began to realise the growing importance of education for the economic future of their countries. At the same time, they recognised that there were limits to how much tax people were willing to pay for services which delivered uncertain outcomes. In response to these pressures, accountability made sense.

Coincidentally, the development among education researchers of a knowledge base about school effectiveness and school improvement had demonstrated that schools and teachers really made a difference. The mind-numbing philosophy of the 1960s and 1970s, which argued that education outcomes were socially determined and that education systems could do no more than reproduce existing inequalities, was finally laid to rest. This provided an intellectual rationale for accountability at precisely the moment when macro-political pressures required one. Thus, from the outset, accountability posed a dilemma for educators with which we have lived ever since. It is liberating to discover that one's actions really can make a profound difference to the life chances of children—but it is also an awesome responsibility.

My argument is in five sections:

- The Virtue of Accountability;
- Accountability and System Redesign;
- Accountability and the Case for Inspection;
- Inspection Now and in the Future;
- Incentives, Leadership and Informed Professionalism.

SECTION 1: THE VIRTUE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

The profuse business literature is clear on the benefits of accountability for both individuals and organisations. At its simplest, realising the benefits of accountability requires that people know what their goals are, that progress towards those goals is measured and that success is rewarded and failure addressed. That this process delivers better results should hardly come as a surprise. It is common sense.

Even so, the introduction of accountability in the education system was controversial for two reasons. One was that in the post-war era, politicians on the whole were willing to cede control of the content and processes of education to the teaching profession. When, through accountability, they sought to wrest this control from the professionals, it inevitably caused conflict. In the UK, we have seen this conflict played out not just in education but across other public services too. The irony is, as I will argue in a moment, that the absence of accountability, far from benefiting professionals, was deeply destructive of their long-term interests.

The second reason it was controversial in education was that the goals themselves were a matter of debate. There were (and still are) numerous people who argue that the outcomes of schooling are too complex and subtle to measure. Onora O'Neill, philosopher and critic of hard-edged accountability, has made this case eloquently. The result of her line of argument, though, is to mystify the public as to the goals of education and lead them to question the value of their investment through taxation in education. This is precisely what occurred in the 1970s and 1980s in England when an admittedly small number of celebrated cases on the lunatic fringe of the teaching profession undermined the majority, which found itself unable to mount a defence or even to demonstrate that the lunatics really were a fringe.

In any case, the fact that there are some subtle outcomes of education which are hard to measure is not even a remotely convincing reason for not measuring the important outcomes that can be measured perfectly well: literacy, numeracy, attendance, truancy, success in academic subjects, overall school performance, value-added . . . and others.

Over the decade after *A Nation at Risk* (1983) in the USA and *Teaching Quality* (1984) in England, the proponents of accountability emerged as the victors, more or less, in a conflict which was not without its cost in frayed relationships. Nevertheless, over the years it has brought many benefits, certainly in England. Standards were set through the National Curriculum, and tests introduced to measure

pupils' progress against those standards. For parents, the benefits have been much better information not only about the progress their own child is making but also about the performance of the school their child attends and the system of which the school is part. Equally importantly, this information gives parents the possibility of addressing problems facing either their own child or the school as a whole.

For pupils and for the performance of the system the benefits have been huge. Standards of achievement have been put in the spotlight, expectations have been raised, teachers' efforts have been directed to making a difference and performance has undoubtedly improved. For example, in the case of primary schools in England, literacy and numeracy performance rose significantly in the late 1990s after a 50-year plateau. Underperformance has been dragged out of the shadows and the system forced to face up to failure—whether of individuals, whole groups or particular schools. In short, contrary to a common line of critique, accountability systems have been the key to driving equity. Before, we only talked about equity: transparency forces us to do something about it. In spite of the flaws in its funding and implementation, this is the reason I strongly support the No Child Left Behind Act in the USA.

Sometimes this case for accountability is accepted but then, it is said, it has been achieved at the expense of teachers and their lives. Sometimes there has been a price to pay. A period of tumultuous change is inevitably stressful. Even so, it is worth remembering that the real low point for teachers' morale in England was the early to mid-1980s when salaries sank and industrial strife became endemic. In other words, the period of greatest demoralisation preceded rather than followed the introduction of accountability. (This, by the way, is an example of an underestimated theme in the change literature; the risk of inertia is often much greater than the risk of change).

Overall, certainly in England, I am in no doubt that the development of a powerful accountability system has been hugely beneficial for teachers. It has clarified their mission for a start, rather than leaving them thinking they could be all things to all people, the solution to

every social and economic problem the country faces. It has made publicly clear over and over again that teachers make a difference, a point often forgotten in the preceding era. It is sometimes assumed that when there is, for example, a heavy intervention in a failing school, the message to the public about teachers is a negative one. In fact, the opposite is the case: such an intervention is a clear statement of the value of good teachers and good schools. It is the neglect of failure that undermines the public's perception of teachers.

There is another point too. The data generated by accountability is the key to enhancing professional knowledge about best practice. Accountability has therefore moved the whole concept of professionalism forward. Instead of a myriad of bottom-up boutique projects, which may or may not work and the lessons of which may or may not be disseminated, we now have the capacity through benchmarking not just for each school to identify its strengths and weaknesses but for the system to identify best practices and to invest in their systematic dissemination. This creates the foundation of a new, informed professionalism to which I shall return in the final section.

As an aside, my current work looking at the performance of other systems—health or policing, for example—strongly reinforces this point. In health, for example, we know that the patients of a surgeon who performs a routine operation 150 times a year will have much better survival rates than those of one who performs the same operation 50 times or fewer. This is an example of how, in medicine, the concept of “a reliable performance” is at the heart of the definition of the profession. The lack of this in my view was for many years the biggest single weakness at the heart of the teaching profession. For too long teachers were left to make it up for themselves. It was hard, if not impossible, to accumulate real professional knowledge and it was impossible to guarantee a basic minimum standard of service. Our daily literacy and numeracy hours in primary schools have made a major contribution in part because they begin to address this fundamental flaw. This would not have been possible in the absence of an effective accountability system.

The final and most important benefit of accountability for teachers is that it has created the possibility of a virtuous circle, connecting teachers to the public. In the 1970s and much of the 1980s, at least in England, it was as though teachers and the public lived in separate universes. Teachers thought they were misunderstood; the public wondered what on earth they were doing. I remember my friend and mentor Alan Evans saying to me that if a publication from a major teachers' organisation could not generate a single positive headline or editorial from a national newspaper, however good it may seem to insiders, it was doomed. This is where we found ourselves in the dark days of the mid-1980s. Accountability is the answer. It establishes goals which the public can understand and believe in; it provides feedback to the public so they can see the benefits of their investment; and because it causes the system to address its weaknesses, it creates continuous improvement which encourages the public to keep faith.

It is surely not an accident that the biggest and most sustained investment in education in British history—both capital and revenue—followed the introduction of clear accountability. When Alan and I worked in a teacher union in the 1980s, the chief message the union conveyed was: *“Everything’s falling apart . . . invest some money . . . and then (if you’re lucky) our members will improve education”*. This was fatally flawed because in response the public, not unreasonably, asked: *“Why should we invest in a failing service?”* It turned out that the answer, which Alan and I and many others were groping towards back then, was to turn the argument on its head: *“We’ll improve the education service; then you’ll see it is worth investing in”*.

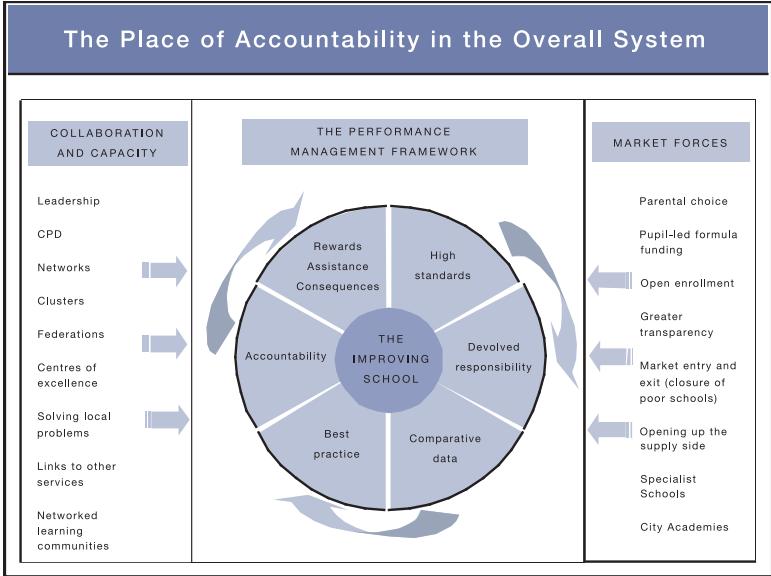
Once accountability is in place and serious, long-term investment starts to come, then it is in the interests of teachers and their leaders to talk up the service they work in, rather than talk it down as they have so often in the past. It is also essential for the money to be spent on evidence-based programmes so that results are delivered. If public servants continue to talk their own service down even when they experience the benefits of sustained investment, far from persuading the public to part with more of their hard-earned income in

taxation, the implicit message will be: “*The investment you’ve made is not working*”. In the UK the public service workforce and its leaders are only just catching up with the new reality. We are in the sixth year of what will be at least a decade of sustained real growth in health and education spending, both revenue and capital. The UK is the only OECD country where this is true. Moreover, the objective data shows irrefutably that this investment along with reform is delivering significantly improved outcomes not just in education but in health and the criminal justice system too. Yet when, for example, health service workers were asked recently what they thought of the governments’ reforms, though privately they were quite positive, they said they told their friends that they were damaging! Similarly, public sector leaders, instead of celebrating the impressive progress, often criticise their own services in the media in order to gain attention. The effect is to demoralise the workforce they purport to lead. Worse still, in the long run such cynicism will result in the slow but sure strangulation of public services by those who claim to be their most ardent advocates. What an irony that would be!

Why, as people get richer and increasing numbers can afford the private alternative, would they be willing to invest in any public service which the workforce says, in spite of 10 years of investment, is getting worse? In these circumstances they would reach the obvious conclusion that it would be mad to throw good money after bad and that no amount of investment could save the public sector. Then those who can afford it would go private and we would be left with public services which are a poor quality safety net for those who cannot afford the private alternative. In these circumstances, equity would become impossible. In short, accountability could be the salvation of public services and the professionals who work within them but, as with any major shift, whether the benefits are realised will depend on the quality of leadership both among the public sector workforce and in government.

SECTION 2: ACCOUNTABILITY AND SYSTEM REDESIGN

Having made the case for accountability in our education system. I want briefly to show how it is part of an overall system design.



The diagram illustrates this design. In the centre of the triptych is the performance management system. The six segments combine to drive continuous improvement. The National Curriculum sets standards for what children should know, understand and be able to do. The vast bulk of funding (around 90 per cent) is devolved to school principals who can deploy the funding as they see fit to achieve those standards. The testing system generates excellent pupil-based, comparative data so that schools can see how they compare to other similar schools and to the system as a whole. This enables them to set targets for future performance. The data also enable the system to identify best practices which can then be disseminated and adopted. In other words the system is enabled to learn. These four elements provide all schools with the capacity to succeed. The accountability

system—inspection and the publication of results—demonstrates whether or not they are indeed succeeding. Those that are, can be rewarded with leadership roles in the system, those that require assistance because of the circumstances they face can receive it and where there is demonstrable underperformance it can be tackled. This process of performance management, drawing on business models, works well. The steady improvement of outcomes in the English education system over recent years and the huge reduction in school failure is the result.

However, it is only part of the overall design. There are also (the left-hand panel of the triptych) arrangements, supported by government, which foster collaboration between schools. These are successful to varying degrees. We have seen successful and unsuccessful collaborations in health. The education system is still learning how best to promote collaboration (and much of it so far has been too loose to be effective) but there is no doubt that under the right conditions it is an important element of capacity-building. On the right-hand panel of the triptych are the policies which encourage competition: per pupil funding, parental choice, encouragement for the establishment of new schools, the expansion of good schools and so on. Each of these aspects of reform is worth a lecture on its own. The essential point here is to see accountability as just one (albeit very important) element of a comprehensive system redesign. This systemic approach to reform, with its elements acting in combination, is the key to further improvement in the performance of the system in future.

SECTION 3: ACCOUNTABILITY AND THE CASE FOR INSPECTION

Making the case for accountability and showing its place in an overall design, only raises a new set of questions about what kind of accountability system. The detail of the design is crucial. Indeed many of the arguments about accountability systems are inevitably and rightly about *how* rather than *whether*. The questions are numerous: if tests

are involved, what kind of tests? If the data are to be published, what precisely? Raw data or value-added? Benchmarks, minimum standards or rates of improvement? If intervention is required, who does it and how? And who ensures that standards are maintained consistently both across a system and over time so that comparisons are valid? Ever since the Thatcher government decided in 1988 to introduce strong external accountability in England, the debate about these *how?* questions has been continuous. The debate of course has moved on as the system has improved but controversy is never far away. It is worth outlining the current state of play.

Under the English system national tests, externally set, in English, maths and science are taken by all 11- and 14-year-olds. The tests themselves are internationally benchmarked and basically sound though there is an ongoing debate about the quality of marking of the 14-year-old English tests. The test results are published each year school-by-school in performance tables. These tables inform the public of the raw scores, the degree of value-added (based on pupil-level data), and the rate of improvement.

The key indicator of performance at age 11 is the percentage of pupils achieving Level 4 (which Americans would call Proficient) in English, maths and science. Obviously depending on their intake, some schools find it much easier to achieve a high figure than others, which seems harsh on the schools facing the greatest challenge. So why the emphasis on Level 4 as an indicator? Very simply because the evidence tells us that achieving Level 4 at 11 is the key to outcomes at 16 and success in the future. Moreover, the drive to achieve this high minimum standard incentivises the system to focus on those schools with furthest to go to achieve it. As a result the schools with the greatest challenge have received extra support and extra funding. In short, the raw results indicator drives equity. We are now bringing in a value-added indicator, showing the progress pupils make between age 7 and 11. This will not replace published raw scores but be additional to it. It will make explicit the contribution each school has made. But we should be clear: had we depended on a value-added indicator over

the last decade it is unimaginable that the distribution of funding and effort would have been so progressive.

For performance at age 14 the schools' results in English, maths and science tests are also published, again both a raw score (the percentage achieving Level 5) and a value-added indicator. At age 14, as at age 11, one critique of this approach is that it narrows the curriculum. While the National Curriculum, involving 10 subjects, is statutorily required, there is no doubt that the accountability system does lead schools to prioritise English, maths and science. This of course is the intention. The basics are the building blocks of progress in all subjects and therefore really are of greater importance.

My own observation would be contrary to the general critique. Even given the pressures of the accountability system, I do not think that many primary or secondary schools have yet prioritised English and maths sufficiently. The evidence tells us that performance in English at age 11 is the best predictor of performance in all subjects at age 16. We know that literacy levels at age 7 are a good predictor of income at age 37. We know that "time on task" is strongly correlated to improved performance. Yet, in spite of this, schools often do not spend enough time on English or maths. Before the age of 8, two hours a day on literacy as in Victoria, Australia, for example, ought to be a minimum for most children, yet many schools do only one. The literacy hour demanded by the National Literacy Strategy is a floor not a ceiling. Some primary schools do not provide extra support for pupils who fall behind their peers and, as a result, the system pays a high price later. Similarly, in some secondary schools, pupils as much as two years behind their chronological reading age are offered an identical curriculum to their more successful peers even though the language in the textbooks and the assignments they are expected to produce are far beyond them. When you ask school principals why they do not provide extra support in the basics to such pupils, they say it causes timetabling problems! In other words, they put administrative convenience ahead of educational necessity. No wonder behaviour and truancy problems result.

At age 16 our students take public exams in a range of subjects. These are the first exams which are “high stakes” for the pupils since they determine progression to college and eventually to university. The published indicator here is the percentage of pupils achieving five higher grades in these exams, regardless of which subjects. Since this level of achievement has long been associated with access to the A-Level exam at 18 and therefore to university entrance, it has much to be said for it. But undoubtedly it undervalues the importance of English and maths, a matter currently of some debate in England where universities and employers still rightly complain that standards in the basics are too low. We have seen huge improvements in literacy and numeracy at primary school level in the last eight years and when the current generation of school pupils reaches adulthood, I have no doubt employers and universities will see the difference. Even so, a change in the indicator at age 16 to require high standards in English and maths would help reinforce this progress and reassure the public.

From 1997 on, the government introduced a further element of the accountability system, namely target-setting. This requires schools annually to set published targets for future performance. They do so after examining annual benchmark data, circulated to every school, and being challenged by their local authority on the degree of ambition. In the best cases, this involves schools assessing ambitiously what they will be able to achieve pupil-by-pupil. This focus through target-setting on each individual pupil and what they might achieve is the basis of personalised learning.

One criticism of the tests, exams, targets and published results which needs constant attention is the accusation that standards over time are being allowed to slip to show government in a better light. This argument is beloved of the elitists, a powerful strand of thinking in England, who believe that talent is a zero sum, and that if more pupils pass an exam this can only be because the standard has dropped. For this group, the possibility that teaching might improve, schools get better and successive generations of children achieve more

is discounted. Indeed, they normally argue the contrary, that standards of pretty much everything are on the slide and any evidence to the contrary must result from manipulation. In order to rebut this case, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, which regulates the tests and exams, is independent of government; the results of the tests are benchmarked against international comparisons; and periodically the process of setting and marking tests and exams is subjected to independent enquiry. For both educators and government this is a constant battle. The evidence shows with increasing clarity that in England we have made dramatic improvements in primary education in recent years. At secondary level the picture is more mixed, showing incremental progress and some impressive gains in areas of disadvantage but also failure rates at ages 14, 16 and 18 which are still far too high.

There are some objections to an accountability system based purely on test and exam results which are much harder to rebut. The first and most important is that schools have broader goals than literacy, numeracy and academic achievement. Even as a passionate advocate of standards and accountability, I fully accept that this is the case. Our moral purpose demands much more than this. We want our schools to teach young people the values of a modern, democratic and diverse society and to know how to resolve differences peacefully. We want them to learn to take responsibility for their actions and to contribute to their school as a community. We want them to develop self-confidence and self-discipline, the qualities on which they will depend as they make their way through the uncertainties of 21st-century life. And we want them to grow up aware not just of themselves and their own community but of the world around them and the fragile planet which they inhabit. Even the most refined testing system could not possibly capture all of this, yet if we value these outcomes, can we afford to leave them to chance? It is in this context that an effective inspection system becomes extremely valuable. If it is well designed it really can hold schools to account for these wider, less easily measured goals.

This alone in my view justifies a robust, independent, evidence-based inspection system, but a number of other points reinforce the case. An inspection system provides an effective a means of evaluating policy implementation. If a government introduces a new policy and depends on test results to measure its effectiveness, it is likely to have to wait a long time, perhaps even several years, to know whether its policy is working. An inspection system, by contrast, is able to provide much more rapid feedback. It can comment on teachers' reaction to the policy. It can examine whether or not it is beginning to affect the quality of teaching. It can assess the extent of implementation. These are lead indicators of future test results. In September 1998 we introduced our National Literacy Strategy in primary schools, which involved training all 190,000 primary teachers to teach a daily literacy hour and to use a detailed curriculum framework which set out an evidence-based sequence of phonics, grammar and text. It was highly controversial at the time in spite of the positive evidence from the pilot areas. It was also the government's top priority. The first time I became confident it was working was in November 1998, just two months after it had been introduced, when I spent three hours with a group of inspectors who had spent their time in primary schools that autumn. Yet the significant beneficial impact on test results was not clear for another year. If I had waited till then for feedback it would have been too late to identify any flaws and, incidentally, played into the hands of the critics of the strategy. This is tactically crucial because even a well-designed and potentially successful major change will often face a whirlwind of criticism in its early months before it begins to prove its worth.

Moreover, inspection can also act, as it did in the case of the National Literacy Strategy, as an enforcement mechanism. The literacy hour was not legally mandated. Instead, the government said that schools should either adopt it as a proven best practice or demonstrate that what they had chosen to do was equally effective. With 6,000 schools being inspected every year there was a means of checking what schools actually did month-by-month. Indeed, inspection

brings literal accountability—school principals and teachers have to give an account of what they are doing. For many the threat of future inspection brought compliance in the early stages of implementation; then once the classroom benefits of the literacy hour became clear, teachers' hearts and minds were won over.

Another major system-level gain provided by inspection is that it helps to explain what lies behind changes in the performance of the system. The key to improving performance, as we have always known, lies in the quality of classroom teaching. Accountability systems which depend purely on test results leave the teaching quality question for principals and teachers to work through for themselves. As inspection system, by contrast, provides a focus on teaching quality, a means of identifying what works, a common language in which to discuss pedagogy and an effective means of disseminating best practice. It provides the information for a powerful national database on teaching quality which we could probably use more effectively than we do.

Also, inspection enables a much more refined approach to dealing with school failure. Intervention in schools which are seriously underperforming—enabled by the development of accountability—has been hugely beneficial, but where the system depends purely on test results it risks being far too crude. Our interventions in failing schools, which include in some cases closure and replacement of the school and often a change of school leadership, are driven by the inspection system. Where a team of inspectors judges a school to be failing (“in need of special measures”, as the legal euphemism puts it), a second team of inspectors follows up shortly afterwards to corroborate the judgement. This process enables real analysis not just of whether performance is poor but also why. In addition, it enables the system to identify and tackle failure even where it is masked by temporarily reasonable test results.

Once a school is in special measures, the inspectors return three times a year. Often within a year or eighteen months they are able to give a school a clean bill of health. Our evidence suggests that in these

circumstances the expertise of the inspectors is hugely appreciated. For the principal and staff these visits are simultaneously both challenging and beneficial. They provide an expert commentary to the school on what is happening. There is feedback on the impact of changes in leadership, standards of attendance and behaviour, staff morale, and the systems in place for marking work, dealing with pupils with special educational needs and so on. These again are the lead indicators which point to improvements in test scores in future. A system depending purely on test scores both for intervening and for deciding whether the intervention has worked has no such subtlety.

Finally, a strong independent system of inspection enables not only the education service to be held to account but also government itself. Our inspection agency inspects not just schools but entire government programmes. As someone who has worked for government these last 7½ years I can recall numerous occasions when I have braced myself for the publication of an inspection report critical of a programme for which I have been responsible. The Chief Inspector's annual report, a kind of state of the union message on education, also often makes uncomfortable reading for ministers and officials. This is as it should be. Government too should feel the full glare of accountability. I know for myself that in response to such public criticism, I set out to improve the programme in question so the result of accountability of government is often better public policy, just as for schools it is improved performance.

SECTION 4: INSPECTION NOW AND IN THE FUTURE

Since the 19th century, England has had a person with the title Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools, who has at his or her disposal a slightly mysterious group known as Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI). Until the early 1990s these people were the eyes and ears of government in the system, publishing periodic reports and inspecting the occasional school. Many teachers could expect to go years, perhaps an entire career, without meeting one of these august figures. Our present

inspection system dates from 1992 when the then-Conservative government, with Labour support, passed legislation that simultaneously required the publication of test results school-by-school and the establishment of a new independent education regulator, the Office for Standards in Education which became known as Ofsted. Her Majesty's Chief Inspector was to head the agency and publish an annual report on the performance of the system. He (since 1992 it has always been a man) was also required to establish a system that ensured every school in England (about 23,000) would be inspected at least once every four years.

So the system began. Ofsted contracted out the inspections to a series of companies that carried them out. Each school inspection was undertaken by a team led by a Registered Inspector, who had to demonstrate the necessary skills and experience. Thus Ofsted, rather than inspecting schools itself, monitored the quality of inspections, analysed the results and regulated the system. HMI, Ofsted's full-time employees, carried out these roles and also undertook thematic inspections on particular government programmes or aspects of education. They also provided training for inspectors.

The inspection of each school checked that the National Curriculum was being taught and reported on a school's performance under four headings:

- standards;
- quality of teaching;
- quality of leadership and management;
- the social, moral, spiritual and cultural aspects of the school.

Inspection took place against an inspection framework, which in effect, defined and described a good school under these four headings. The framework thus explicitly required inspection of those wider goals of education I mentioned earlier. The inspection itself took about a week. For a large school it might involve over 40 inspector days, with the inspectors spending the bulk of their time observing lessons. The head received oral feedback on the last day of inspection.

The reports, school-by-school, were published shortly after the inspection and a summary of the report sent to every parent with a child at the school. The system therefore strengthened the school's accountability to parents and provided them with information on which to base school choice. In addition, because it was introduced at the same time as funding was devolved to schools, the inspection system strengthened the quasi-market which continues to operate.

Since its establishment, just over a decade ago, there is no doubt that Ofsted has been a huge influence on the system. In my view it has probably been the single biggest lever in improving the system over that decade. Its development has had four phases, each associated with the person who was Chief Inspector. The first was Stewart Sutherland, a softly spoken university vice-chancellor, who cajoled and calmed teacher leaders into believing the inspection system might work. He set Ofsted in motion calmly and effectively.

His successor, Chris Woodhead, put it firmly on the map. Chris was a trenchant critic of the system at the time, a man who believed the agenda had shifted too far away from good, traditional classroom teaching and who despaired at the failure to provide high standards of reading, writing and arithmetic. He also railed against the local education authorities and university departments of education which he believed had dragged the system into a relativist quagmire where poor performance was blamed on the children. He made his name as Chief Inspector by stating that he thought there were 15,000 failing teachers and by goading into debate some of the system's leading lights. He claimed to speak on behalf of frustrated parents and positioned Ofsted as the consumer champion. Though he had been appointed under the Conservatives he was held in high regard by new Labour and stayed in post for the first three years of the Blair government after which time he resigned. In fact, he was critical of ministers and officials in both Conservative and Labour governments and accountable to neither. This lack of accountability is the inevitable consequence of the brave and correct decision to make the Chief Inspector an independent figure. He was highly controversial and

never the easiest person to deal with. (I know because between 1997 and 2001 it was my job to manage the relationship between government and the Chief Inspector.) It would not be too strong to say that many teachers feared him. He was unnecessarily provocative sometimes and courted publicity—often, it seemed, for its own sake. Nevertheless, I have no doubt that over the period in office he was a force for good. He and I were allies in advocating the robust approach to school failure which has done much to improve performance in some of our most disadvantaged communities. At the very least, it has made sure that the system has to tackle failure rather than sweep it under the carpet. He and I were allies too in improving literacy and numeracy in primary schools. I have no doubt that when the history is written he will be seen as one of the most influential educators of the 1990s, not least because he dared to say what many others only thought.

Under Woodhead the first cycle of inspection (i.e., every school was inspected at least once) was completed on time in 1998 and the second cycle embarked upon. His more emollient successor Mike Tomlinson implemented a refined system which lengthened the period between inspections for the evidently successful schools and inspected them with a lighter touch. The less successful a school was, the more regularly and the more thoroughly it was inspected. Thus the principle of proportionality was introduced. Meanwhile, there were successive revisions of the framework, though its broad content changed only incrementally.

While the system had the benefits I have identified, it also had defects. Especially in the early days the inspection process generated extensive bureaucracy. In order to meet the demands of the framework, schools found themselves preparing policies on everything from equal opportunities to health and safety, forgetting that in fact a policy is not a piece of paper but something you do. Partly because of the anxiety Chris Woodhead generated and partly because of the consequences of a poor inspection report, schools over-prepared. The notice period for an inspection was often several months. Even when

this was reduced to a few weeks it still left schools a long anxious wait during which they inevitably spent too much time preparing for the inspection rather than paying attention to the real task of teaching children.

A second criticism concerned the quality and consistency of inspection. Inevitably there were variations between teams of inspectors, not just in the judgements they reached but in the way they expressed them in reports. In fact, Ofsted's process for ensuring consistency was sound and became better over time. What worried me most (and is a worry in relation to all regulatory functions) is that sometimes Ofsted inspectors failed to keep up with the pace of change. In a rapidly changing system, the most advanced practice will be found among the best frontline leaders. Sometimes Ofsted inspectors, who were mostly worthy (but not necessarily brilliant) former school practitioners, fell behind this cutting edge and became barriers to its progress. For example, there were some inspection teams which failed to recognise a good literacy hour when they saw one. The reverse was true too. Because of the consequences not just for the school but also, in workload terms, for the inspection team, of finding a school in need of special measures, inspectors sometimes erred on the bland side in reaching their judgements about poor practice. This meant that when schools were challenged by government to set more ambitious targets, they were sometimes able to point to an inspection report declaring their standards and quality of teaching to be "satisfactory" (a favourite catch-all among inspectors), even though benchmark data showed this was palpably not the case.

A further problem was that the published reports on each school, which are to be found on the internet, rapidly date. The best schools act rapidly to deal with criticism from inspectors, having welcomed the external perspective. Meanwhile, during the six years until their next inspection, the picture of the school on the web remains unaltered. This is not just unfair to the school, it also means that Ofsted reports are often misleading for parents who study them avidly as part of making their school choice. Similarly the schools

with the most critical reports are required to act quickly to correct flaws but have no means of correcting the public picture. Paradoxically it is the schools in the middle of the performance spectrum who probably suffer least from the long gap between inspections. The criticisms are hidden behind inspectorial euphemisms and the action that follows is less prompt and effective than in other cases, so the blurred picture stays truer for longer!

Finally, there is a question about the cost of the inspection system. Across government we currently have an efficiency drive designed to reduce the central and local government overhead and push as much resource as possible to the frontline. The aim is that as far as possible the rising investment in public services should be spent where it makes most difference to the citizen. Since inspectorates across the public services are part of the overhead, the challenge to each inspectorate is to increase effectiveness while reducing costs.

For all these reasons, the current Chief Inspector, David Bell, is in the process of bringing about the most substantial reform of the inspection system since the establishment of Ofsted more than a decade ago. His proposals are part of a wider, very radical reform of the accountability system which the government is taking forward. In addition to the published performance tables, there will be a published school profile. The profile will set out the school's results, both raw and value-added, and include benchmark data comparing it to other similar schools. It will include the school's published targets for future performance and the latest overall judgements from school inspection. It will also succinctly describe the school's vision and plans. In total, it will be no more than four pages with the key data summarised on the cover sheet. The profile will be updated annually.

To be of value to parents, the inspection judgements in the profile need to be recent. The plan is therefore for every school to be inspected at least once every three years. Little notice will be provided of the date of an inspection. Schools will not have time to over-prepare. Each school will annually conduct a thorough self-evaluation, using the inspection framework. The inspection itself will take this as

a starting point. It will therefore require far fewer inspector days but also far sharper inspectors, who are rapidly able to deconstruct any self-evaluation which is designed to hide rather than reveal problems. Where the inspectors question the effectiveness of the self-evaluation, a much fuller external inspection would follow rapidly. This process—due for implementation in 2005—is much less labour intensive (involving between 4 and 11 inspector days per school rather than 23–44 days under the current system) and therefore a smaller number of inspectors will be required. This means that full-time, experienced and well-trained HMI can lead almost all inspections with fewer being contracted out. This should help to increase both quality and consistency.

From a school's point of view the new approach to accountability should have benefits too. Parents will have a more accurate picture. Self-evaluation will be enhanced, something school leaders have long sought. In addition, the introduction of the school-level, three-year budget from 2006 will give each school a much longer planning horizon. The purely administrative step of moving from a one-year budget to a three-year budget has, in my view, enormous potential and is a truly radical step, not least because it takes a long running excuse off the table and tilts the whole agenda towards continuous school improvement. Three-year funding in health is already bringing benefits.

The link between these developments will be brought about through what we are calling "*the single conversation*". The idea is that once a year the school principal will meet a "school improvement partner" (who will be a headteacher from a successful school trained in the challenge role and familiar with the data on system performance) and negotiate agreed targets for improved future performance in return for not just the core budget, but any additional funds for specific projects, appropriate for that school. The aim is a sharp, tailored process of accountability and resource allocation.

There are major risks in the introduction of this radical new relationship with schools, which is why the various aspects of it are

currently being piloted. One risk is that the system will become over-dependent on self-evaluation. Self-evaluation is an essential and valuable process but its flaws are well known—a tendency to give the benefit of the doubt and the possibility that something appears good to insiders simply because they are not aware of better practices that have been adopted elsewhere. The external inspection should minimise these risks but because of the reduction in inspector days, it remains to be seen whether inspectors will be able to reach robust judgements on the quality of teaching, the key variable in driving performance. At the very least the new system places a high premium on the skills of inspectors themselves and therefore has implications for their selection, training and development. The new inspection process is currently being tested and the early evidence is good but not yet conclusive. Another risk is that the school improvement partners, being school principals themselves, will be insufficiently challenging in their negotiations with their peers and insufficiently ambitious for the system as a whole. For those in this role too, the details of selection, training and performance management will be decisive. A great deal is at stake in the next year as the government seeks to bring about a new relationship with schools, which enables continuous improvement in outcomes and greater equity.

SECTION 5: INFORMED PROFESSIONALISM AND INCENTIVES

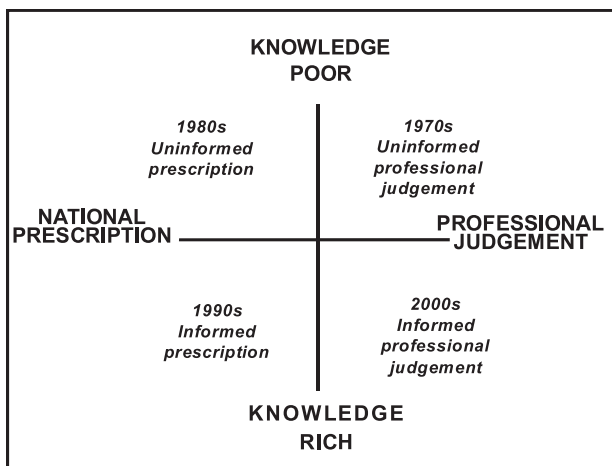
Lying behind these significant changes in accountability is a major underpinning assumption in government, namely that the system has reached a new level of maturity; that performance improvement no longer needs to be driven with such vigour from top down because leaders and teachers within the system have the will and the means to drive improvement themselves while government provides strategic direction and resources and creates the circumstances within which this bottom-up drive for improvement can take place. This is the basis for the new relationship with schools.

The thinking behind this shift was provided in significant part by the concept of *informed professionalism* which I developed in 2001 as part of an attempt to envision the next stage of reform. Between 1997 and 2001, the government led from the centre and on key issues—literacy, numeracy or school failure, for example—was unapologetically prescriptive. It took the view, given the evidence, that only through such central direction could significant system-wide progress be made at sufficient speed. The benefits were two-fold: improved outcomes within a short space of time and a new belief among the public and educators that progress was possible.

In taking this approach, the government was building on what had gone before. Until the mid-1980s what happened in schools and classrooms was left almost entirely to the teachers to decide. However, at the time no means were in place to ensure effective practice was identified, disseminated and universally adopted. In short, the system as a whole had no means of learning effectively. Almost all teachers had goodwill and many sought to develop themselves professionally but, through no fault of its own, the profession as a whole was uninformed. The response of the Thatcher government in the mid-1980s to the evidently underperforming system was to centralise. But, ironically, it too was in no position to prescribe on the basis of real knowledge because the system generated so little good evidence or data. The result was that we moved from a system of uninformed professional judgement to one of uninformed prescription (see diagram).

However, as a result of the reforms of the late 80s and early 90s—especially the National Curriculum, national testing and independent inspection—the potential for the system to become informed was established. The data and therefore the evidence about best practice have become steadily more powerful.

The Blair government, after its election in 1997, was able to exploit this opportunity. It used the emerging evidence to inform and justify its hard-hitting approach to school failure, for example. It also used this evidence—as well as international research—to inform its literacy and numeracy strategies at primary school level. In addition



it was able to monitor the implementation of policy better than ever before and was therefore able to refine and strengthen implementation as it proceeded. In short, the 1997–2001 Blair government inherited a system of uninformed prescription and replaced it with one of informed prescription.

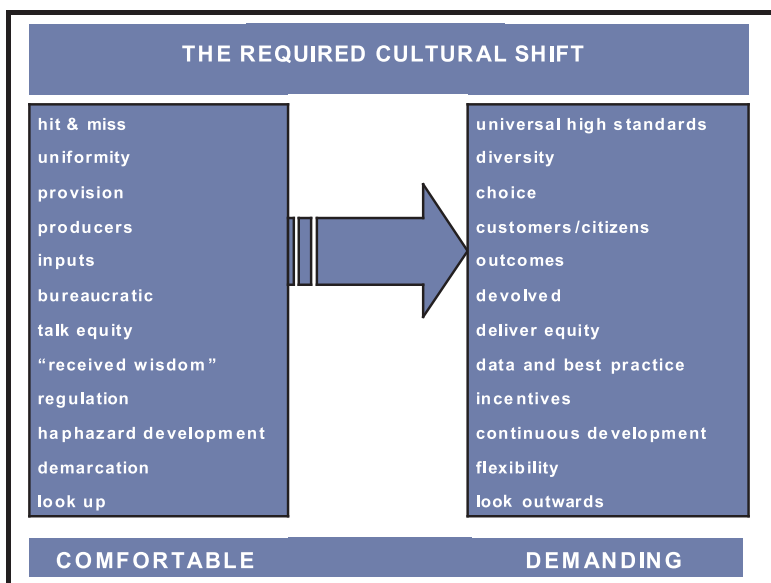
This worked remarkably well for a while. It was an important and necessary stage but it had a downside: teachers perceived the changes as imposed from outside and worried about the degree to which they could tailor and adapt the government’s materials to their own purposes. Moreover, in a fast-moving, large, complex system confidence, innovation and creativity at the frontline—where the service meets the customer—is of vital importance. Centrally driven policies, however good, cannot by definition deliver these characteristics.

Hence the need for the next shift: from informed prescription to informed professional judgement. Bringing this about requires radical change in the way both government and schools function and hence the new relationship.

One of the ironies of thinking aloud while working for government is that simply by describing a possible concept of the future you make it more likely to occur! Informed professionalism, which I first floated in November 2001, was pounced upon not just by those seek-

ing to move to the next stage but also by those who wanted to unwind the previous decade. They emphasised “professionalism” but played down the “informed” element of the concept. They argued that informed professionalism required a weakening of the accountability system when in fact it required it to be stronger and more precise. They argued for a return to teachers making it up in their own classroom whereas informed professionalism required persistent analysis of the data and the adoption of practice on the basis of evidence. They misunderstood creativity and failed to realise the discipline it involved. They argued that for inspection it meant a shift from “hard” to “soft” when the shift that was really required was “blunt” to “sharp”. In fact, informed professionalism is an extremely demanding concept, above all because it removes the excuses and places responsibility for outcomes firmly in the hands of teachers. The following table illustrates the cultural shift required.

As I discover whenever I meet groups of teachers and principals, many have grasped this shift and see its value, if the public are to



remain willing to invest ever larger sums in the education service. Even so, I now wonder whether I promoted this concept several years too early. The central drive for improved performance, far from having run its course by the year 2001, had only just begun. Even now, while literacy and numeracy standards are much higher than they were, they are far short of where they need to be and the very concept of accountability is still contested. Nor is it clear to me that the undoubted progress of the last decade is irreversible. It remains to be seen whether the system is ready for informed professionalism, the single conversation and an inspection system which places so much weight on self-evaluation. The combination is potentially transformative and, if it succeeds, will light the way for other systems to follow, but the leadership it requires both from teachers and principals on the one hand and government on the other is highly sophisticated. In the next year or so we will discover whether this leadership capacity is present in sufficient depth or whether the gains of the last decade will begin to unravel. Fortunately though, it is not a question of waiting to see what happens. The good news is that it is up to us; we can seize the opportunity if we wish. The key will be to incentivise an ambitious interpretation of the emerging agenda.

It has been instructive for me in my present role to become familiar with the dramatic reform of our health service which is being taken forward in parallel with the education reform. In many ways the two reforms are based on similar assumptions. In the last three years the health reforms have probably moved further and faster than any other reforms in England and the improvement in performance has been steady and significant. A comparison of our health reform with our education reform reveals many similarities but also significant differences, particularly in relation to choice and the use of financial incentives. Patient choice in health, with the money following the patient, does have parallels in the school system where money follows the pupil but in schools the market is still relatively inflexible. A parent cannot easily and routinely move a child from one school to another whereas it is perfectly plausible to make a different choice

each time medical treatment is required. Moreover, the supply-side reforms, such as opening up the possibility of new independent suppliers, have moved further and faster in health. So the quasi-market mechanism is currently having a more powerful impact in the health sector than in the education sector. This is being addressed through further potentially radical supply-side reforms in education but these will take time to introduce.

The difference in relation to incentives is starker still. In the health service it is assumed by both government and health service professionals, that financial incentives drive behaviour. The discussion between them is about the nature of those incentives. Thus consultant surgeons are increasingly receiving a fee-for-service while general practitioners are rewarded financially for meeting government-set objectives. Similarly, there are incentives for institutions, such as hospitals, to achieve system-wide goals. Once these positive incentives begin to work alongside the negative incentives (of external intervention, leadership change, etc.) which are working in both health and education, it is possible for the system to drive its own improvement without constant top-down edict. In short, payment by results is an accepted concept and all the evidence suggests it is beginning to work. This in turn means that both managers and professionals in health have the incentive to strengthen their practice (i.e., to become informed) because the system rewards them not just for avoiding outright failure but also for improving continuously. Bluntly, in health informed professionalism pays.

Contrast this with education. While every school has a strong incentive to avoid outright failure, the incentives for continuous improvement for schools in the middle (or above) of the performance spectrum are much less apparent. Recently proposed reforms do begin to address this weakness by offering every secondary school the opportunity to take on a curriculum specialism along with extra resource. In American terms every secondary school which meets the required standards can become a magnet school and receive roughly 5 per cent extra per-pupil funding. Moreover, each secondary school

that already has a specialism can take on further responsibilities and opportunities (and be funded to do so) after five successful years in the programme. Even once these reforms are in place though, the incentive effect will be much less sharp and influential than it already is in health. Moreover, these reforms do not apply to primary schools. Nor do any of the proposals in the current education reform come close to matching the incentives provided in health for individuals to improve their performance.

The explanation for this stark contrast is in part cultural. Whereas belief in financial incentives is embedded in the health community, the immediate reaction of most in education circles is to argue that they will be “divisive” and therefore fail to work. I am constantly told that financial incentives cannot be motivational in education. It is as if health professionals and education professionals belong to different species! One irony of this debate is that where financial incentives have been used in education they have worked excellently. Teacher recruitment, for example, has been transformed in the last three years by offering financial incentives at variable rates according to the degree of shortage in a given subject.

In the year 2000 the government introduced the School Achievement Award Scheme, which provided a lump sum financial reward each year to about a third of all schools which either achieved excellence in relation to benchmark groups or improved rapidly. The schools’ governors could distribute the money among the staff as they chose. I was a passionate advocate of the scheme, which was inevitably controversial. There was rough justice at the edges of the categories and two-thirds of schools each year did not get the bonus, so the majority had cause to complain in any given year. Of course, it was divisive too; that is the point of rewarding performance. Then there was an administrative blunder which resulted in a few schools receiving an award to which they were not entitled. Red-faced officials called these schools in vain to ask for the money back.

For these reasons after two years of controversy the scheme was withdrawn. It was assumed that it was unpopular but this was only

because the defenders of the status quo almost always shout loudest. Interestingly, I meet more and more school principals these days who would like to see a scheme along these lines reintroduced but with a new prospective element. Schools, they argue, should be challenged to set demanding improvement targets and be rewarded handsomely when they do. They suggest reasonably that this would be entirely consistent with three-year funding, the new inspection system and the single conversation. Inevitably the principals that make this case are the most successful ones. Many less successful principals would no doubt oppose such a scheme, which merely raises a question about which principals policymakers should take more seriously. I predict that government will find increasingly over the coming years that informed professionals will demand rewards for success and that responding to this demand may turn out to be the key to ensuring the success of informed professionalism.

The leadership challenge for teachers and principals is to respond to the opportunity of informed professionalism not just because it will enable the achievement of their moral purpose—improved performance and greater equity—but also because it is the best guarantee they have that the taxpayer will remain willing to invest in their service. The leadership challenge for government is to set and stick to a small number of clear priorities, to design programmes on the basis of evidence, to continue to invest substantially in education because it is so fundamental to all our futures and to refine the emerging system of informed professionalism so that it powerfully incentivises (at both individual and institutional level) continuous improvement.

The challenge for all of us, is to enable the education service to play its increasingly important part in the creation of a society which is economically successful, socially cohesive, democratically vibrant and able to contribute to making the world a better place. Our experience suggests a powerful and sophisticated inspection system has a major part to play in achieving those objectives. ❧

Postscript

I am grateful to the School of Education at Boston University for the invitation to deliver the Inaugural Edwin J. Delattre Lecture. It is a great privilege and I hope the lecture makes a contribution both to honouring Edwin J. Delattre and to setting a standard for my successors in the series to improve upon. I am also grateful to have been asked to lecture on the themes of inspection and accountability about which I have trenchant views, as I hope this article has made clear.

I would like to thank the staff in the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit who are a constant source of learning and inspiration and especially those who work with me on education, Richard Page-Jones, Simon Rea, Simon Day and Kieran Brett. Tony O'Connor and Kate Myronidis who have worked with me on countless presentations, lectures and publications, including this one, are the most supportive and challenging colleagues imaginable and this publication is an opportunity for me to pay tribute to them.

Finally, I would like to express gratitude to many colleagues working in public education not just in the UK but in many other countries including the USA and Russia. Everything I know, I learnt from them. None of the above though are responsible for any errors of fact, style or judgement in the lecture. Responsibility for these is mine alone.

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