



POLICY CHALLENGE

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INSPECTING SCHOOLS: BREAKING THE MONOPOLY

John Burchill

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The author

John Burchill taught in primary, secondary and special schools and worked with Heads and teachers in more than half the LEAs in the country before becoming an LEA inspector. He has held four inspectorate posts in three LEAs over the last ten years. In 1989 he was appointed Chief Education Inspector in the newly formed London Borough of Wandsworth Education Department.

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Introduction

The external inspection of schools and colleges maintained by a local education authority (LEA) takes place in two ways. Local councils employ education inspectors and advisers to monitor schools within their control and Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) monitor education nationally. HMI in England report to the Secretary of State for Education and Science and in Wales to the Secretary of State for Wales. Local inspectors report to the chief education officer and the elected members of the Council.

There is some overlap since HMI inspect schools which are also monitored by LEA inspectors. There is no formal agreement between HMI and LEAs to co-ordinate their respective monitoring arrangements for schools and the overall picture of inspection is patchy. In 1989 there were about 480 HMI in post in England and Wales¹. Reporting on individual schools is only one aspect of their work. In 1989-90 19 such reports were published on primary schools, 63 on secondary schools and 8 on special schools². In 1987-1988 CIPFA (Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accounts) Education Estimates recorded a total of 2,504 LEA inspectors and advisers employed by the 104 LEAs³. A recent Audit Commission survey showed that 53 out of 60 LEA inspectorates spent less than a third of the time on the observation of teaching⁴. Over the country as a whole it appears that objective and rigorous external monitoring and reporting on schools is the exception rather than the rule.

1. *HMI - Its Work and Publications*, DES 1989.

2. *Standards in Education 1989-90*, DES 1991

3. *Assuring Quality in Education - The Role of Local Education Authority Inspectors and Advisers*, HMSO 1989.

4. *Ibid.*

1.

The problem

During the next few months, the Government is to consider the future of school inspection. There is scepticism about the role and influence of HMI and LEA inspectorates in monitoring the work of schools, and concern that they are preoccupied more with imposing recent theories than with reporting on standards in education. Reports are thought to be too vague and often based on personal judgement unsupported by hard evidence.

The Secretary of State has already announced a review of HMI. Their role and that of local inspectorates (indeed, even whether they should have any role in the future) has become a matter of urgency because of the number of schools expected to opt out after the next election -- and also because of the imminent reform of local government.

This paper suggests that no single inspectorate, either LEA or HMI, should have a monopoly of inspection over any given school. It may not be necessary for every LEA to maintain an inspectorate in the way they do at present; and some of those now employed as inspectors may not be the most appropriate people to inspect in the future. An alternative is to have a series of competing inspectorates, operating as consultants, licensed and empowered to inspect schools according to clear criteria. These might include some independent inspectorates and some linked to an LEA. They would compete for the custom of schools. The paper suggests that regulations requiring schools to submit to inspection, and criteria for inspecting schools could be issued centrally, possibly by a reformed and streamlined national inspectorate, a successor to HMI.

Grant maintained (GM) schools and City Technology Colleges (CTCs), are two pillars of an education policy designed to provide greater choice and variety of schools, and thereby to raise standards. There will be a great interest in the efficiency of schools which have opted out of local authority control. But the need for accountability must not impose undue constraints on the freedom which is crucial to the success of the new schools -- whose emergence indeed reflects among other things a lack of confidence in the way in which schools have been held accountable in the past and in how well they have been monitored, both nationally and locally.

2.

The solution

The options

The review of HMI recently announced by the Secretary of State has brought the issue into focus. One option would be to continue with the existing system. But even before significant numbers of schools opt out of local education authority control there are too few HMI to make regular visits and reports on individual schools.

Another suggestion is that HMI should be expanded so that they can inspect all opted out schools regularly and frequently. They already have a right in law to inspect independent as well as maintained schools. Expansion, however, is not an attractive solution, if only on the grounds of doubts about the independence and objectivity of HMI; there is not much confidence in their reports as a basis for improving schools. So the dangers are obvious in strengthening one central, all-powerful body enjoying a monopoly on national monitoring.

A third option is for the HMI to be re-established and re-named as an independent body, with some of the characteristics of the Audit Commission. It would be concerned more with oversight of inspection arrangements by other bodies than with itself observing the process of teaching and learning in schools. It would be responsible for authorising or licensing inspecting bodies and approving local arrangements for inspection according to clear criteria to do with the collection and publication of information about pupil assessment, attendance figures and examination results.

How the new arrangements would work

Consistent and systematic inspection would then be carried out by small consultancy teams, either independent or linked to LEAs. These teams should not be recruited solely from the teaching profession, as is almost always the case with HMI and LEA inspectors at the moment. They might include representatives from other professions, business, industry or finance who could demonstrate an understanding of how to control quality in public services. If existing local inspectorates or advisory services wished to undertake this work, they, like the independent teams, would need to meet statutory requirements set out in DES regulations and to be licensed by the new national inspectorate.

The local teams would be professional consultant inspectors. Whether independent or LEA, they would need to understand the financial policy and the strategies for running a school. In addition they would need to master quickly and thoroughly information about the composition of the school and the area from which pupils are drawn.

They would need to make more effective use than they do at the moment of information which already exists, applying research and statistical methods to school performance and improvement as objectively as possible. Findings would be presented in terms of input and output measures, relating the ability and attainment of pupils on entry to the school to their achievements as measured by assessment and examination.

The DES regulations would ensure that the inspectorate, whether independent or attached to one of the local education authorities of the future would:-

- i) be able to offer inspection services to schools in different LEAs and to opted out GM schools and CTCs;
- ii) be able to compete with other LEA inspectorates and independent local inspectorates for contracts to inspect; and,
- iii) be subject to regulations governing the criteria for local inspection.

In such a scheme regulations would be required to ensure that all schools submitted to inspection according to established criteria. Schools would present their health and safety procedures for inspection as well as their accounts so that the areas of standards, money and safety would be open to scrutiny. This would, for example, help to prevent schools spending money on additional equipment before either making essential improvements to safety measures in laboratories and workshops or appointing staff in areas where they were most needed to improve the quality of education in a particular subject.

Schools would be able to select the team to carry out inspections as required by regulations. They would pay for this out of their devolved budget, possibly from earmarked DES funding within the scheme for 'Grants for Education Support and Training (GEST)'. Governors would also be able to commission additional inspections for different aspects of schools' work not covered by statutory requirements, for example, to assess whether a department could offer an additional foreign language, or to investigate a department where examination results were poor.

LEAs may also wish to monitor aspects of their service not covered by regulations for which they could use their own inspectors (if they employed a team), or buy in from independent inspectorates or other LEAs.

External inspection would be objective, characterised by the collection of data and factual reporting and inspecting. The inspectors would be obliged to report and would have no brief to expound particular views or theories of education.

4.

A model for local inspectorates in the future

The Wandsworth Inspectorate

Wandsworth Council has already taken some steps which would enable its education inspectorate to compete in the open market. It recognises that the main accountability for standards in educational establishments rests with the Head or Principal. The prime function of inspectors is to monitor, record, analyse and report. Inspectors must in turn be fully accountable to those who contract for their services. A business plan for loaning equipment and books to schools has been developed, with schools buying into the service from their devolved budget. Contracts for in-service teacher training and internal school inspection have been negotiated with other LEAs and with non-maintained schools, as well as with Wandsworth schools. The rates for these services are negotiable within a framework set out by the Council. The foundation has been laid for the inspectorate, regardless of whether it remains an LEA inspectorate, to inspect and report on schools on a business-like basis in the terms which implementation of the Education Reform Act will require.

Wandsworth inspectors work to a clear brief designed to establish:

- i) that pupils are making progress according to the evidence collected in inspections;
- ii) that schools comply with the statutory curriculum and local curriculum policies;
- iii) whether the short and long term academic⁵ and financial aims of schools and colleges are set out in a way allowing for checks on decisions about spending *vis-à-vis* targets for improvement in the curriculum;
- iv) whether factual evidence exists about standards of performance in schools and colleges and whether they are being maintained, are improving or are falling.

Accurate reporting will make it possible for parents to make a choice, in relation to other schools in the neighbourhood, on which they can rely. All reports should contain clear recommendations, and set out a realistic timetable for implementation.

In Wandsworth the inspection report makes it clear whether the findings give cause for

5. The word *academic* here means learning in school in a broad sense; it is not used solely to mean *scholarly* as opposed to technical, practical or vocational.

5.

Regulations governing inspection

Regulations issued centrally would need to address:-

- i) the requirement for schools to submit to inspection on a regular basis;
- ii) earmarking of some grant-aided education support funding for this purpose;
- iii) the responsibility of governing bodies for actions to be taken on the basis of the report;
- iv) requirements for inspectorates to be licensed according to national criteria.

Regulations should include guidelines for all recognised inspections to be based on a written contract. As well as containing information required on a national basis, reports may be required -- by the local education authority or by the governors of a school -- on the results of more specialised or technical inspection. The contract should make it clear whether the Head is reporting to the governors, with the inspectors commissioned to assist with particular aspects; or whether the governors are commissioning the inspection and therefore expecting a report on the work of the Head as well as the staff of the school.

In either event, the inspectors would be responsible for ensuring that any statutory requirements for the collection and transmission of information to a local education authority or to the DES should be included within the contract.

An accompanying DES circular to the regulations would be needed to deal with procedures for obtaining information from auditors' reports and health and safety reports. This should also make it clear that within a school the principal responsibility for quality control lies with the Head and the governors; and that the regulations deal with the external monitoring of that responsibility.

Conclusions

Cumbersome regulations are bad for everyone. The choice and competition proposed in this paper would provide effective means of regulating external inspection. The features of the new model would be:

Quality assurance

All inspections would be by teams licensed by the national inspectorate. The reliability of the data and the objectivity of the information collected would be guaranteed by having regulations specifying what the inspection should cover.

Independence

The national inspectorate would operate independently of the DES. Local inspectorate teams seeking a licence and competing for custom would need to be more objective and rely less on personal views and trends when preparing reports.

Value for money

Schools and LEAs would have a degree of choice in selecting from a number of competing inspectorate teams. Inspection (if not exactly a business) would at least be conducted in a business-like manner.

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