

NewStatesman

OUR SCHOOLS' FUTURE

Round table on how we
get from here to there

NAHT
The Association for all School Leaders

Autonomy & Accountability

Welcome to our supplement on trust and school improvement, developed in partnership between the *New Statesman* and the National Association of Head Teachers.

The current government has made much of trust in the teaching profession. It has suggested that heads and teachers know best, and that government should get off their backs. Yet it is also very clear that with greater autonomy comes greater accountability.

Schools should be accountable. They are public assets, spending public funds to achieve precious outcomes. Nobody, really, wants to return to the bad old days of autonomy without accountability. It wasn't healthy for teachers, let alone students – it's more fun being successful. Nor do teachers occupy a privileged position in the debate on the outcomes and goals of our education system. What our schools are "for" is a topic for all of us to decide.

There are, though, concerns about accountability that have nothing to do with shirking responsibility. The first of these is what schools are accountable for. You cannot meaningfully hold someone accountable for things they cannot control – schools should be accountable for the work they do, not for the quality of their intake, or the failings of society.

A second issue is the way performance is measured. We are obsessed with data in our education system, and manage our schools through statistics and league tables which capture only a very narrow portion of what matters. Any result you choose to measure in such a high stakes fashion will inevitably go up. The question is what gets sacrificed? People are increasingly worried about 'gaming' in the education system where schools allegedly boost their league table position by steering pupils towards so-called "soft" subjects, which may seem easier to pass, or concentrating on getting borderline students across a threshold rather than investing



The current government has made much of trust in the teaching profession

time and effort in encouraging gifted or under-achieving children to perform beyond expectations. But any system which only measures a school's achievements by the simplistic and often misleading data of school league tables is asking for this to happen. We need a better way of judging school performance than simply listing how many pupils pass an arbitrary threshold.

Finally: accountability to whom? The policy shift is that we should publish more data but that it should not all be used by government to categorise and judge schools, rather it should be available to parents to help them choose schools. The awkward fact about parental choice is that not all parents are able or willing to exercise such choice, and the risk is that market-based solutions to school improvement will widen rather than narrow the divide. How can we become more focused on the needs of parents and pupils without widening inequality?

Clearly, we need a more subtle debate on the balance between autonomy and accountability, and the round table discussion captured in this supplement begins that process. It explores both the moral and practical implications of the government's agenda. As the oldest and largest association of school leaders in the country, the NAHT is proud to be working with the *New Statesman* on raising these questions.

It is a debate that the round table can advance but not, of course, complete. If you have a view, why not come along to our fringe events at each of the party conferences or submit a question in advance? You can find details at the back of the supplement.

Russell Hobby
General Secretary
NAHT

NAHT
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Contents

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Head to head: getting down to the real issues 4



The view from here: what will new legislation bring? 6

From “failing” to “outstanding”

The Education Bill currently making its way through parliament promises to create a system that delivers consistently better standards for all children, with a focus on accountability, discipline and the removal of bureaucracy.

School inspectors will be instructed to concentrate on four areas: achievement, teaching, leadership and management, and behaviour and safety. In addition, the Secretary of State will be given powers to intervene in schools that are failing while “liberating” outstanding schools and colleges from routine inspection.

Notwithstanding the merit or otherwise of the changes the legislation will bring, the implications for head teachers expected

to implement it are significant. In such a complex and demanding world, it is not easy to make the best choices.

Among the questions raised are: at what level should education standards be set? What is the best way to reach them? What are the benefits and challenges of collaboration with other schools? What impact will the growing number of academies have on the state system, particularly in a world of increased parental choice?

The NS and the National Association of Head Teachers brought together a panel of experts to provide some of the answers. The round table, which begins on page 6, is essential reading for those who want to find out how to get from here to there.

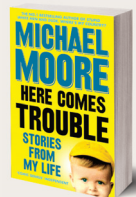
This supplement, and other policy reports, can be downloaded from the NS website at newstatesman.com/supplements

Articles	4	Take-your-pick schools with do-it-all heroes <i>Francis Beckett</i> charts 30 years of tinkering and relying on charismatic leaders
	6	Freedom or accountability? <i>Rafael Behr</i> and a panel of 12 experts, including the Children’s Commissioner, assess life after the new Education Bill

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Tinkering with structures and relying on charismatic heads is not going to solve the difficult issues, argues *Francis Beckett*

Take-your-pick schools with do-it-all heroes



Thirty years ago, state school head teachers and aspiring heads knew exactly what the job was, for better or worse. They knew what they were responsible for, and what the local authority dealt with for them, and they could move to another school or a new part of the country knowing that they would face roughly the same responsibilities.

Three decades of incessant government-ordered changes to the system, mostly with the aim of reducing the role of local authorities and increasing that of the private provider, has left a patchwork of different systems. Being the head, say, of an academy, or one of Michael Gove's free schools, carries very different responsibilities from those still in a local authority family of schools, and running one of the remaining 164 grammars is another job again. And there are differences within these categories. A head in an academy run by Oasis has fairly wide responsibilities, but his or her counterpart in a United Learning Trust (ULT) academy is so centrally controlled that one of them once told me he needed to "get permission from head office" before speaking to me.

Sometimes this compulsive tinkering has looked a bit like an alternative to the more difficult task of helping heads to do

better. The former schools adjudicator Philip Hunter once told the then *NS* editor, Peter Wilby, that he had invented foundation schools with a colleague in 20 minutes in the National Gallery tea room, adding: "It's very easy to invent a new kind of school. You come up with a name, play around with the governing body, decide who owns the land and appoints the staff, and decide how funding gets to it. That's it."

That easy task is what the past few governments have chosen to do. If there is a silver lining, it must be that we have more models of headship than we know what to do with, and we can see what works and what doesn't. Are heads empowered by having greater responsibilities, or weighed down and diverted by management tasks that have nothing to do with teaching children? Who do they like to be responsible to – the local authority's education committee, their own governors, the head office at a chain of schools? If the latter, does a religious organisation, such as those behind Oasis Community Learning or ULT, offer them the best support, or should they be looking at one of those chains of fee-charging schools that have seized on academies as a source of regular income? Or should they simply be finding a

commercial company that knows nothing about education, but a lot about management?

The dangers of the additional responsibilities devolved upon heads since Kenneth Baker's landmark 1988 Education Reform Act were illustrated by Russell Hobby, general secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers, at a NAHT/*NS* round-table discussion held recently, an edited transcript of which is published across the following nine pages. Heads need to focus unrelentingly on teaching and learning, he said, but, increasingly, they are being distracted: "I was at a meeting of secondary heads up in Yorkshire last week, and the amount of time they spent writing press releases was scary." As the consumer of many of these press releases, I can tell Hobby that most heads write very bad press releases. They



have neither the talent nor the training for it. Writing a good press release is not one of the skills required for school leadership. If they are having to spend a lot of their time doing it, that's truly scary.

But, if they are responsible for marketing their school and the services of the local authority PR department are no longer available to them, and they must compete with academies and free schools, they have no choice. John d'Abbro, a head teacher at the New Rush Hall Group, which educates young people with emotional and social difficulties, thought it was "sad that we have spent the past 20 years getting schools to work against each other rather than working with one another".

Writing press releases isn't the only task keeping heads away from what they ought to be doing, said Hobby. He spoke of the head of an infant school going

Head to head: Janet Moffat talks with one of her students at Melcombe Primary, west London, a formerly "failing" school that has been turned around

for academy status, who had taken six months out of the leadership of the school to manage its academy application.

You wouldn't expect a panel of experts to come up with a definitive answer, or even to focus squarely on the question, and they didn't. There are too many interesting questions in a head teacher's life, offering too many diversions. I interviewed 14 successful heads for my book *How to Create a Successful School* and the one thing they all agreed on was that the job is an endlessly fascinating one. The structures, the tiers of accountability – which, strictly speaking, is what this discussion should have been about – is not always the subject that engages them

most. In fact, Warwick Mansell, author of *Education by Numbers: The Tyranny of Testing*, argued: "I am not sure how things change when a school changes from a community school to an academy. It changes the governance structure, but what parents are surely looking for is what actually happens in the school."

So the discussion ranged over most of the dilemmas that heads face. How do you define standards? How do you raise them? And how much does it matter? What standards are we talking about, anyway – the floor standards, beneath which no school should be allowed to slip, or the ceiling standards to which some, or perhaps all, schools ought to aspire?

Is the concept of a "hero head" – a charismatic leader who comes in and sweeps away all the dead wood – either useful or relevant? The concept of the

"Writing press releases and applying for academy status can be big distractions"

hero head was very popular in the early years of New Labour, when it fitted well with the political atmosphere. Tony Blair was himself a sort of superhead, who apparently believed he was there to sweep out all the rubbish his party had accumulated in a century of muddling along without him. And the trouble with the hero head is exactly the same as that trouble with Blair: that, in order for him or her to shine as bright as possible, the school's past has to be painted as black as possible.

And are we still excluding some children from the benefits of education? Maggie Atkinson, Children's Commissioner for England, is sure that we are. "Who is being told, 'Well, we don't deal very well with your sort of child, Mrs Jones, but they do around the corner'? Who is being told: 'You don't fit in, do you? Don't come back after half-term – but we won't make it formal?'" she asked. In our new competitive education system, with its league tables, few heads can honestly say they have never participated in that sort of conversation. That's why our education system, which ought to be a route out of poverty, turns, for some families, into a poverty trap. ●

The writer is the author of 'How to Create a Successful School'

Freedom or accountability?

As parents and teachers face up to the coalition's education agenda, the National Association of Head Teachers and the *New Statesman* gathered experts to debate the changes ahead

Rafael Behr

Welcome, everyone, and thank you for joining us today. Almost as we speak, the government's Education Bill is being steered through the House of Lords. Perhaps, to kick things off, Dr Sidwell, you could outline for us the changes you think head teachers will notice most when that becomes law?

Elizabeth Sidwell

Head teachers are being put to the front. The Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, is very clear that he wants to hand decision-making over to heads. The appointments within the Department for Education of myself, a former head, as Schools Commissioner, and of Charles Taylor, the behaviour guru who is a head teacher in west London, as an Expert Adviser will help head teachers feel that there are people involved in policy-making who understand the situation they are in.

I would say that primary heads are a little worried, so a big job is to go out there and talk to them. We also have special school heads, who have a slightly

different position as well. The important thing is that not all heads are the same.

Rafael Behr

Sometimes it is about empowerment. There are different ways of empowering people. There is empowering people from the bully pulpit by saying, "We respect your right to do this". But there are also statutory changes. I want to pin you down on the latter point.

Elizabeth Sidwell

In terms of behaviour management, it is going to be easier. Heads do feel they are going to be listened to. They feel reasonably positive although also a little bit wary. We have to get the message out there that we are supportive.

Russell Hobby

They are probably slightly more wary than positive at the moment, because "empower" means different things to different people. It can be enough rope to hang yourself with. It is good we have raised the issue of primary schools, because their heads respond very

differently to the "freedom" agenda than secondary school heads. They have a different relationship with the local authority; they have fewer resources inside the school to support them. Many wonder if "trust", "empowerment", and so on, are just other words for sharper accountability. In fact, they are, in some respects – or, at least, the two go together.

They also feel that on some things they are trusted, on other things they are not. One of the big dangers about coming out with a "trust" agenda for schools – which this government did, and has not, perhaps, had the response that it would have anticipated – is that, when you tell people that you trust them, they expect you to trust them on everything. They expected to be trusted. And, actually, no government can do that – or should do that. You can only trust people on certain things. For example, you do have to monitor what is going on in schools.

In addition, this government has fixed views about how things will be done, from phonics as an early-literacy strategy to subject-based delivery of lessons. So it is a fairly conflicted position. ►



ALAMY

Leading from the front: schools are being given more discretion to choose how they educate. Will this benefit underperformers as well as the strong?

► Anastasia de Waal

Would you say that part of it is about having had a buffer removed, in terms of accountability? Do you think there is suddenly this idea that heads, particularly primary heads, are going to find that accountability is now a central aspect of scrutiny? It is almost as if the head teacher has become the face of the school on an accountability level – but without the support network they need. Is that one of the things that is making primary school heads nervous?

Russell Hobby

Accountability is uncomfortable. Some people thrive on it, but sometimes it is nice not to be in the spotlight. If you are in the wrong, it helps for accountability to be fudged now and then, but it is not good for the system or the children, so people do need to be accountable. However, people need to understand what they are accountable for; and it is important for this not to change too frequently. So, at the moment, there needs to be clarity more than freedom.

Louise Stoll

There is also the issue of heads' capacity to be responsive. A head teacher yesterday described to me this so-called "letting go" as "the most fundamental shift of the landscape" he had known since 1987, when he first came into education. In his words, it was "potentially seismic". There has to be a commitment to collaboration, and to peers being able to provide that accountability system. So, for example, if there were further shifts to the Ofsted system, or whatever – in terms of head teachers being involved in evaluating their peers – there would be a whole skill-building exercise to be done. It's the issue that Anastasia mentioned, about who is going to be the middle tier and who is going to support schools? Even in the most successful schools system, when there is peer networking there is still external support.

Warwick Mansell

In terms of this "seismic" shift, what kind of school was this head running? There is a difference in terms of what is going on in schools at the bottom of league tables and those elsewhere. The government is continually reproaching the previous government for having the floor standards, below which schools are not allowed to fall in terms of test and

exam results, and which have massive consequences for schools that do, including closure and enforced Academy status. That does not look like freedom to me. The schools with better results, which are being freed up from Ofsted inspections as well, have a very different experience from others that are still feeling incredible pressure to improve.

Rick Muir

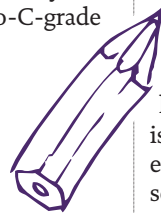
As part of a centre-left think tank, I find myself in the strange position of agreeing with the government on at least some of what it is doing in this area. I was very concerned when it first announced its agenda around free schools, particularly

“Articulate parents may well hold schools to account. But come to a rough Barnsley estate and I’ll show you – because I grew up there – parents who won’t”
Maggie Atkinson

about the emphasis on competition and autonomy. I felt there would not be sufficient minimum standards. I thought the last government had quite a strong approach to minimum standards, with the National Challenge if schools were not doing well. But I have been very encouraged by the current government's introduction of a higher threshold.

The international evidence is that when you want schools to go from good to great to excellent, autonomy is the best way to achieve it. You allow people to innovate, you give freedom to head teachers. With the schools that are struggling, however, central government must step in to make sure those kids get a decent chance.

There is a problem, though, with the accountability framework: things are confused. We have some secondary heads looking at the five A*-to-C-grade GCSE minimum floor target. We have other heads looking at the English Baccalaureate (EBac) as a kind of gold standard. We have people in the middle wondering which of these to follow.



Julian Stanley

I was talking to a group of primary heads in Cambridgeshire recently. Many were feeling very stressed because they felt they were being expected suddenly to become much more managerial in their approach – which is not necessarily bad – but they did not know who was going to support them in doing that.

In secondaries in Bedfordshire, meanwhile, they are talking about the problem of being expected to be either charismatic heads, who lead the way, or managers, who devolve to teams and develop a different internal structure. The problem with charismatic heads is that, if they leave, people are left floundering. We hear a lot about those kinds of individuals.

Maggie Atkinson

We should not forget who the end user of education is. It is the child. I am agnostic about who runs schools. What I am bothered about is the deal children and parents get when they walk through the door. Who is being told, "Well, we don't deal very well with your sort of child, Mrs Jones, but they do around the corner"? Who is being told, "You don't fit in, do you? Don't come back after half-term – but we won't make it formal"? Who is going to hold the moral compass that takes the system forward for the vulnerable kids, who are almost always from difficult, fractured backgrounds? Where they are articulate, parents in some parts of the country may well hold schools to account. Come with me to an estate at the rough end of Barnsley and I'll show you – because I grew up there – the parents who will not. So who will?

Elizabeth Sidwell

No one has mentioned governors yet, but they do need to be brought into the picture. They are very important. We need to support them.

Gerard Kelly

The subject of governors is one of the big areas of education that is always left out.

We are appointing a bunch of well-meaning and very committed, but essentially amateur, volunteers to responsibilities for which they may not have any experience whatsoever. It is not a great idea to have what is, in effect, a non-executive body for every school. A paid-for or, at least, semi-professional chair would be

helpful. We have focused so much on the quality of heads and teachers, and ignored the quality of governorship.

Anastasia de Waal

Perhaps this white paper should have been called “The Importance of Management”, rather than “The Importance of Teaching”. We have seen academies with executive principals, which is moving much more towards engaging professional managers. There could be a conflict here, when, on the one hand, we are trying to inspire the profession in terms of teaching and, on the other, heads need to run budgets.

Mike Cladingbowl

I want to offer an observation around the quality of good governance. It does exist in some schools. There are some fantastic governors out there doing a fantastic job in some fantastic schools. Schools are accountable to parents, although parents hold schools to account in different ways and to varying degrees. You need some autonomy in order to be accountable. But head teachers, both primary and secondary, have had considerable autonomy for a while. Certainly, Ofsted’s inspection framework recognises the importance of head teachers, and in particular, the quality of the teaching; and of ensuring that all the other components are there. The new inspection framework will put greater emphasis on how well teachers are supporting improvements to teaching and learning in a particular school. It is also right that inspections are targeted to where leaders and management have been less successful.

Rafael Behr

That is an important point. And leads on to the issue of underperforming teachers. I have heard people from the Institute of Education say the single biggest thing you could do to improve schools would be to sack the bottom third of underperforming teachers. That’s a politically toxic thing to say, but it is something we ought to discuss.

Warwick Mansell

I wonder whether schools, in the drive for better results, neglect the needs of some children. There are stories about schools easing out difficult kids because they bring down their statistics. If the whole system is predicated on the idea of pressurising the school to raise its results,

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somehow you have to align the child’s needs to that system. You could argue that the “results” pressure has a good backwash effect on children, but you certainly have to look at the impact in detail and not just assume that, because the numbers are rising, this is good.

John d’Abbro

I am not opposed to schools being inspected. I think we should have standardised tests. But, if we are to put the child at the centre of the debate, we have to recognise that students are different, schools are different, and head teachers are

different. So one-size-fits-all is never going to be the right way to measure attainment. I have no problem with measuring attainment, but let’s think in a way that is fair, that is just, and that actually measures children’s abilities, rather than the current system that leaves 40 per cent of children disadvantaged because they leave school without five A to C grades.

Rafael Behr

Liz, how do you deal with those issues when there is national pressure to demonstrate that standards across the board are going up?

► Elizabeth Sidwell

What we are saying is that there's a basic education – maths and English – that every child should have. We're not saying that every child should have the EBac. I have been into hundreds of schools, of all types, and I have rarely found – if never – a school that is not caring for the child. It is not the case that schools are only chasing exam results.



they can just cope with the world, rather than seeking academic attainment. So, in different social groupings, you have different purposes. We are not always clear what our education system is about.

Elizabeth Sidwell

We cannot be doing the social skills rather than the education! My schools in New Cross got students to Oxbridge, so I do not believe that it cannot be done. We have to start when they are nought and go to three. If they are coming in with deficit, then we have to focus on children's centres and make sure they are ready to learn by the time they are five.

Louise Stoll

I have been working with school leadership teams, trying to help them be leaders of learning. We talk about unleashing some of the constraints, and how they can help their teachers be more creative. In areas where performance is low, the teachers are too fearful to experiment and take risks.

Mike Cladingbowl

Ofsted is keen to look at the progress that each child makes from their own starting points. These can be very, very different, and our inspection frameworks reflect this. Achievement is a mixture between attainment and progress. The key thing is the distance travelled to a particular point.

There has been some discussion about whether a school can be good if it doesn't achieve average attainments. The answer, of course, is yes. The last annual report by the Chief Inspector of Education, for example, set out quite clearly that a fifth of all secondary schools judged to be outstanding had pupils who broadly achieved national expectations by the time they left school, but had started with low levels of literacy and numeracy, all sorts of social difficulties, and so on.

Rafael Behr

If you are trying to compete in a difficult labour market, it does not matter where you started. It matters what skills you have when you apply for a job. Is there a danger of putting too much emphasis on that sort of contextual value, when, really, it is standards that matter?

Julian Stanley

We come back to the purpose of education. In poor areas, where there's not much chance of people getting a job, or where they cannot get to college or university, some teachers feel their moral priority is to try to equip these kids so

Russell Hobby

I think there is a clear consensus that underperformance needs to be addressed. There is not a consensus on the way we measure performance. We have just started to become unearthed in this debate, attainment versus progress.

“Achievement is a mixture of attainment and progress. Ofsted wants to look at the progress each child makes from their own starting points”

Mike Cladingbowl

It is the case that the breadth of the curriculum is impoverished for large numbers of children in Year 6 and primary schools, as they are drilled to the tests. It is also the case that we do not value every child equally in our system. The child who is on the edge of five A* to C grades is more valued than the child who is either through it or further away from it. All the incentives of our measurement system push us in ways that are unproductive for the equality issue.

Alison Halstead

I think we have to address this “Everyone is to go the university” and the constant drive for academic performance. On the latest statistics, only 32 per cent of our 18-year-olds actually go to university

and 6 per cent gain apprenticeships, so where the heck are the majority?

Gerard Kelly

The problem is that various administrations and newspapers, in particular, tend to assume that university is for a certain type of person from a certain type of background. Some public schools do push vocational training but that tends to be rare, which is a shame.

Maggie Atkinson

One of the things that is starting to bubble up for me around this table is this notion that a school cannot do it on its own. Parents, children's centres and communities – and all the other things that go around the child – are important, because the child is only in school 25 hours a week, 39 weeks a year; what they do outside matters just as much. My abiding concern remains that, when the child walks through the school door, what they do not do is put down the baggage that comes with them from their life somewhere else. It is not as if the school is all that is going on in their lives. Whoever is running, owning, governing, managing and putting their badges on the schools, needs to understand that the cluster around that school, of health, of social care, of youth services, of fire and rescue services, really, really matters. I will give you one statistic and then I will shut up: nine out of ten incarcerated young offenders have been excluded from school.

Rafael Behr

How do we empower head teachers to connect with that wider community?

Rick Muir

That is difficult because there is only so much that heads can do. But there is a lot that you can do in schools around helping disadvantaged kids get access to the social and cultural capital that middle-class kids perhaps take for granted. Things such as taking them on trips to universities to raise their aspirations, and saying, “This is the kind of thing you could be doing”. All of that stuff around the classroom is very important.

Warwick Mansell

I do not know how much emphasis Ofsted is putting on that kind of input. A lot of people say we should look at statistical outcomes but, actually, these

inputs are really important for kids. Individual reports may comment on them, but it is the statistics that are driving inspection judgements.

Mike Cladingbowl

We have just piloted a new inspection framework in 150 schools up and down the country and we have had some fantastic evaluation meetings with head teachers. Inspectors will evaluate the standards attained by pupils by the time they leave the school, how well they make progress relative to their starting point, how gaps are narrowing between different groups of pupils in the schools, how well pupils are learning in lessons, what the quality of interaction and learning is in the classroom, and so on.

Anastasia de Waal

If we are going to have autonomy that is meaningful for schools, diversity in the education sector, good-quality schools and, crucially, be able to respond to the kids we have in front of us, then we have to have another measure alongside performance. Clearly, that is where Ofsted comes in. However, one of the big problems historically with Ofsted is that there has simply not been enough time to go into a school and understand what it is like. In contrast, although the Independent Schools Inspectorate – which the majority of independent schools will be inspected by – certainly isn't perfect, one of its benefits is that it spends quite a lot of time in schools. Ultimately, it is monitored by Ofsted, but it decides its own schedule. It is expensive but it is holistic, and that is going to be the million-dollar question here. If we have autonomy and diversity in schools, then we need a system that accommodates and recognises this. My worry is that we don't have that.

Mike Cladingbowl

In our two-day inspections of maintained schools, for example, we do try to get a broad view of what goes on in that school. That means we need to have good, high-quality inspectors, and we are absolutely committed to that. Inspectors will always look to take a well-rounded view, exercising their judgement as to the quality of education being provided in the school. That is the key to it. That is the thing parents want to know, and that is why we are there.

“We know that, in terms of improving students’ learning, the most powerful thing that head teachers can do is to focus on teachers’ learning”

Louise Stoll

Louise Stoll

If you are talking about empowering head teachers, you have to help build skills. One of the things we know is that giving head teachers and teachers focused opportunities for inquiry in other schools – and in their own school – is a tremendous development opportunity for them. The inspection-type approaches can add to that. We know that, in terms of improving students’ learning, the most powerful thing that head teachers can do is to focus on teachers’ learning.

Julian Stanley

Consistently, in all the survey work we do with teachers who use our services, the thing they come back to is that they never have time for professional development that allows them to look at other practice as well. That contributes to the notion that there are many, many underperforming teachers. You have to remember, if you are a teacher, a classroom teacher, you are facing kids, and parents and governors and heads of departments, day in and day out. It is a wonderful job, but it is hugely challenging, and often stressful. We underestimate the impact of this on the health and well-being of teachers themselves. And, if people are going to be asked to work until they are 68, that might be an issue!

Elizabeth Sidwell

We should remember that we have the best generation of teachers ever. I have been in schools for 30 years, and they are fantastic. We need to let them concentrate on teaching. When I was a CEO my job was to take away all that stuff – whether the buildings lacked this or that, the cleaning, or whatever – so the head could focus on the staff, the kids and the parents; and so the teacher

could focus on teaching, which is their job. You do head teachers down by thinking that they do not realise how important the enrichment activities are. In a group, you can sometimes afford to do something more than you could do on your own. That is what I have seen and have been able to do with day trips, musical instruments, and sport on the playing field of another school. These things are desperately important in terms of raising a child’s opportunities and achievements.

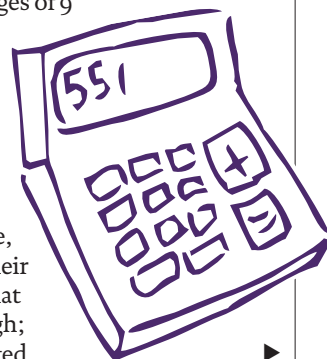
Russell Hobby

I agree that the unrelenting focus on teaching and learning is at the heart of every successful school, but heads are more and more being driven away from that focus. I was at a meeting of secondary heads up in Yorkshire last week, and the amount of time they spent writing press releases was scary. There is a huge focus on the press and what it says about their schools, and also on how to compete with free schools that are going to take their pupils. There was a head of an infant school that was going for academy status who had taken six months out from the direct leadership to manage the academy application. What a waste of six months. If they had been a good head teacher, they would have been in the school.

Collaboration does drive improvement, because you need to learn from other schools, not just from your own institution. However, the sense of fragmentation – particularly around changes to the admissions code, where schools are being encouraged to poach pupils from each other – will affect this.

Maggie Atkinson

On our website there is a report that I commissioned from the National Federation for Educational Research: the NFER asked 2,000 children between the ages of 9 and 16 what makes a good teacher. Of course, they said somebody who listens, who is creative, who knows their subject. But that was not enough; they also wanted



► teachers to tell them what the rules were and then stick by them, and not to make promises they could not keep, and so on and so on.

I had a great experience in November last year in a County Durham comprehensive school on Takeover Day. Thousands of schools do Takeover Day; it is what it says on the tin, and it is fantastic. In that school, pupils had had to make formal applications with a CV to teach for two days. They put the applications to the teachers they wanted to shadow, and the teachers interviewed them for the jobs, in front of a formal panel. If they got the job, the teacher did the normal preparation, the kid taught the lesson and the teacher was a classroom support assistant. One teacher said: “You were gobsmacked at their dedication, their creativity, their ability with technology, their risk-taking. And then you realised that they see ten different teaching styles a week, while we only see our own.” The kids said: “We will never kick off in class again. It is such hard work. We had not realised how many hours they put in on Sunday afternoon.” It is about bravery. You empower the adults in your school by truly empowering your children and your pupils, and giving them a voice.

Alison Halstead

On empowering staff and leadership: we have models that we know work. But this is not solving the problem because we are not sharing the practice, and we are not working in the communities, with employers and other schools.

John d’Abbro

It is sad that we have spent the past 20 years getting schools to work against each other rather than working with one another. I know from some of the work within the London Challenge, which I was part of, that when you can get communities and schools to work together, you can do things. I am not saying we should not do all the testing stuff but, if we abolished league tables, with one quick swoop we would bring about a much greater sense of collegiality, and find that schools are prepared to support each other because they are not in competition.

Rafael Behr

I am intrigued by this. The agenda coming out of the Department for

Education is to empower new academies and free schools, to give parents the power of choice. Yet this will create competition for students, which will undermine collegiality.

Warwick Mansell

I am not sure how things change when a school changes from a community school to an academy. It changes the governance structure, but what parents are surely looking for is what actually happens in the school. So just having different categories and names for schools is not necessarily increasing choice.

Julian Stanley

There is often such an emphasis on all these structures, and then it seems to miss the heart of what is being said about the need to work collectively and communally. The best head teachers I see are the ones that have a genuine handle on their communities, are really

“The best head teachers are the ones with a genuine handle on their communities. There is a sense that everyone is engaged with something shared”
Julian Stanley

involved with them – and the kids are really involved with them. There is that kind of sense of everybody being engaged with something shared. This emphasis on structures and free schools tends to be divisive. In particular instances, it might be healthy or beneficial, but I am not sure it can work for everybody.

Rick Muir

The government seems to want both. It wants federations and chains, to give you the sort of collegiality, and then it wants competition as well, so you have free schools opening up, and schools being allowed to expand, and all that sort of stuff. That is one issue.

However, I just want to return to this matter of league tables, and I am sure Warwick will completely disagree with

me on this. I hate to stand up for league tables but is not the evidence from Wales, where they did away with league tables, that it has been a bit of a disaster and now they are bringing them back?

Russell Hobby

They are not bringing them back. They are going to banding in Wales. They are not going to do SATs, they are going to rely on teacher assessments still. So they have managed to resist the temptation.

Rick Muir

That is interesting. What the Welsh case shows is that you do have to have transparency. You do have to have accountability. The question of whether it is the league table model or not is another issue. We cannot have a situation where there is no accountability, no transparency and parents are not aware of how well schools perform. That would be a retrograde step.

Warwick Mansell

I would not disagree at all; you certainly need accountability. The main study on this is by academics at Bristol University. They looked at the results in the two countries and said, “League tables is essentially the only thing that is different. England has them and Wales has not. Results have gone up faster in England than in Wales, and therefore league tables are the reason”. I was not convinced by this. The accountability system may be behind it, but I do not think you can isolate league tables as the factor.

Rafael Behr

Is there a broader international lesson from this? The Swedish model is often given as an example of a free school but, as I understand it, they rather had to chase an Ofsted-style accountability, having first diversified, because they realised they would need to bring back some kind of central accountability mechanism.

Maggie Atkinson

By bringing in free schools, we have taken one part of the Swedish model. Inspectors in Sweden interview children, with no adults present, about how well the school makes their living their United Nations Convention rights real. If the school falls short, the inspectors are empowered to shut it.



“It’s about being brave”: Maggie Atkinson, Children’s Commissioner (third from left), says teachers are empowered when pupils are truly given a voice

Alison Halstead

Talking about international models and also engineering, vocational and technical education, I think everybody would say Germany and Austria do well in this area. I was over in Austria recently, because we are looking to partner there, and we said to them, “What is it about this system that makes it work?” What they said was, “No ministerial, governmental interference in the models of education in that country”. They have had them since the late 1800s – I have not got the date right – and it has never been interfered with. In this country – it is not a party thing, it is whoever gets in – they mess with the system. If we just trusted, empowered and let it run, it would be an awful lot better than trying to solve problems that almost do not exist; put the learner at the centre, trust the staff.

Rafael Behr

If you could imagine that you were walking through a sort of Powers R Us as

a head teacher, and there was one thing you could grab to take to the checkout – what would that thing be?

Gerard Kelly

I was going to pick up on the point around accountability and international lessons. The trouble with it is that it depends on your educational system’s development, where it is in the cycle, and the context. For instance, if you look at “target-itis”, which was bigger under Labour, you could say it was necessary for a period of time but then it outlived its usefulness. If you look at Sweden, certain things are useful, others are not. It is very difficult to draw a comparison.

Russell Hobby

Hold schools accountable for what they can control and influence, and hold them firmly accountable for that. Measure them on quality and not on the statistics. So go in and find out

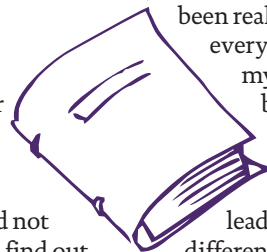
what is really happening inside the schools; do not rely on proxy measures for that. Once you have done it, keep it stable for a while, so that people know what they are working under.

Elizabeth Sidwell

I would go back to where I began and say: empower heads. The amount of bureaucracy that heads are on the receiving end of is far less than I had; that is good. Yes, we talk about free schools and structures, but, actually, they are all academies, that type of school, and they have freedoms. They are well rehearsed, the group of freedoms you can have. So I think we can go forward on that. I have been really interested to listen to everything, and I will certainly do my best to take people’s thoughts back.

Mike Cladingbowl

Evidence tells us that leaders and managers make the difference in schools, and it is right, ▶



► therefore, that we involve leaders and managers in our inspections. We would always argue that all schools can improve a bit, and it is right that we have high expectations of the children in the schools. So, within that, good-quality inspections and good-quality inspectors matter, and they can make a difference.

Julian Stanley

Accountability is critical, for head teachers in particular, whether it is to communities or to their own governors. Those relationships need clarity and strengthening. I also think much more emphasis is needed on supporting leaders and teams of leaders in schools.

Rafael Behr

What about this dereliction of parental responsibilities in some situations, which can affect what teachers do. What is the broader function that head teachers are supposed to have in their communities? Is your head teacher supposed to be walking down a high street, fulfilling the kind of function that a 1950s bobby on his beat would have?

Julian Stanley

“Visible and present”.

Rafael Behr

That sounds a bit like the sort of role the peacekeepers have in certain war zones, so there may be a slightly alarming comparison.

Rick Muir

I am on the board of a children’s centre. One of the functions of a children’s centre is doing an incredible amount of work with families in really difficult circumstances, trying to help them. Whether that is done through the school, the children’s centre or whatever, the state, at some level, needs to be doing that – to help empower parents who are in really difficult circumstances, so that they can help their kids. That is very important.

In terms of the head teacher’s role, continuous professional development is hugely important. It sounds incredibly dull, but is vital to ensure that teachers are learning and improving their own teaching. That is a crucial role for heads in schools.

Also, as a system, we need to get better

at sharing. There is this focus now on narrowing the gap – the pupil premium is being introduced – but we need to get better at sharing practice between schools about what works to lift kids who are at the bottom attainment-wise.

Anastasia de Waal

I think it’s important to remember, perhaps slightly counter-intuitively, that to empower heads is not to put all your eggs in one basket: because they work with a lot of teachers. There has been an obsession with leadership for a long time. But an empowered head is also going to have empowered teachers.

“We need to get better at sharing practice between schools about what works to lift kids who are at the bottom attainment-wise”

Rick Muir

The ultimate, really, is about having accountability that does what it is supposed to do, which is about providing quality assurance. To achieve that, you need broad accountability measures. Really effective inspection looks at the whole provision. It is about having a range of indicators, and ones that are meaningful. And that means that the government needs to invest in inspection.

Warwick Mansell

I would emphasise anything that can be done to get children to read for pleasure. If you look at the evidence, the number of books a child has in their house is statistically associated with how well they do in tests.

If I had to change the accountability system in one way, I would stop the emphasis on league tables, and make inspections the main school-by-school measure. But I would make the inspection system much more rounded than it is at the moment, much more along the lines of the Independent Schools Inspectorate.

Just generally on continuing professional development, I would say support subject associations and support networking.

Rafael Behr

Is there a motion to scrap league tables around this table?

Alison Halstead

I would reconstruct them.

Gerard Kelly

They are terribly flawed but, if you do not have them, all you have is reputation, and that can be just as dangerous.

Louise Stoll

Yes. Have a much broader and fair accountability system, and evaluate what we value, as well as what is just easily measurable. Stimulate collective responsibility through professional learning communities; ensure adequate support for heads and teachers; and give incentives for innovation, with careful evaluation.

John d’Abbro

I must just say something about Sweden. I am very concerned about the suicide figures among young people in Sweden.

The OECD [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development] did some work around Chile. Chile has gone from being about 200th to, I think, 24th in educational performance. They agreed to have no political involvement in their education system for ten years. I wonder if there is a correlation?

And, then, finally – you would expect me to say this, given the sector I work in – I still believe the biggest determinant of educational outcomes is the quality of relationships within the institution – whether that is between teacher and teacher, between student and pupils, pupil and teacher, etc. Where there are effective relationships, to me, there is effective learning.

Alison Halstead

Schools and learners: we should all, collectively, be striving for excellence, and we should all be learning together. We all need to exhibit self-discipline, and everyone in schools should be a leader.

Rafael Behr

This has been a high-level panel, and I feel completely intimidated by the level of knowledge, expertise and insight in the room. Thank you to you all. ●



at the Party Conferences 2011

Have your say...

Following on from the publication of this report, the *New Statesman*, in association with the NAHT, is hosting a series of fringe debates at this year's party conferences.

All three debates are outside the secure zones and free to attend. Please come and give your point of view.

Liberal Democrat **Birmingham**

Tuesday 20 September

How can we empower head teachers to improve our schools?

Speakers:

Dan Rogerson MP

Co-chair of the Liberal Democrat Education Committee

Russell Hobby

General secretary, NAHT

Professor Alison Halstead

Vice chancellor, Aston University

Professor Stephen Gorard

Professor of education research, University of Birmingham

Rafael Behr,

Chief political commentator,

New Statesman (chair)

6.15pm-7.30pm

Novotel, Burne-Jones Room, Central Birmingham

Labour **Liverpool**

Wednesday 28 September

How can we empower head teachers to improve our schools?

Speakers:

Andy Burnham MP

Shadow secretary of state for education

Russell Hobby

General secretary, NAHT

Julian Stanley

Chief executive, Teacher Support Network

John D'Abbro

Head teacher, New Rush Hall Group

Rafael Behr

Chief political commentator, *New Statesman* (chair)

1pm-2pm

Pan Am Restaurant, Albert Dock

Conservative **Manchester**

Sunday 2 October

How can we empower head teachers to improve our schools?

Speakers:

Graham Stuart MP

Chair of the Commons Education Select Committee

Russell Hobby

General secretary, NAHT

Emma Knights

Chief executive, National Governors' Association

Toby Young

Broadcaster, journalist and free schools campaigner

Rafael Behr

Chief political commentator, *New Statesman* (chair)

4.30pm-5.30pm

Great Hall, Manchester Town Hall

Smarter and fairer accountability raises standards

Hold schools to account for what they do, not where they are

“School leaders should be accountable for sustained performance on the difference they make to children’s progress, as measured across a range of factors.”

Value the achievement of every child

“Behind the tables and statistics are human beings. Every child counts, not just those on the borderline of some threshold.”

Use judgement as well as measurement

“If we only value what we can measure, we will create an impoverished education system, without room for creativity or character; we will not only permit but encourage gaming. Data provide questions, not answers.”



The NAHT is the largest association of school leaders in the UK.

We represent 28,500 school leaders in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, covering virtually every special school, 85 per cent of primary schools and more than 40 per cent of secondary schools, as well as many early years, further education establishments and other settings.

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