WE Position Paper IV:
Accountability: Beyond Covid-19

Report created with Whole Education trust leaders participating in the Leading a Whole Education in Trusts series

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Accountability: Beyond Covid-19

On 9th February 2020, Headteachers Roundtable launched their #PauseOfsted campaign. On 16th of March 2020 for wholly unforeseen and unrelated reasons, Ofsted paused. Chief inspector Amanda Spielman said: “I’m grateful for the Secretary of State’s permission to suspend routine inspections. It’s clearly the right thing to do when teachers and social workers are under pressure as a result of the coronavirus outbreak. We all need to support them in their work.”

We are living in extraordinary times. For the past eleven months the world has reacted and adapted to life with a deadly and indiscriminate virus. Some countries have fared better than others but all have been affected. We have changed the way we live, work and play.

In schools, we have changed the way children learn and the systems which support learning have changed too - Ofsted included.

It is through this lens that Whole Education trust leaders gathered, ten months later and virtually (of course!), to discuss accountability: has the unthinkable become thinkable? Is it time to change the way we hold schools to account?

It is striking and important that during the pandemic, Ofsted’s activity may have paused and taken different shapes but, in the view of trust leaders, accountability has only become more present and important. Now more than ever they have felt the weight of the responsibility of their role. It is during this time that the true purpose of accountability, and who we are truly accountable to, has been brought into sharp focus.

When asked “who are you accountable to?” every trust leader, without exception, talked about their children and their community - not Ofsted, not the DfE, but children.

When in the process of moving mountains to provide young people with access to learning in all of its various forms; in providing them with access to technology; in providing those in need with food parcels; in checking on the welfare of young people and their families; schools were doing ‘the right thing’. On behalf of and accountable to their children and their communities. They didn't require a framework for this. Without fail they turned to their values and focused on their ‘core purpose’.

Left to its own devices the school system holds itself to account, to do what is right by those that it is there to serve.

“One of the extraordinary things about human events is that the unthinkable becomes thinkable.”

Salman Rushdie

“... if what we are doing is not right for the children, then why are we doing it?”

WE trust leader

“If you’re committed to truly living your values then that’s ultimately what drives your decision making.”

WE trust leader
Similarly, when Whole Education trust Leaders were asked “what is the core purpose of accountability?” their answers focused on children and the quality of education and care they provide, or aspire to provide, on their behalf. They are clear that there is a need for the profession to maintain standards and to continually strive for improvement. They were clear in the distinction between internal and external accountability:

- Accountability applied internally in their trusts was positive: goal setting, achievement, celebration and affirmation. Recognising that maintaining quality and standards requires the setting of aspirational goals and ensuring progress is made towards them.

- External accountability was interpreted as judgement, inspection, focussed on a narrow set of standards for the short term. External accountability was perceived as negative, based in a deficit model that requires schools to prove their worth and earn trust.

Implicit in this distinction is the feeling that external accountability is applied with the intent of ‘finding schools out’; that there is a lack of regard for the ‘moral purpose’ that drives leaders to do the best by their children and a lack of understanding of the complexities that sometimes prevent leaders from achieving this. Where the required standard is not met it’s implied that, somehow, there is deliberate and wilful intent to fail.

**For Whole Education trust leaders the key issue in external accountability is a lack of trust.**

The trust leaders’ view is that the role of the regulator has become overly complex and that there is therefore a lack of transparency. An example of this would be in the creation of a new framework, by the same organisation that carried out the research that informed the creation of the framework. Whilst the perception is that the research evidence base is a rich source of information, the process of using the evidence to inform the framework is open to interpretation and selective bias.

Trust leaders were also of the opinion that often the issue is not in the intent of the regulator, but in the inconsistency in the implementation and application of the framework by inspection teams, across an incredibly diverse education landscape.

They accept that school leaders in the system have some responsibility for seeking to interpret the framework to ensure their own school’s success, but believe that the regulator must take more responsibility for the high stakes culture it has created which occasionally leads to unethical behaviour.
Looking to the future:
Systemic cultural change - immediate priorities, our role and system expectations

Trust leaders reflected on the responsibility they have for accountability within their own trusts, and therefore the collective responsibility leaders have to challenge the culture of high-stakes accountability at a system level.

All of the trust leaders are clear on the importance and relevance of accountability within the education system. However, they were equally clear that the current system of perceived ‘winners and losers’ creates a high-stakes culture for individuals and organisations. We all have some responsibility for the current system and therefore we must all act to challenge and change it through:

- The output of school inspections becoming more nuanced and appreciative of the context of the school - less reductive and judgmental.
- A collective accountability approach at a regional level that removes inter-school competition, creating deeper collaboration on behalf of all children and allowing for greater diversity in the interpretation of how we can deliver high quality whole education.
- An adaptable framework which takes a longer term view of school improvement, allowing for greater experimentation and growth at school level and that is less susceptible to rigid interpretation.
- Clarity and simplification of the purpose and role of the regulator with some of the functions delivered by separate independent organisations.
- Organisations with a responsibility for supporting school improvement should spend more time and energy on this focus and less on replicating the role of the regulator and the accountability framework.

Background:

Whole Education is a national network of schools and trusts collaborating to providing a high-quality whole education for all their young people.

Leading a Whole Education in Trusts supports leaders across trusts to share and learn from each others practice and explore what leading a whole education across a group of schools looks like.

Leaders in the LAWET group support and inspire each other to take a sustainable, long-term approach to leadership that challenges the short-termism we see in the English education system.

The WE Trust Influence Forums are roundtable events that provide trust leaders with the space and time to collectively influence each other and the system and become a powerful, positive voice for the change they want to see in education.

Further info:

Are you curious to find out more?

If have any thoughts or comments, we would love to hear from you.

Get in touch trust@wholeeducation.org