

BETTER TOGETHER?

OFSTED IS A BLUNT TOOL THAT NEEDS TO SHARPEN ITS PRACTICES, SUGGESTS **KEITH WRIGHT** – BY WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP WITH SCHOOLS IN A NEW, QUALITY ASSURANCE REGIME...

A steady stream of criticism and advice for HMCI Michael Wilshaw can be found across the media on an almost daily basis.

This criticism comes from all quarters – unions, school leaders and Westminster policy wonks chief among them. Recent views included those from the right wing think tank Policy Exchange, which said that inspectors needed inspecting themselves as quality was uneven.

ASCL echoed some of these views in March when general secretary Brian Lightman commented on what he saw as the uneven nature of Ofsted judgements. Most importantly, he sketched out a vision for the future of Ofsted, suggesting the role of the inspectorate should move from one of quality control, to that of quality assurance of a school's own self-evaluation processes and whether it has the capacity to improve.

"HMIs would contact every school on a regular cycle or when a cause for concern is identified. The HMI could then either 'sign the school off' or decide that a more in-depth inspection is required, led by the HMI. This would reduce the unhealthy extent to which the threat of inspection dominates many school leaders' work and makes teachers afraid to try new approaches," he said.

ASCL also published a survey showing that of 900 heads polled 65 per cent did not have confidence in Ofsted overall to make accurate and reliable judgements.

There are signs that the inspectors are moving in a more accommodating direction. Michael Wilshaw announced in March that the 60 per cent of schools judged good will no longer be subjected to an intensive three day visit by a team of inspectors. Instead they'll get a one day visit from one inspector every couple of years.

And earlier this year inspectors received guidance on lesson judgements, stressing a

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need for open mindedness when it came to determining what a good lesson looked like. In short – inspectors shouldn't have a preferred teaching style and it didn't necessarily have to be a bells and whistles classroom participation lesson if that wasn't appropriate. Sometimes a teacher standing at the front of the class imparting knowledge was enough.

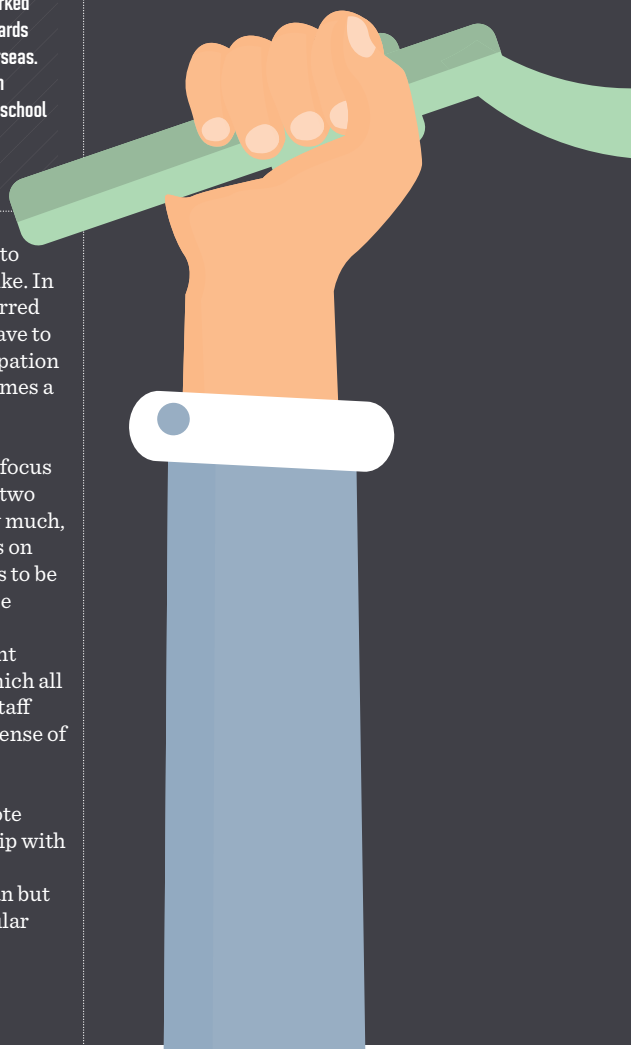
I don't think this goes far enough. The focus is still on visits – whether they are every two years or every five; and regardless of how much, if any, notice is given – which put schools on parade before the inspectors. More needs to be done and fundamental changes need to be made at Ofsted if we are to achieve an enlightened model of school improvement which is truly led by the school and in which all the players – leaders, teachers, support staff and HMIs – work together in a genuine sense of collegial effort.

Inspection needs to move away from being an infrequent visitation from remote 'judges' who have no previous relationship with the school.

My views echo those of Brian Lightman but take them a stage further. Instead of regular

contact with schools inspectors should become quality assurance partners for the school, working with them on an ongoing basis, offering advice and support to a school in developing its improvement planning, for example.

On the face of it this 'QA partner' approach looks time and resource hungry. But the



practical hurdles can be overcome if modern online systems are brought into the equation. If schools and inspectors can use the same online school improvement planning and monitoring systems to develop and manage their improvement processes such as school improvement planning, quality assurance, performance management and self assessment then it will be far easier for the inspectorate to work with those schools on an ongoing basis. Schools would be able to share any issues as they arise and solutions worked out with both sides having access to the same information picture.

I currently work with several groups of schools that are using common school improvement systems to monitor improvement processes. Their approach could offer a practical example of how this QA partner approach could work. One group of schools – a chain of international schools – replaced a disparate collection of homemade evaluation systems with a standardised, online school improvement planning system which meant that all schools were tracking the same processes in the same way. This made it easier for head office to target support more precisely to schools that needed it. Rather

than the blunt tool approach of physical inspection this group uses the system for ongoing monitoring. Problems are addressed as they arise. They don't remain hidden until the showdown moment when the inspection team arrives on the school doorstep.

If communications with schools were more regular, more positive and more solution focused – and more CPD focused – then overall the quality of schools would improve more quickly.

The technologies are already there to do that – it just needs policy makers to make a genuine move towards an inspection system based on working with schools, rather than policing them.

Last autumn I was joined by David Weston of the Teacher Development Trust for a round table with school leaders. We talked about CPD and how this could be a genuine force for school improvement in an era of increasingly onerous accountability for schools.

There was an interesting consensus: all of the schools there weren't looking to Ofsted as the benchmark for their improvement activities. They were guided by the desire to raise the attainment of their pupils. This in turn was driven by school improvement planning which focused its goals not on achieving Ofsted gradings but on what the institution needed to do in order to raise pupils' attainment. Giving their teachers the tools to play a meaningful part in this drive – through good quality CPD – was part and parcel of that approach. If Ofsted approved they saw this as an important by-product of their work rather than the objective.

These schools held similar views on the usefulness of lesson

observations to the Westminster policy analysts mentioned earlier. They saw them as being of limited use – unless they were used as a developmental tool. One school had taken responsibility for lesson observations away from the leadership team and rooted it firmly in faculties and autonomous, teacher led teaching and learning communities. These schools wanted lesson observations to be seen as developmental rather than a stick with which to beat teachers.

Schools have for several years been making great strides. Recent statistics from the Department for Education show that the number of pupils taught in underperforming secondary schools has fallen by almost 250,000 in four years. It shows that schools are doing lots of things right but the inspection regime needs to take account of this and trust schools to become a partner in the quality assurance process.

Ofsted is increasingly looking like a blunt tool with limited use in the changing school landscape. It's time for the education system to embrace an inspection system that works in partnership with schools – not against them.

