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## Pocket Watch – More on school performance

### Introduction

Two Ministerial speeches and a Government Paper over the last week all on the subject of raising performance suggest that this remains an important policy battleground. The two speeches came at the North of England Conference, the traditional curtain raiser to the education policy year where both Schools Ministers traded initiatives on further models for transforming teaching while the Paper came in the form of the Government Response to last year's Education Committee Inquiry into School Partnerships and Collaboration. So how do things stand now?

### Two Ministerial Speeches

For the Government, David Laws used his [speech](#) to spell out more details about the Government's Talent Leaders Programme, a Programme announced by Nick Clegg last year in which a so-called 'champions' league' of head and deputy head teachers would be literally 'dropped' into schools that needed help.

In his Annual Report last month, the Chief Inspector had highlighted a continuing gulf between best and worst performing schools and for the first time added regional figures to show where the worst cases were. The Government believes strongly in the virtues of a self-improving system and the Talented Leaders Programme is the latest initiative to support this by trying to shift support to where it's most need. It's not a case of "*parachuting in hero heads*" as the Minister was at pains to point out, it's more about deploying proven expertise and sharing success. "*We want outstanding schools to take a leading role in the training and professional development of teachers, support staff and school leaders and to help to raise standards through school to school support.*" As a proposition, it may throw up some logistical problems but for the moment the aim is to have the programme ready for launch this spring and for a hundred 'talented' leaders to be out there within the next two years.

For the Opposition, Tristram Hunt used his [speech](#) to set out his Party's proposals for "*educational excellence*" through a fully qualified and supported workforce. He too was keen to make thing clear, focusing on enhancing rather than licensing: "*this is about elevating teachers to be all they can and should be, professionals whose job is so important it requires the highest standards.*"

The Opposition has made a big play for a fully qualified profession. It believes a flaw in the Government's assault on standards is its lack of commitment to this principle and intends to consult between now and 2015 "*with teachers, professional bodies and trade unions on the criteria for revalidation, the mechanisms for implementation and how best to raise the standard of professional development on offer.*" This may involve support for a Royal College, it may also involve re-looking at career paths but the challenge remains how best to re-define the profession without a) adding a range of bureaucratic hurdles and b) undermining the status of the profession. The description of teachers as "*project designers and subject specialists*" suggests plenty of room for further thinking.

### The Government Paper

Both Ministers in their respective speeches made much of school partnerships and collaboration as an important ingredient in raising performance and the theme of school collaboration emerged again this week with the Government's [Response](#) to the Education Committee's recent Inquiry into the matter.

In its Report last autumn, the Committee had broadly supported the current policy direction of academy chains, system self-improvement and so on but did make a number of recommendations. These included giving Ofsted powers to inspect academy chains, calling on

Government to evaluate school partnership initiatives to determine what works and formalising procedures for schools who might want to leave academy chains.

In its Response Paper, the Government acknowledged these points but declined to go much further. On inspections, it argued that Ofsted already had requisite powers and granting them other specific powers to inspect sponsors for instance "*would not provide any information that the DfE doesn't already have.*" On collecting evidence of impact, the Dept already does this and the National College for Teaching and Leadership already observes and reports on the data while on firming up the procedures for schools to leave chains, the Dept argued that this doesn't happen very often and while they might consider further guidance, they are wary of anything that could destabilise the whole ship.

So it's pretty much as you were in this area though perhaps with three interesting questions remaining. First, should the role of Local Authorities in school improvement be more clearly articulated or is this an area being left to commissioned support? Second, as Dr Seldon argued this week, should independent schools take a stronger lead in this area, replicating perhaps the success of the sponsored London Academy of Excellence? And third, given the importance of developing employability skills for young people should a stronger vocational chain be established? FE currently has a small part in these developments but should it be greater or is that where Career Colleges come in?



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