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Pocket Watch – Ofsted prepares to inspect local authority school improvement arrangements

Introduction

Next month Ofsted intends to begin looking at how local authorities support school improvement and this week it set out how it was going to do it. The move follows further concerns about widening gaps in school performance highlighted in performance tables published earlier this year. Ofsted followed up concerns by launching a consultation on proposals for inspecting this area of work which have led to the publication this week of an inspection framework with accompanying handbook. The framework adopts many of the principles now being used for school inspections including a limited notice period, in this case up to five days, and a range of performance descriptors, in this case nine, although it won't use the same four-point grading scale, opting instead for a strengths/weaknesses report and where required, notice of re-inspection

Context

It's nearly 10 years since school improvement support arrangements were formally inspected by Ofsted and of course a lot has changed in the interim. For a start, the school system has become more diverse and autonomous so for example Ofsted won't be concerning itself with support arrangements for Academies unless there are performance issues that affect the authority's overall responsibilities. The local authority role too has changed to focus more on the provision of core services and performance monitoring while school improvement systems have equally changed with considerable responsibility devolved to schools often working in chains and partnerships and commissioning support where necessary. The danger in such a system is that some schools develop better high-quality improvement systems than others with obvious consequences on overall school performance, hence Ofsted's interest in this area

How will these inspections work?

Not every authority will have the pleasure of such an inspection, a lot depending on whether concerns have been raised but where they do take place, they will typically last up to five days and hone in on how effective support arrangements are, recognising that these may differ significantly from one authority to another. As such, inspectors will be looking for what works and how this can be proved rather than a standard approach. They will look at a range of sources of evidence including local strategic plans and data sets, speak with a range of people from the Director of Children's Services to local head teachers and use a 'best practice' set of nine key aspects grouped under four areas: corporate leadership and strategic planning; monitoring, challenge, intervention and support; support and challenge for leadership, management and governance; and use of resources. Findings will be reported in the normal way within three weeks

What happens next?

Ofsted already inspect a number of local authority services particularly in the area of child protection and safeguarding and will be looking to add inspections of the arrangements for supporting school improvement from June 2013



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Ofsted and supporting school improvement May 2013