A woman with dark hair and bangs, wearing a light blue hoodie, is leaning over a young boy with dark hair and bangs, wearing a white shirt. They are both looking intently at a laptop screen. The woman's hands are on the laptop keyboard. The boy is resting his chin on his hand, looking at the screen with a focused expression. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

**School
choice and
accountability:**
putting parents
in charge

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CENTRE:FORUM

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■ Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Executive summary | 4 |
| Introduction: accountability in a decentralised, choice-based education system | 5 |
| 1 The purpose of school accountability systems | 6 |
| 2 The short history of school accountability in England | 7 |
| 3 The characteristics of the English school accountability system | 9 |
| 4 The shortcomings of the English school accountability system | 11 |
| 5 The coalition government's reforms to the accountability system | 15 |
| 6 Creating a school choice and accountability One Stop Shop | 17 |
| Conclusion | 26 |

■ Executive summary

Education is too important to be delivered without scrutiny. Parents, the government, further and higher education institutions and employers all have a right to know how pupils and schools are performing.

There is good evidence to suggest that the accountability system boosts school and pupil performance; another reason why external stakeholders are so supportive of its existence. No one wants to return to the situation that pertained in England until the 1980s where only teachers knew – and were deemed to have a right to know – what went on in the classroom.

Unfortunately, in our determination to measure school performance and drive school improvement, we have allowed the accountability ‘tail’ to wag the education ‘dog’. Since failure to meet performance targets brings with it potentially grave consequences, the effort to satisfy central government and its agencies has come to dominate almost every aspect of contemporary schooling. This creates a large number of perverse incentives for school leaders and teachers, of which four have become particularly commonplace:

- The incentive to ‘teach to the test’
- The incentive to narrow the curriculum
- The incentive to focus on particular pupils
- The incentive to steer pupils towards particular subjects and qualifications

To overcome these and other effects, we have created a web-based tool that is designed to achieve two things:

1. To empower parents to choose schools and to hold them properly to account. In the jargon, we are seeking to replace the current system of ‘administrative accountability’ with a system of ‘market accountability’, so that the pressure on schools to deliver a first rate service will come from the below, from parents, rather than from above, from politicians and officials. As liberals, we believe such a system is inherently superior – parents and pupils are better placed than bureaucrats to decide what it is they want and need from a school. It is also likely to prove significantly less burdensome on schools and less distorting in its effects.
2. To provide parents with a new system for comparing school performance through the creation of a rating system that awards every school a mark out of 100. This rating system, based on 19 sub-indicators of school quality, should sit at the heart of the market accountability system and should replace government Achievement and Attainment Tables and the newspaper League Tables as the primary measure of school effectiveness. The 19 sub-indicators – some of which, like attainment and progress scores, are well established, some of which, like pupil destinations, are new – are weighted according to their relative importance. Together, they provide a more rounded and sophisticated impression of a school’s performance, and, crucially, are far less susceptible to ‘gaming’.

The new system – designed to inform parental choice and to increase parent power – rests on the creation of a ‘One Stop Shop’ school accountability and choice website. As a fully interactive tool, the site is designed to provide parents and pupils with all the information they need to make objective judgements about different schools’ relative strengths and weaknesses, and to allow them to search out schools that meet their own circumstances and preferences.

■ **Introduction: accountability in a decentralised, choice-based education system**

The coalition government has a bold vision for England's schools. Through a process of far-reaching supply side reform, it is opening up state funded primary and secondary education to new providers. Diversity, competition and choice are the watch words. Increasingly, parental preference, rather than central planning, will shape the system.

CentreForum has long called for the liberalisation of our public services, and of state funded education services in particular. After decades of centralisation, accelerated under the last Labour government, we believe policy makers have reached the limits of what can be achieved by 'flogging the system' from Whitehall. A further ratcheting up of standards will only be possible if schools are required to compete for pupils and given the freedom to innovate and experiment as they do so.

It would be a mistake to think that an injection of market discipline into state education will obviate the need for a formal school accountability system, however. If anything, the need for reliable information about the strengths and weaknesses of different schools will increase as choice and competition are extended. This is because information will increasingly need to flow downwards to parents as well as up to government: in the former case, to ensure the schools market functions properly; in the latter case, to put pressure on schools where market forces are weak or non-existent and to alert regulators when the market fails.

1. The purpose of school accountability systems

The arguments for having a system to hold schools to account for the service they provide are compelling and widely accepted.¹

Most obviously, given the importance of education to a child's welfare and future prospects, parents need to be able to make informed choices about which school they send their child to. Once there, they have a right to be kept informed about the performance both of their child and of the school, relative to other children and schools.

Government, on behalf of taxpayers, needs to know whether public money is being effectively spent. It needs accurate and useful data to inform policy and to trigger remedial interventions where services have fallen below an expected standard and where efforts at self-improvement have manifestly failed.

Finally, further and higher education institutions and employers need schools to prepare young people for additional study and for work. They need reliable indicators of individual competence and potential to assist them in their admissions or recruitment processes.

School leaders also need data to help them allocate their human and financial resources just as classroom teachers need performance data if they are to measure their pupils' progress and make any necessary adjustments to their teaching methods. Unlike parents, universities, colleges, employers and policy makers (all of whom need standardised between-school data) teachers need a constant flow of granular, in-school data capable of continuous, real-time interpretation and application. The ultimate goal is a genuinely personalised model of instruction that stretches pupils to the limits of their individual capabilities. Important as this is, however, it is essentially about school self-improvement, rather than school accountability. Consequently, it falls largely beyond the scope of this paper which addresses instead the question of how to make schools externally accountable to parents and government.

¹ A 2009 survey of parents by the National Confederation of Parent Teacher Associations found that 96 per cent agreed it was important for parents to know how well each school performs; 87 per cent wanted to be able to compare schools; and 90 per cent wanted to be able to compare the performance of schools that were alike in terms of context, location and circumstances.

■ 2. The short history of school accountability in England

The story of school accountability in England is largely one of 'administrative accountability', that is to say, a system designed to help politicians and officials hold schools to account. This is linked to, but distinct from, 'market accountability' which flows from schools to parents.

The administrative accountability system rests on three pillars: local authorities, the independent national inspectorate (Ofsted), and the Department for Education, each of which can intervene when they judge schools to be failing (sometimes referred to as 'consequential accountability'²). These interventions range from the provision of additional resources and support to more drastic measures, with the closure of a school the ultimate sanction.

So high have the stakes become that the effort to meet government performance targets and gain the approval of inspectors now dominates much of what schools do.

The contrast with the way English schools used to be run could not be starker. Until the Education Reform Act of 1988, decisions about what and how to teach rested with teachers. Schools were visited by local authority inspectors, but there were no formal criteria against which performance could be measured. Because children sat no national tests until they were 16, it was impossible to draw meaningful comparisons between different schools. Such was the opacity of the system during the post war decades that it became known as "the secret garden"; a place to which only teachers were granted access.³

The change in public and political opinion that was later to force open the maintained schools system to external scrutiny can be traced back to events at the gates of William Tyndale School in the London Borough of Islington between October 1975 and May 1976. Throughout that winter, the school's predominantly working class parents protested at the heavy price they believed their children were paying for what they saw as an ideologically motivated and deeply flawed experiment in progressive, child-centred teaching. It began a power struggle which brought into sharp relief the question of who controls schools. It also influenced Prime Minister Jim Callaghan's direction-setting 'Ruskin' speech in the summer of 1976 in which he first raised the question of school accountability and asserted that teachers were not the only group to have a legitimate interest in education.⁴

Despite this, significant change did not arrive until Margaret Thatcher's third term when, in 1988, her government introduced a national curriculum, regular national testing and national performance reporting. The accountability system was further strengthened four years later by John Major's government which created an independent national inspectorate, led by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools in England which later became the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). These two pieces of legislation put in place the institutional architecture of the accountability framework we have today and meant that, for the first time, standards could be systematically measured and failure identified. This, combined with the publication of school league tables in the national press, was to have a profound impact on the national education debate.

2 Hanushek and Raymond, 'Does accountability lead to improved school performance?' National Bureau of Economic Research, 2005.

3 The term 'secret garden' was first used by Lord Eccles, Minister of Education, in 1960.

4 Kathryn Riley, 'William Tyndale "nourished agenda"', TES, 18 October 1996.

With the manifest inadequacies of large numbers of schools exposed by the unflattering light of media scrutiny, politicians had no option but to act. And none did so with greater zeal than Tony Blair, who campaigned in the 1997 general election on a “zero tolerance” platform, promising to “wage war” against failing schools.⁵ The age of high-stakes teaching and testing had arrived.

To tackle the problem of endemic failure within a minority of schools the Labour government introduced a dizzying array of school improvement initiatives (Education Action Zones, Excellence in Cities, Fresh Start, the National Challenge, the Academies programme and others). And to tackle more widespread problems, it subjected all schools to an unprecedented degree of micro-management. Emblematic of this trend were the National Strategies, which dictated to schools precisely how, what and even when they should teach, with literacy and numeracy hours introduced, teaching methods prescribed and detailed priorities laid down. But as Ofsted noted:

“Too much monitoring by too many people did not always tackle weaknesses but simply continued to identify them. The schools and local authorities visited were often overwhelmed by the volume of centrally driven initiatives, materials and communications.”⁶

We highlight this criticism not to argue that school improvement strategies had no positive impact, but to illustrate the fact that in just 20 years, England’s maintained school system had moved from a model of ‘high autonomy, low accountability’ to the exact opposite.

5 Nicholas Pyke, ‘Education is social justice, claims Blair’, TES, 18 April 1997.

6 ‘National Strategies: a review of impact’, Ofsted, February 2010.

■ 3. The characteristics of the English school accountability system

As mentioned, the three bodies to which each maintained primary and secondary school is accountable for its performance are the local authority, Ofsted and the Department for Education in Whitehall.

Local authorities are tasked with monitoring school performance and helping schools improve, not least by appointing School Improvement Partners (serving heads, former heads and local authority advisors) to provide assistance, advice and challenge. Ofsted inspectors visit and observe schools before producing inspection reports containing qualitative and quantitative analysis setting out whether and where schools need to improve. The Department's judgements are based on quantitative measures alone; it rates school performance against a range of statistical criteria and sets this out in achievement and attainment tables.

The primary purpose of any system of administrative accountability is to measure performance as a first step towards securing improvement. This process begins within schools, and is led by head teachers and governors.

Local authorities

The process of *external* accountability begins with the local authority, which appoints a designated School Improvement Partner (SIP) to each school in its jurisdiction. The SIP has two functions: to mediate between the school and external stakeholders at the local and national level, and to provide support and challenge during the continuous process of self-evaluation and self-improvement. Whether the SIP can be considered part of the external accountability structure is moot, however. Some schools view their 'partner' as just that: a member of the team, dedicated to self-assessment and self-improvement. Others are more defensive, viewing the SIP as an outsider; a part of a coercive, even hostile, system of government inspection and assessment.

The confusion surrounding the role of SIPs stems from the fact that the local authorities that appoint them are unequivocally a part of the external accountability system, endowed, as they are, with statutory powers of intervention. These include the power to require a school to enter into partnership with another institution for the purposes of school improvement; to appoint additional governors; to replace the governing body with an Interim Executive Board; and to take back a school's delegated budget.

In practice, local authorities have been reluctant to use these powers, preferring to use every non-statutory means at their disposal to drive improvement.

Ofsted

The Office for Standards in Education has responsibility for inspecting all maintained English schools (as well as early years settings, colleges, teacher training institutions, adult education providers and local authority children's services). School inspections are carried out by 1,000 independent contractors working alongside 250 members of Her Majesty's Inspectorate. Schools deemed 'good' or 'outstanding' are inspected every five years, while 'satisfactory' and 'inadequate' schools are inspected every more frequently. Some inspections are carried out with one or two days' notice; others with no notice at all. They normally last two days, and lead, after a short delay, to the publication of a report in

which the school and its efforts are described, assessed and rated, with the school being placed into one of the four categories listed above.

In assessing the strengths and weaknesses of a school, inspectors must consider:

- The quality of the education provided
- The extent to which the education meets the needs of all pupils
- The educational standards achieved
- The quality of leadership and management
- The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils
- The contribution made by the school to community cohesion
- The contribution made by the school to the well-being of its pupils (with well-being defined by reference to pupils' physical and mental health, their social and economic well-being and the extent to which they are kept safe from harm and neglect, given access to recreation and enabled to contribute to society)

In total, Ofsted is required to measure school performance against 27 different sub-indicators.

In addition to assessing school effectiveness, Ofsted also has a duty to encourage school improvement, although attitudes differ, even within the Inspectorate, as to precisely what this means. To some, Ofsted's role is simply to catalyse improvement through inspection. To others, it is to help secure that improvement by engaging more directly with individual schools.

The Department for Education

Central government holds schools to account through the compilation and publication of achievement and attainment tables, and the issuing of specific performance targets.

The achievement and attainment tables include: test scores; a Contextual Value Added (CVA) score which weights raw attainment statistics to take account of context; comparative test scores; pupil profiling data; statistics about children with Special Educational Needs (SEN); and pupil absence rates.

The government sets schools a number of performance targets, the most important of which is the key stage 4 'floor target'. Originally, the target was for schools to ensure that at least 25 per cent of their pupils obtained five A* - C grade GCSEs (or equivalent). This has since been raised three times, first by increasing the proportion of pupils that needed to get five good GCSEs to 30 per cent, then by tightening the definition of five 'good' GCSEs by insisting English and maths be included. Most recently, the 30 per cent target has been increased again, this time to 35 per cent. Alongside this, a new measurement has been introduced, identifying the proportion of pupils in each school achieving an A* - C grade in the five core academic disciplines of English, maths, a science, a humanity (geography or history) and a modern language, collectively designated the English Baccalaureate.

These achievement and attainment tables are regularly presented in a 'league table' format by the media, ranking schools from best to worst, with raw attainment data (non-weighted test scores) given greatest prominence.

4. The shortcomings of the English school accountability system

It should be stated clearly at the outset that, not only does the school accountability system exist to serve the legitimate desire of parents, government, universities, colleges, employers and the wider society for information about the performance of schools and pupils, but there is good evidence to suggest that the existence of such a system boosts performance. In comparing different education systems across different countries, the OECD finds that external accountability has a major positive impact on how well children do, with particular benefits for the disadvantaged and for minority groups whose performance is systematically underrated by internal assessment.

In comparing England to Wales, which ceased publishing school performance tables in 2001, researchers at the University of Bristol found: *“systematic, significant and robust evidence that abolishing school league tables markedly reduced school effectiveness in Wales”*.⁷ The impact they found was indeed remarkable – the average drop of 3.4 percentage points in the proportion of pupils in each school achieving at least five good GCSE passes is of equivalent size to the expected performance gain from reducing class sizes by 30 per cent.

That this is the case is striking, but unsurprising. The criticism of the contemporary school accountability system in England is not that it fails to improve performance against those outcomes – like the key stage 4 floor target – that it measures and prioritises. Rather, it is that the process of measuring and target setting creates perverse incentives for schools which deliver unintended and undesirable consequences for pupils. As a rule, what gets measured gets done. The concern is that there are things schools do, or should do, that do not get measured. The consequence is that these things may not get done, or at least, not done well.

As we have seen, the intention is that the task of monitoring school performance and intervening to improve standards be carried out, in the first instance, at the local level. But the capacity of local authorities and their appointed School Improvement Partners (SIPs) to do so varies. Some SIPs have more time to devote to the task than others, just as some have more talent for the task than others. A widespread complaint is that the relationship between SIPs and schools is too focused on the process of filling out the Self-Evaluation Form (SEF) which, for many schools, has become more of a box-ticking exercise than a genuine attempt at individual and organisational learning.⁸

It is also clear that local and central government often have quite different attitudes towards both school assessment and the appropriate role of government in the assessment process. Local authorities tend to favour a collaborative approach, in which they provide schools with support rather than challenge. Central government favours a more robust approach in which underperforming schools are confronted, if need be with the threat of sanctions. The tension between the two was all too evident in the Department for Children, Schools and Families' warning, in 2009, that:

“There is evidence that some authorities are not taking the opportunity to use their statutory powers effectively...The Government therefore proposes to take a new legislative power to require authorities to consider formal warning notices where these are clearly justified by the school's performance...Where local

7 S Burgess et al, 'A natural experiment in school accountability: the impact of school performance information on pupil progress and sorting', Centre for Market and Public Organisation, University of Bristol, 2010.

8 De Waal, 'Inspecting the Inspectorate: Ofsted under scrutiny', Civitas, 2008.

authorities fail to take the steps needed, the Secretary of State will use the powers available to him to ensure provision is improved, whether in individual schools or across the local authority.”

Behind the dispute between local authorities and the department about how muscular government should be when holding schools to account lies a more fundamental difference of opinion about what constitutes a ‘good school’. Local authorities, like the teaching unions, tend to take a wide view, emphasising schools’ community and social responsibilities. Central government, by contrast, has come to take an increasingly narrow view, focused on academic attainment.

Ofsted also stands accused of placing too much emphasis on academic attainment when compiling its predominantly qualitative reports. This is despite the fact that it is charged with reporting on school effectiveness across a wide range of measures, many of them non-academic. In 2006-07, for example, 98 per cent of the 6,331 primary schools and 96 per cent of the 1,282 secondary schools inspected received the same inspection verdict overall as they received for the ‘achievement and standards’ sub-heading. By contrast, 41 per cent of primary schools received the same overall verdict as they received for the ‘enjoyment’ sub-heading.⁹ This may be as it should be. While everyone wants children to be happy at school, few would argue that having fun is more important than learning. The point remains, however, that Ofsted’s judgements appear to be determined, overwhelmingly and increasingly, by measures of pupil achievement.

The way in which academic achievement is measured has also changed in recent years. The initial emphasis on raw attainment data shifted with the introduction of contextual value added scores (CVA), which sought to measure pupil progress while taking students’ family backgrounds into account. The use of CVA remains controversial. Some believe it provides a much fairer account of school effectiveness since it levels the playing field between schools with advantaged and disadvantaged pupil populations. Others believe it draws too deterministic a line between deprivation and low attainment, excusing, rather than explaining, relatively low achievement. Both sides in the debate would agree on one thing, however: that the formula used to calculate CVA scores is so impenetrable that most people, educationalists included, do not really understand it.

The backstop in the accountability system was intended to be the Secretary of State and the Department for Education. Yet the achievement and attainment tables they publish and the performance targets they issue have come to dominate not only the other parts of the accountability system but almost every aspect of contemporary schooling: the children schools prefer to admit; the subjects they teach; the pedagogy they employ; the resources they allocate; the qualifications they pursue – all are influenced by the over-riding need to meet the various performance targets set by central government.

Four perverse effects on school behaviour have become particularly evident. In order to boost results and the school’s position in performance tables, teachers have an incentive to:

- ⋮ Teach to the test
- ⋮ Narrow the curriculum
- ⋮ Focus on particular pupils, especially those most likely to progress and those on the borderline of target grades (particularly those on the D/C borderline at GCSE)
- ⋮ Steer pupils towards particular subjects and qualifications

The first two of these have the effect of hollowing out the educational experience as children are forced to 'cram' for particular exams, taking and retaking 'mock' tests and taught only those aspects of those subjects that are likely to be feature in the real exam. The worry is not only that the knowledge and understanding gained tends to be shallow and superficial, but that the soulless manner by which it is transmitted can dim children's enthusiasm for learning for years, if not for life.

The third problem – the incentive to focus on particular pupils – has the obvious problem of leaving very high performing and very low performing pupils relatively under attended to and under stretched. In part, this is because it is harder for these pupils to demonstrate 'progress' – those already achieving the highest marks can only hope to maintain their performance, while those who find themselves adrift have often given up hope altogether. By contrast, schools have every reason to prioritise middle-ability pupils, not least because of the importance of ensuring they end up on the right side of the C/D borderline at GCSE.

In September 2009, evidence of the lengths to which schools will go in order to help these students came to light when a teacher leaked his/her school's internal staff emails which identified just over 70 pupils – around a third of the GCSE year cohort – for extra support. The pupils were named in the e-mails as the "target intervention group"; taught together in several classes by the most experienced teachers and given individual support and additional instruction in maths and English.¹⁰ It may be regrettable, but for a school struggling to get more than 30 per cent of its pupils to achieve five good GCSEs, the fact remains that time spent getting an F grade pupil to achieve an E grade is, effectively, time wasted. Thus, a well intentioned attempt to drive up standards for the benefit of pupils has ended up systematically placing the interests of some pupils above the interests of others, and the interests of the school above all else.

Exactly the same dynamic has led to pupils being entered for exams that are likely to boost a school's standing in the Department's tables, but which may be of little interest or benefit to the student. This problem has been compounded by the system of 'equivalence' which seeks to locate vocational qualifications within the existing framework of recognised awards. Until 2006, GNVQs in 14 subjects ranging from leisure and tourism to information and communications technology were deemed to be equivalent to 4 GCSE passes, a fact that led many schools to shun traditional academic subjects like science, languages, history or geography.

A 2005 study by the Times Education Supplement (TES) found that the fastest improving schools in the country were boosting their standings in achievement tables via the GNVQ route. For example, at five of the seven most improved schools in England that year, no pupils achieved a C grade or better in GCSE science.¹¹ By 2010, the favoured equivalent qualifications had changed, but the trend remained. Just under 1 million GCSE A* - C equivalent passes were awarded through BTEC First qualifications (non-exam, work-related courses deemed equivalent to academic GCSEs) that year, compared to 871,360 passes awarded in English and maths combined. What is more, BTEC pass rates were far in excess of those for academic GCSEs. 99 per cent of grades awarded to BTEC First diploma students (worth 4 GCSEs) were at least a pass, while for BTEC First certificates (worth 2 GCSEs) the pass rate was 97 per cent.

Little wonder that the number of registrations for BTEC Firsts more than doubled in just two years, rising from 287,437 in 2008 to 580,173 in

10 W Mansell, 'Schools focusing attention on middle-ability pupils to boost results', Guardian, 21 September 2010.

11 W Mansell, 'League tables push pupils to easy options', TES, 13 January 2006.

2010.¹² Another set of vocational awards – the OCR National First Award (worth 1 GCSE pass), the OCR National Award (worth 2 GCSE passes), the OCR National First Certificate (worth 3 GCSE passes) and the OCR National Certificate (worth 4 GCSE passes) – have also proven highly popular, with entries for level 2 IT qualifications rising 669 per cent in the two years to 2010.¹³

None of this is to suggest, as some have, that all pupils should be forced down the academic route.¹⁴ Rather, it is to point out that the equivalency system is flawed in the sense that some qualifications are easier to obtain than others. This creates a perverse incentive for schools to herd pupils towards the easiest qualifications to boost their standing in league tables and to meet government targets which makes it all the more important that the courses pupils are encouraged to take are robust and the qualifications of real benefit. This in turn makes the fact that many of the vocational qualifications for which schools enter their pupils are of limited value, all the more regrettable.¹⁵

12 W Mansell, 'BTECs lead the chase', TES, 27 August 2010.

13 W Mansell, *Ibid*, TES 2010.

14 D Bassett et al, 'Core business', Reform, 2009.

15 A Wolf, 'Review of vocational education - the Wolf report', Department for Education, March 2011.

5. The coalition government's reforms to the accountability system

The coalition has declared its intention to slim-down and simplify the accountability system to make it less burdensome and constraining for schools, more accessible and useful for parents and more tightly focused on schools' core educational purpose. Crucially, it has also promised a "more sophisticated" approach to measuring pupil progress and achievement to reduce schools' ability to 'game' the system.

The overarching vision set out in the government's schools White Paper is one we strongly support: of an accountability system which requires schools to spend more time answering to parents and less time answering to politicians and officials.¹⁶ To deliver this vision, the government has promised to

"dismantle the apparatus of central control and bureaucratic compliance...removing the centrally-driven process of target setting, the requirement for every school to have a school improvement partner (SIP) and the requirement for every school to complete a self evaluation form."

It has also promised a more proportionate approach to inspection.

From the start of the 2011-12 academic year, schools deemed 'outstanding' will be exempted from routine inspection, while those judged to be 'inadequate' will receive termly monitoring visits. 'Satisfactory' schools will be divided into two groups – those which are improving and have good capacity to improve further, and those which are stuck. The latter will be more likely to receive a monitoring visit from Ofsted within the next year, and may be judged inadequate if they have not improved. In making its assessments, Ofsted will in future look at just four things: pupil achievement, the quality of teaching, leadership and management, and the behaviour and safety of pupils.

The aim of helping parents choose schools and hold them properly to account will be advanced by providing parents with more information in what the government promises will be "an easily accessible on-line format". This information will include:

- attainment in specific subjects
- attainment trends over time
- class sizes
- attendance levels
- the composition of the pupil body
- financial information
- admissions information and oversubscription criteria
- the school's curriculum
- the school's phonics and reading schemes
- arrangements for setting pupils
- the school's behaviour policy and home school agreement
- the special needs policy
- information about how the school uses the Pupil Premium (additional revenue funding attached to pupils from low income households)

The government is also committed to reforming its achievement and attainment tables. It has promised to look afresh at how these could better recognise vocational qualifications so as to avoid incentives for

¹⁶ DfE, 'The Importance of teaching: schools White Paper', HMSO, 2010.

schools to use these as a short cut to the fulfilment of the key stage 4 floor target. It has signalled its intention to get rid of CVA scores, claiming *“it is morally wrong to have an attainment measure which entrenches low aspirations for children because of their background”*.¹⁷ Instead, it plans to set out more prominently in performance tables how well all pupils progress, warning that it expects schools *“to make as much effort with a lower achieving or higher achieving pupil as with one whose achievement means that they are close to a threshold”*. Finally, it has promised to publish information about the progress and achievements of two different but overlapping sub-groups: pupils in receipt of the Pupil Premium and the lowest attaining 20 per cent of pupils.

With regards to the all important floor target, the White Paper has this to say:

“We will define a new minimum, or ‘floor’ standard, which we will expect all schools to meet. This standard will be higher than in the past, because we think it is right that minimum expectations should continue to rise. But it will also be more carefully calibrated: some schools take in children who have very low levels of prior attainment and do a very good job of helping these children to progress. So, the new floor standard will include an expected standard of both attainment and progression. For secondary schools, a school will be below the floor if fewer than 35 per cent of pupils achieve the ‘basics’ standard of 5 A-C grade GCSEs including English and mathematics, and fewer pupils make good progress between key stage two and key stage four than the national average. For primary schools, a school will be below the floor if fewer than 60 per cent of pupils achieve the ‘basics’ standard of level four in both English and mathematics and fewer pupils than average make the expected levels of progress between key stage one and key stage two. In future, we plan to make the floor at secondary level more demanding by including science; and because we expect the system to improve year on year, we plan to continue to raise the floor standard over time.”*¹⁸

17 Ibid, DfE, 2010.

18 Ibid, DfE, 2010.

■ 6. Creating a school choice and accountability One Stop Shop

The government's planned reforms will take the accountability system in a direction we are happy to endorse. We want to see schools given far more freedom; so does the government. We want the accountability system to be less onerous and bureaucratic; so does the government. We want the system to create fewer perverse incentives and to be less susceptible to gaming; so does the government. We want to see parents given more usable information in a more accessible format; and so does the government.

Nevertheless, putting all these elements together in a way that will transform, rather than incrementally improve, the system will not be easy. The danger is that, rather than creating a system of meaningful market accountability, these reforms end up simply modifying the existing system of administrative accountability with the result that schools continue to respond to government targets, rather than parents' wishes. If the government is serious about inverting the system so that the pressure on schools to deliver a first rate service comes from below – from those who actually use the service – then it needs to find a way of engaging parents, actively and continuously, in the accountability process.

To do this – to create a place where the abstractions of competition and choice become real and relevant – we propose the government creates a school choice and accountability website, a prototype of which we have created for illustrative purposes. The rest of this paper is devoted to an explanation of what such a site might look like, what information it should contain and what it could contribute to the twin goals of informing parental choice and improving school accountability.

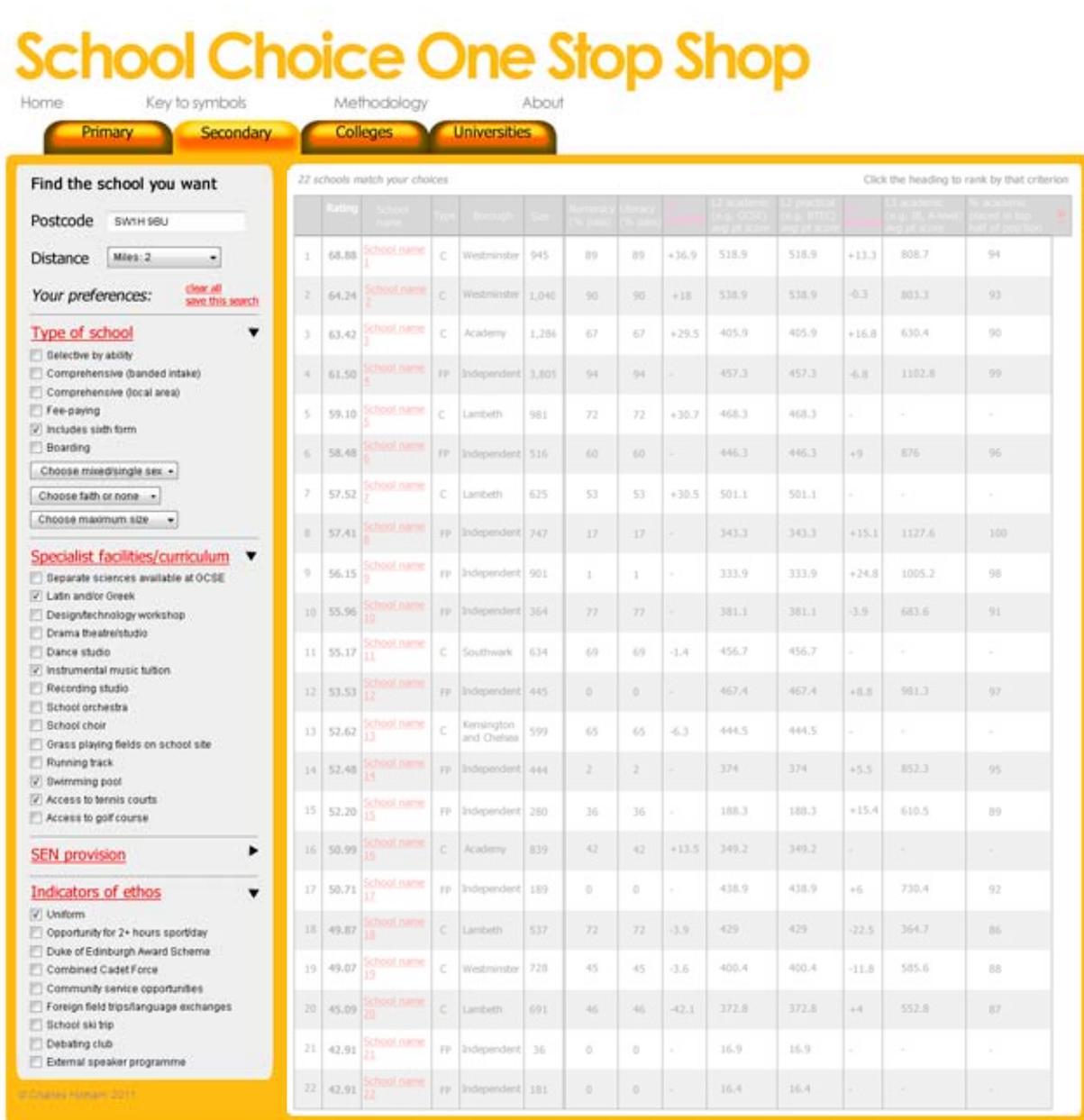
To illustrate how the site works, we have presented performance data (real where available, invented where not) for every secondary school within a two mile radius of the CentreForum offices in Westminster, London. We have removed the names of the schools and replaced them with numbers.

The home page reflects the site's two core functions: to help parents choose schools, and to help all external stakeholders in the accountability system – but particularly parents – gain a better and more sophisticated understanding of school and pupil performance.

The left hand side, shown in Figure 1 (over page), is where parents looking to choose a school will start by entering their post code and indicating how far they are prepared to travel from home to school. They are then presented with four types of filter – school 'type', school 'specialism', indicators of school 'ethos' and SEN provision – to help them identify schools that match their particular preferences or circumstances. This side of the website is concerned not with measures of quality, but of 'fit'.

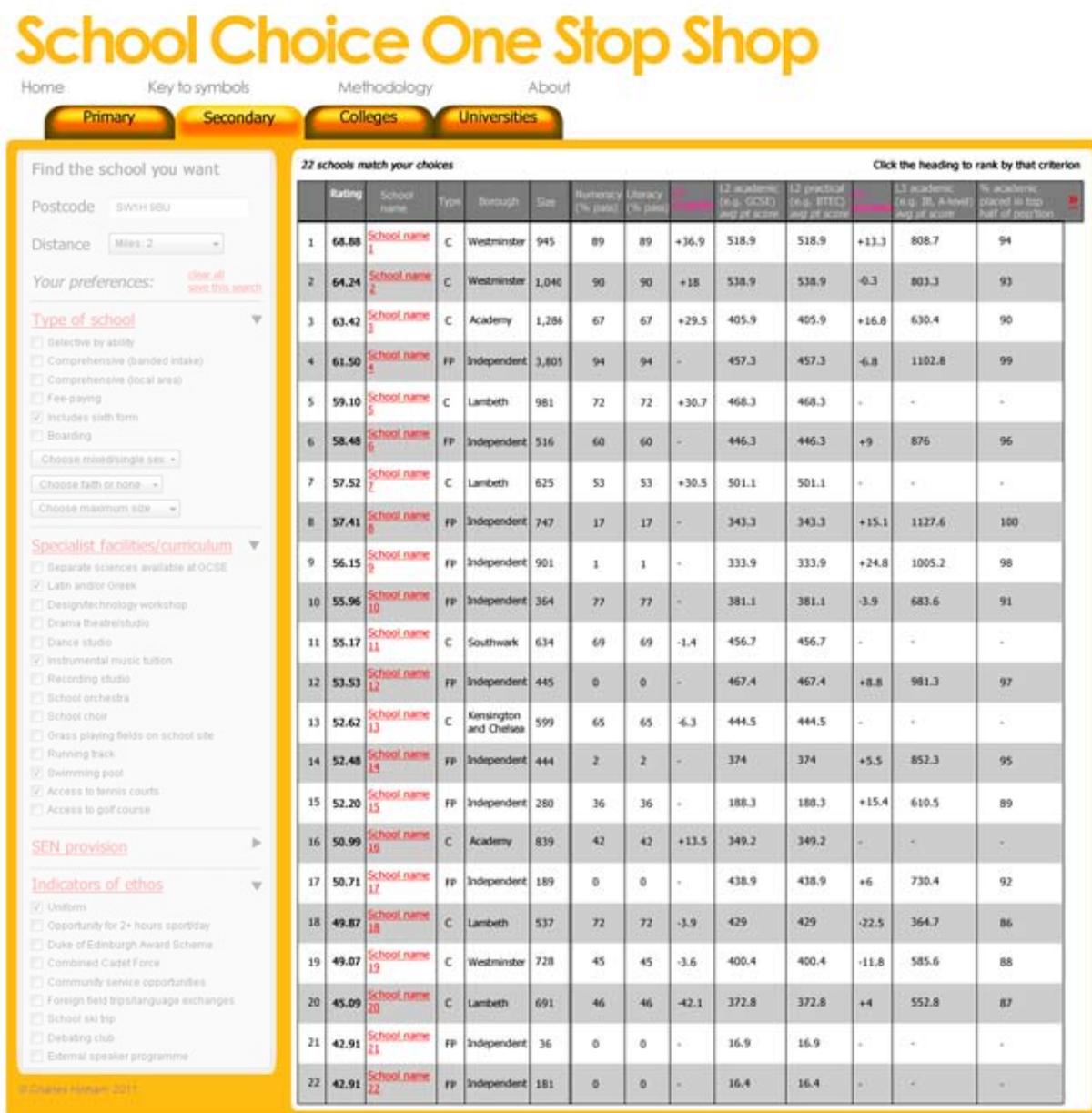
The importance of fit – of finding a school that is right for your child – will increase as the system diversifies: parents want to know how different schools perform, but they also want to know how they match up to their own educational philosophy and their child's aptitudes, interests and needs. Two schools might be equally successful in getting similar pupils to the same level of attainment but do so in very different ways. How big a school is, whether it is single sex or co-ed, whether it has a uniform, whether it divides pupils into sets or streams, whether it offers a broad or narrow curriculum, an academic or vocational emphasis – all these things matter to parents. So too do schools' attitudes to things like religion, discipline, homework, sport or extra-curricular activities.

Figure 1 – Finding the right type of school



The right hand side of the home page (see Figure 2 opposite) presents a picture of school quality in the form of a reformed interactive league table. The table ranks all the schools that match the user's 'search' preferences according to a range of performance indicators, some of which, like attainment and progression scores, are already in use; some of which, like pupil destinations, are new. By clicking on each of the different performance indicators along the dark grey banner at the top of the table, users can reorder the rankings according to the measurement chosen. The default ranking – and the one parents and the media are likely to be most interested in – is set by schools' overall 'rating' measure, shown in the first column to the left of the school's name. The rating measure – shown as a score out of 100 – is based on a composite of all the quantitative and qualitative performance indicators set out in the dark grey banner, weighted by relative importance.

Figure 2 – Judging school performance and progress



Giving schools an overall rating score

The composite figure used to rank schools on the website homepage has not been used in school league tables before now. University rankings produced for newspaper ‘higher education guides’ have done this, however, and with apparent success.

The rating score is calculated by amalgamating all the other performance measurements displayed across the top of the table and weighting them by (a subjective judgement of) their relative importance. These are set out in Table 1 over page. Clearly, decisions about which performance measurements to include, and about the weight attached to each, are likely to prove controversial. If the government was minded to produce such ratings, it would need to consult widely among schools, parents and other stakeholders to ensure the methodology used was widely accepted.

The use of an overall rating score, based as it is on 19 sub-scores, is designed to minimize the distortions caused by the use of fewer, narrower

Table 1 - Calculating schools' overall ratings

| | | |
|--|-------------------|-----|
| Numeracy & literacy measure | | 10% |
| Progression / value added | | 30% |
| Level 2 academic/GCSE results (looking at the proportion pupils achieving particular grades, at average point scores, and at the average number of subjects taken) | 50% ^{i*} | 10% |
| Level 2 technical/BTEC results (including a grading system that corresponds to academic equivalents) | 50%* | |
| Level 3 academic/A-level results – as above | 40%* | 10% |
| Level 3 academic/A-level % of pupils in top half of population | 10% | |
| Level 3 technical/BTEC results (including a grading system that is as sophisticated as for academic equivalents) | 40%* | |
| Level 3 technical/BTEC % pupils in top half of population | 10% | |
| Destinations 1 year on: in education (using UCAS and university data already collected, but collated in a more coherent and integrated way) | 33.3% | 5% |
| Destinations 3 years on: in education | 33.3% | |
| Destinations 5 years on: in employment/education | 33.3% | |
| OfSTED judgement (with 'outstanding', 'good', 'satisfactory' and 'inadequate' scoring 10, 7, 4 and 1 respectively) ² | | 10% |
| Parent survey (already done by OfSTED, but given it its own measure - % satisfied) | | 5% |
| Student survey (as above) | | 5% |
| Curriculum range (i.e. no. of subjects offered) | | 3% |
| Staff turnover % (inverse) | | 3% |
| Student retention % | | 3% |
| Attendance % | | 3% |
| Exclusions % (inverse) | | 3% |

i Where 50% of previous year's cohort took that type of qualification (academic/technical): percentage to reflect proportion of students taking that category of qualification.

ii Also suggested by C Wood, 'Making choice a reality in secondary education', The Social Market Foundation, 2005.

benchmarks which are more susceptible to gaming. As noted earlier, the achievement and attainment tables published by the government, converted into league tables by the media, and underpinned by specific performance targets backed by the threat of intervention, have had a profound effect on school behaviour. What we are proposing is a more sophisticated ranking system which we hope will allow parents and government to judge schools on their broad provision, and which should create incentives for school leaders to improve education in the round. While the way in which the rating is calculated is intentionally complex, the rating score itself could not be simpler: a mark out of 100. Research undertaken by the last government in preparation for the planned

introduction of a 'School Report Card' shows that parents are strongly in favour of having a single rating by which to judge schools.¹⁹

As mentioned, parents can, if they wish, over-ride the compound score and personalise the league table to reflect their own interests or priorities. They can do this by clicking on any of the headings, thus automatically reordering the rankings. This gives users of the site the ability to compare schools according to the performance indicators of greatest importance to them. If, for example, they knew their child had a particular aptitude for practical subjects, parents could choose to rank the list of chosen schools by performance in practical or technical subjects at either level 2 or level 3. In this way, the tool responds to parents' wishes both for choice and for reliable, rounded and objective information about school quality.

In our model, 10 per cent of a school's overall rating score is determined by the ability of its pupils to demonstrate competence or flair in the basics of literacy and numeracy. The importance we attach to these core skills stems from their centrality to each pupil's prospects of success in other aspects of their education and, later, in work. We propose that competence be measured in a new designed-for-purpose test, rather than through maths and English exams, as at present. Literacy is not the same as English. GCSEs in English language and literature test a candidate's ability to analyse the use of language in different contexts, whereas literacy is about being able to write in a way that demonstrates a mastery of language – its grammar, structure, vocabulary and so forth. Literacy (and to lesser degree, numeracy) is the essential building block for learning almost all other subjects and can be taught through them. By measuring literacy and numeracy through a simple test (similar to the skills tests incorporated in the civil service fast stream application process or the Qualified Teacher Status exams), schools will be given the freedom to promote literacy and numeracy through the teaching of other subjects, with the result that the curriculum need not be distorted towards literature and algebra at the expense of the arts, humanities and sciences. Pupils would be awarded a pass, merit or distinction, giving them the opportunity to prove they have acquired the functional skills that employers value.

We propose that the greatest weight be attached to a measurement of pupil progress; we suggest 30 per cent of the total rating score. There can be no more important test of effectiveness than the degree to which teachers help pupils learn and develop during their time at school. At present, progress is measured by comparing pupils' test scores against prior attainment (in the case of secondary schools, by comparing key stage 4 results to key stage 2 results), adjusted to take socio-economic context into account (CVA). Michael Gove, the education secretary, objects to the contextual measure on moral grounds and has signalled his intention to abolish it. We therefore talk only about progress, or value added. We wait to see how the coalition government plans to measure it.

There is a danger that schools with large numbers of pupils with high prior attainment rates will be punished by this system as they clearly have less scope for demonstrating progress: this is where the use of multiple indicators within a composite rating system comes into its own. What these schools may lose on the progress measure (and there are very few schools outside of the fee paying sector where all pupils are high achieving on entry) they should make up elsewhere, particularly on the attainment measures.

The next two performance indicators, which together account for up to 20 per cent of a school's overall rating score, measure attainment at level 2 (academic/GCSE and technical/BTEC) and level 3 (academic/A Level and technical/BTEC). Schools without a sixth form will obviously not return any level 3 scores and will need their attainment scores recalculated accordingly.

¹⁹ 'School Accountability and School Report Card', (Counterpoint and DCSF).

There is no obvious way of eliminating the qualification equivalency problem if some qualifications are seen to be more difficult (and therefore of greater value) than others. Parity between vocational and academic qualifications, and between particular qualifications within these two categories, cannot be bestowed from on high by politicians. How much higher and further education providers and employers value particular qualifications is a judgement for them. We have therefore limited ourselves to recommending a more limited reform – of introducing the same grading system for vocational qualifications as for academic qualifications (an A*, A, B, C, D, E, F, G or U, rather than the diminished Pass, Merit, Distinction system). This will make pupils' grades (if not the qualifications themselves) more directly equivalent and should help overcome the perverse incentive created by the fact that very few pupils 'fail' a vocational qualification, certainly compared with the number of pupils receiving a GCSE grade D or lower.

One of the more radical innovations in the league table is the measure of students' achievement at level 3 relative to the rest of their cohort countrywide. This information would be presented as a proportion of pupils in each school's cohort in the top half of the distribution, both for academic and technical qualifications. To avoid stigmatising schools and pupils, the position of those in the bottom half of the distribution would not be disclosed. Pupils in the top half would be told in which of the top five deciles they came. This will be of considerable value to them, but also to universities, colleges and employers who we know are becoming increasingly concerned about the diminishing signalling power of level 3 qualifications caused by grade inflation. With more and more parents aspiring to a university education for their children, this measure is also likely to be valued by many families choosing a secondary school.

The inclusion of information about the destinations of recent leavers gives an impression of the school over the long term. It also leap-frogs the proxy output measures of educational success (like exam results) and offers up a real outcome measure instead: the success of the school's alumni. And because it is a genuinely external measure, it is difficult to manipulate. This weakens the incentive to teach to the test and 'cram' since it measures the school's success in imparting skills and knowledge of lasting benefit to students.

The 10 per cent of a school's overall rating score that relates to its latest Ofsted report is designed to reflect the high value added that the inspectorate brings to the accountability process, particularly through its independent and expert qualitative analysis of school performance.

The combined 10 per cent that relates to the parent and pupil surveys reflects the importance we attach to schools responding to the demands and concerns of students and their families. So much of what makes for a good school – and so much of what it takes to help a student succeed – is down to parents; schools can only do so much. We want schools and parents to work together in partnership, and the inclusion of these two measures will increase the incentive for them to do so.

An indication of how many subjects a school offers, and in particular how many are used to determine the other league table measures, is very important for parents and government to ensure that a broad curriculum is provided and that children's education is not being distorted.

While the inclusion of staff turnover statistics in the league table might, in isolation, encourage the retention of poor teachers, in reality the importance of retaining a high proportion of good teachers to achieving all the other measured outcomes makes this inconceivable. The advantage of including this measure is that it should encourage schools to recruit high quality teachers; to keep staff happy and motivated; to

invest in training; to offer development and promotion opportunities; and to prioritise continuity and stability in staffing, which we know to be of benefit to pupils.

There has been a concern that some schools find ways to remove students from their school roll in order to avoid a negative impact on their statistics.²⁰ A measure of student retention would mitigate against this and would make visible those schools where disproportionate numbers of parents remove their children mid-year or where large numbers are excluded. The latter would suggest the school had not adequately managed behaviour. Attendance statistics are valuable indicators for similar reasons, but should not be given undue weight due to the multitude of other factors involved.

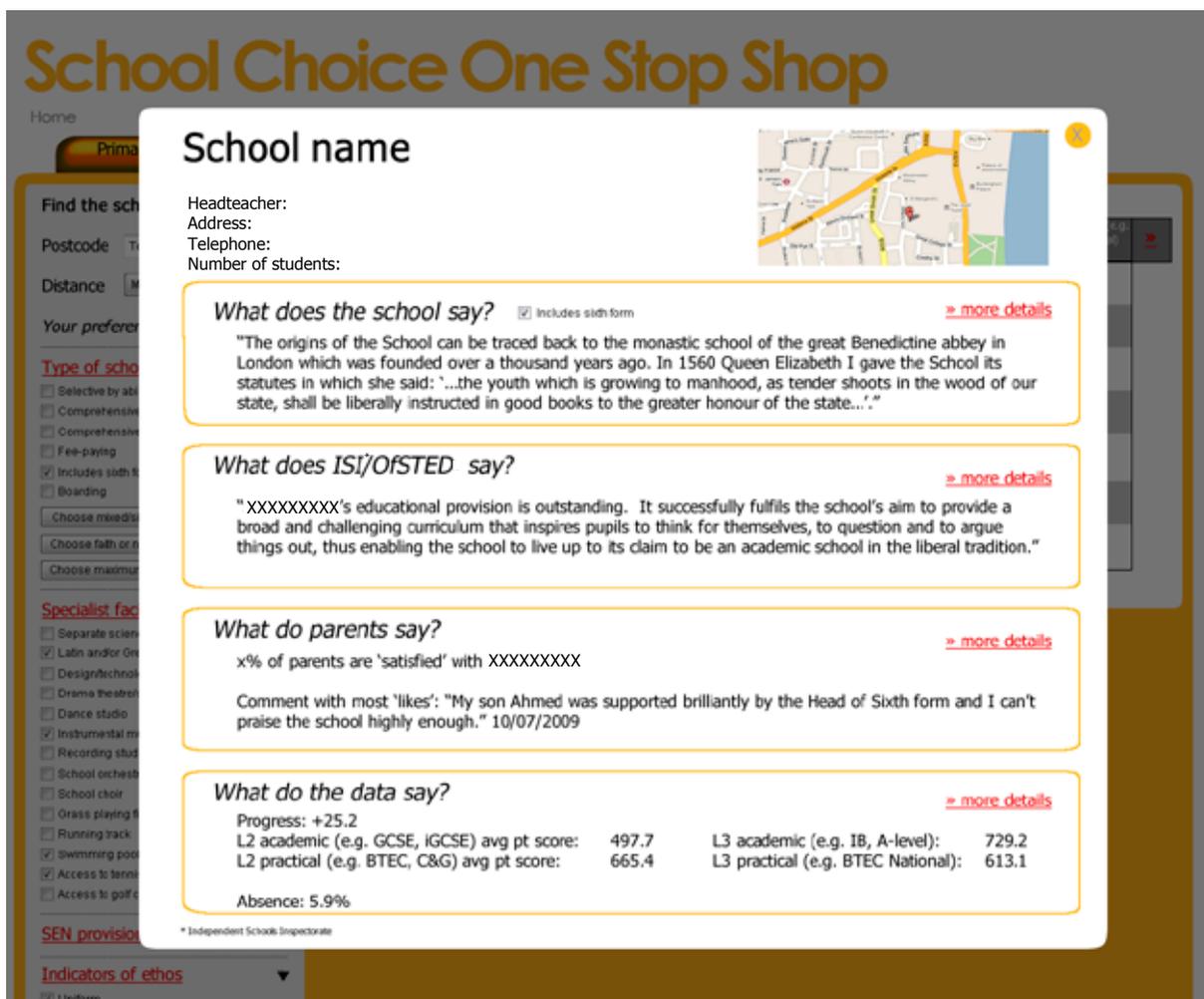
Providing more detail on particular schools

Parents looking to choose a school will, of course, want more information than is provided on the home page, either in the school characteristics panel on the left, or the school performance table on the right.

By clicking on the name of a particular school, they will be taken to a 'landing' page, an example of which is provided in Figure 3 below.

This summary page offers school contact and location details and four further options: information provided by the school itself, usually in the form of a prospectus; information contained in Ofsted reports;

Figure 3 – Individual school summary



20 S Burgess et al, 'Who wins and who loses from school accountability?The distribution of educational gains in English secondary schools'.

a link to the government's attainment and achievement tables and other official statistical information about the school; and a parent forum where opinions can be submitted, read and endorsed and where parent satisfaction rates are recorded.

The parent forum provides a mechanism for capturing and sharing the insights of existing and former parents. These insights are, of course, partial. But because they are based on real experiences, they often provide a valuable sense of a school's ethos, culture and mood – things Ofsted reports and performance tables can never fully convey. Clearly, if the government were to create such a forum, it would need to think carefully about how it would be policed to prevent personal or defamatory comments being posted (See Figure 4).

Parents would be directed to the School Choice One Stop Shop website either through word of mouth, public information campaigns or by their local Admissions Adviser. The vast majority of parents will, in our view, be both able and keen to use the site. We are aware, however, that for some, a lack of internet access, computer literacy or English language proficiency could represent a barrier, which is why local authorities need to take a proactive approach to ensuring that the most marginalised families have access to the same educational choices as the rest of the population.

Most of the data needed to make the site work are already collected by schools, so any extra administrative burdens should be minimal. Schools would provide destination information collected via an online survey,

Figure 4 – Parent forum

School Choice One Stop Shop

Home Key to symbols Methodology About Back to tables Back to school summary

Name of School [Make comment](#)

Sort by: [Most recent/Oldest](#) [Highest star rating/Lowest star rating](#) [Highest number of 'likes'/lowest number of 'likes'](#)

★★★★☆ [Like \(35\)](#) [Report](#)

Parent comment appears here, sorted by the criteria links above, with facilities for endorsement (via the 'Like' button) and for reporting personal comments, inappropriate contributions, etc.

10/09/2010

★★★☆☆ [Like \(6\)](#) [Report](#)

Parent comment appears here, sorted by the criteria links above, with facilities for endorsement (via the 'Like' button) and for reporting personal comments, inappropriate contributions, etc.

15/08/2010

★★★★☆ [Like \(12\)](#) [Report](#)

Parent comment appears here, sorted by the criteria links above, with facilities for endorsement (via the 'Like' button) and for reporting personal comments, inappropriate contributions, etc.

23/07/2010

which could either be supplemented or verified by that published by UCAS and universities (for those students who go into higher education). The characteristics that allow the filtering and choice function of the website would need to be self-reported annually in place of the self-evaluation form.²¹

The Department for Education should host the site, though need not necessarily administer it. In our view, the site cannot be entirely privately run; government needs to be involved to ensure the accuracy of collected data and, if necessary, to compel schools to submit the required information. In time, as schools come to value the site as a key way of demonstrating quality and attracting pupils, the government's role in extracting data should diminish.

What makes the site different from other school choice websites and league tables?

There are a number of school choice websites already in existence. Most provide basic information about the school's location and links to OfSTED reports and school websites. Some attempt to compile league tables based on OfSTED ratings and some exam results data, but none has succeeded in rivalling the publicity of the league tables published in newspapers.

The newspaper league tables are based on an even smaller number of performance indicators than the achievement and attainment tables published by the government. Consequently, a narrow view of school performance is made narrower still, with all that means for distorting school and teacher behaviour. What is more, they are presented on a take-it-or-leave-it basis; they cannot be reordered according to parental priorities as our interactive table can.

By taking such a wide range of measures into consideration in calculating each school's overall rating, we acknowledge that we run the risk of further complicating the performance measurement process and confusing parents. This makes the design of the website a key issue; we have proposed the use of 'pop-up' explanatory notes, for example, to help the user de-code government jargon (CVA, SEN etc.).

We also propose that the website include information about independent, fee-paying schools, as well as those in the state-funded sector. With the advent of academies and free schools, the boundary between the two sectors is, in any case, becoming increasingly blurred. We welcome this. Allowing parents to compare all schools in their area should exert upward pressure on the quality of all provision, while exerting downward pressure on the price of private provision.

■ Conclusion

Education is too important to be delivered without scrutiny. Yet we have, in our determination to measure school effectiveness and drive school improvement, allowed the accountability ‘tail’ to wag the education ‘dog’; our high stakes system of consequential accountability now dominates almost every aspect of state-funded education, with hugely damaging consequences.

The coalition government has signalled its intention to find a better balance between accountability and freedom, introducing fewer, broader targets and giving schools more autonomy to decide how best to meet them.

While we welcome the direction in which the government intends to travel, we worry that its proposed changes will fall short of the transformational change we think is necessary. We want parents, rather than politicians and bureaucrats, to choose schools and hold them to account, and have created a tool to help them do so. The task for government is to take this prototype, improve it and establish it as the key destination for all parents wanting to make meaningful comparisons between different schools. This won’t happen simply by making more impenetrable data sets available to the public via the DfE website. The government needs to put the site – and the composite rating system around which it is constructed – at the forefront of its efforts to expand parental choice and boost school improvement.

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