



Schools in England face a tougher Ofsted regime starting this year. **Mike Boyce** from Granada Learning looks at how school leaders can make sure they are ready



Making Ofsted less of a headache

Receiving the call that Ofsted is on the way is enough to ruffle the feathers of even the most experienced school leader. However, from September 2009, schools will be inspected under a new regime which places even greater emphasis on pupils' attainment, making it harder for some schools to achieve 'good' or 'outstanding' status.

The Ofsted Framework for the Inspection of Maintained Schools in England 2009 heralds a fresh approach to the way teaching and learning are scrutinised in an

inspection. Designed to ensure that schools in even the most challenging circumstances offer the highest possible standards of teaching and learning, the scheme was piloted for more than a year and has been introduced following consultation with schools, parents, governors, inspectors and local authorities.

What do the new inspection rules mean for schools? Under the new regime, the system of grading schools as 'outstanding', 'good', 'satisfactory' or 'inadequate' remains the same but school leaders need to be aware of changes to

the frequency of inspections, which will depend on how a school has been graded in its last visit from Ofsted.

Previously, all schools in England were inspected every three years, but from September onwards this will change and 'outstanding' or 'good' schools may only have to undergo an inspection once in every five years. Schools graded as 'satisfactory' or 'inadequate' in their most recent inspection, however, will continue to be visited by Ofsted every three years. In addition, so-called 'lighter touch' inspections will take place for all schools in between visits, if any concerns are raised by inspectors, parents or governors.

There has been speculation that no-notice inspections will be introduced as part of the new regime, but this is still being debated. Politicians are concerned about the possible impact it may have on schools, the availability of Ofsted inspectors and the process of gathering feedback from parents. However, snap inspections may still occur if issues are raised over pupils' welfare.

Regardless of whether a school is to be inspected every three years or every five, it is vital that it applies the same stringent attitude towards its inspection. As school leaders know, the drive for school improvement is ongoing and there is little room for complacency.

Schools have been going through the process of self-evaluation since 2005, and in that time they have become better at monitoring their progress towards school improvement goals and identifying the strengths and weaknesses of their provision. The school self-evaluation form (SEF) has played a key role in helping to make this a simpler task for schools.

With the introduction of the new inspection rules, schools due to be inspected from October 2009 onwards will need to complete a revised version of the SEF, which was published on the Ofsted website in July 2009. Those schools that are due for inspection before October can continue to use their existing SEF but they will need to transfer over to the new version for all subsequent inspections.

One of the changes that school leaders need to know about is in the design of the new SEF. The document focuses on three key areas – outcomes for pupils, the quality of teaching and the effectiveness of a school's leadership – rather than the seven areas set out in the previous SEF. Schools will be required to grade themselves on the statements in the SEF and give reasons for the grades they have chosen. This can include references to any relevant evidence.

It will be increasingly important for schools to give Ofsted inspectors easy access to accurate and meaningful data alongside the SEF. This evidence will be scrutinised even more closely as part of the new inspection framework to ensure that the school is meeting the needs of every child. Some schools have found the use of an online school self-evaluation system can help make it easier for them to prepare for the arrival of Ofsted.

Key facts about the new Ofsted inspection

- 'Outstanding' and 'good' schools inspected every five years
- 'Satisfactory' and 'inadequate' schools inspected every three years
- 'Lighter touch' inspections may take place between Ofsted visits
- Possible no-notice inspections if child welfare issues are raised
- New SEF for schools being inspected after October 2009
- No change to the school grading system
- Increased focus on pupil attainment, leadership and quality of teaching
- Emphasis on a school's capacity to improve



The amount of preparation required before inspectors arrive can put pressure on schools and increase the workload of teaching and non-teaching staff alike. Using an online system for managing the school improvement process can be an effective way of completing the SEF and collating the wealth of information schools need to provide to ensure that an inspection runs smoothly.

Schools can work more efficiently in preparing for their inspections when key documents such as the SEF and school development plan are stored electronically, rather than in paper files. It is easier to keep them updated throughout the academic year and any data or evidence that will help demonstrate the effectiveness of the school's teaching and learning can be uploaded directly on to



the system. This ensures that the most current information is instantly available when inspection day arrives. It is advisable, however, for school leaders to check that the system they use has been updated to support the new SEF.

As with the previous inspection regime, it will be essential for schools to demonstrate that they are successfully identifying issues such as underachievement and poor behaviour across the school. They will also be required to show clearly that the strategies they introduce are effective in addressing any issues.

Inspectors will want to see that schools are improving outcomes for all children. They will pay particular attention to the achievement of certain groups of pupils, such as those who are looked after or those with special educational needs. There are pupil tracking tools available that can help with this and the information on the RAISEonline website can also be useful.

It is important that the data schools present as part of an inspection helps to substantiate that the work they are doing is supporting pupils' learning. Data on pupils' reading scores over time, for example, and details of the strategies introduced to raise achievement in literacy, can all be linked online to relevant areas of the SEF.

There is an increased focus on pupils' health and well-being under the new framework. Schools will need to show that they offer a range of interesting learning opportunities and activities that are helping to promote healthy living and raise pupils' awareness of the importance of being

safe. Schools need to select the information that best demonstrates the value of their provision. For instance, they could upload the results of a classroom test on healthy foods or attach a questionnaire pupils have completed on bullying onto their online SEF. Images of classroom projects or assemblies could also be included.

Quality of teaching

Under the new rules, school inspectors will be spending more time observing lessons to check on the quality of teaching in the classroom. It would be prudent for schools to make sure inspectors have access to detailed information on how the curriculum is being taught and what topics are currently being covered, to support them in making a good judgement on the day.

Schools using web-based self-evaluation systems can allow people such as governors or contacts from the local authority to access information held online that is relevant to their role, from wherever they are working. Using this facility, schools can enable inspectors to find all the information they need before they arrive at the school. This will help to ensure that the time inspectors spend in school is more meaningful and discussions are focused on the issues that matter. Some systems even enable schools to upload their completed SEF directly on to the Ofsted website before an inspection is due to take place.

Strong leadership can make the difference between a 'satisfactory' school and one that has the potential to

achieve a grade of ‘outstanding’ from Ofsted. Inspectors will want to see how effective a leadership team is at driving whole-school improvement. This will also help them to make important judgements on whether or not a school has the capacity to improve.

By managing school improvement online, school leaders can create transparency in the self-evaluation process and encourage a culture of shared responsibility for raising standards of teaching and learning. Staff specialising in numeracy, for example, can log on and see what actions have been agreed to help raise boys’ attainment in mathematics and add notes or information online to show what progress has been made. Some systems allow deadline alerts to be set up, which help special projects to enhance pupils’ learning to be completed on time.

Maria Gash, the assistant headteacher of Fulston Manor School in Sittingbourne, Kent, has seen many benefits to giving department heads online access to information about school improvement. It has helped them see where the work they are doing to boost pupils’ achievement fits in to the whole school vision. This collaborative approach is key to an effective and productive school. “Having an online system for managing school improvement has put department heads in the driving seat within their individual subject areas,” she explains.

Subject heads can manage their own school



improvement tasks online and the leadership team can log on and see what actions have been taken across the school to support pupils’ learning. “We have found that the system has encouraged department heads to showcase their successes and this gives them a real sense of pride in what they have achieved.”

With budgets being squeezed by the current economic climate, schools will also be under pressure from governors and school inspectors to demonstrate that finances are being managed as efficiently as possible. Some have linked financial information to specific projects online so that department heads can keep track of their budgets as they make progress towards the completion of a task or scheme. At Fulston Manor, information gathered and stored on their online self-evaluation system has helped to demonstrate where investment is needed to support pupils’ learning – and the school has been able to show what impact that investment is having on achievement. This can be incredibly powerful in an inspection.

The success of a school inspection can depend upon the quality and integrity of the information that is provided to Ofsted, so it is essential that schools get this right. Local authority school improvement partners (SIPs) provide professional challenge and support to schools, helping leadership teams to evaluate performance, identify priorities for improvement and plan for effective change. This relationship can be crucial in the preparation for a visit from Ofsted.

Some schools can enable their SIP to log on from their home or office and access all the data that the school will be relying upon in their inspection. This helps them work more effectively with schools to make sure their teaching and learning are meeting pupils’ needs.

Schools are committed to giving their pupils every chance of reaching their full potential. Changes to the Ofsted inspection will not diminish or alter this commitment.

Mike Boyce offers advice and guidance on school self-evaluation for Granada Learning, publisher of the online school improvement system *schoolcentre.net*.

Links

Framework for the inspection of maintained schools in England from September 2009 www.ofsted.gov.uk/Ofsted-home/Forms-and-guidance

Information on the new self-evaluation form www.ofsted.gov.uk/Ofsted-home/Forms-and-guidance

RAISEonline www.raiseonline.org

National Strategies online school improvement tool www.supportingselfevaluation.org.uk

Information on Granada Learning’s schoolcentre.net www.skillsfactory.co.uk/schoolcentre_net