

## Educational accountability in Wales

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Educational reforms since 1988 have led to the development of a more strategic rather than operational role for the Local Education Authority, a shift towards accountability for results and enhanced consumer choice. Although reforms cover both England and Wales, separate cultural influences and administrative structures mean that in practice change takes place in very different contexts. A study, by Catherine Farrell and Jennifer Law, looked at the particular implications of reforms in Wales and found that:

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**f** **The impact of the educational reforms has been more limited in Wales than in England due to:**

- **the very small number of grant-maintained schools in Wales (only 0.8% of schools) meaning that responsibility for the vast majority still rests with the LEAs;**
- **the resistance to the development of a 'market' in education amongst Welsh LEAs;**
- **the consultative nature of the education network in Wales, enhanced by its smaller size, which encourages professional accountability.**

**f** **The emergence of a variety of Welsh education quangos accountable to the Secretary of State for Wales means that more responsibility for education is now held in Wales.**

**f** **Interviews with LEA Chairs found that:**

- **Welsh LEAs feel the market is not an appropriate mechanism to improve quality in education. They prefer to see schools acting in partnership to improve provision rather than competing.**
- **Welsh LEAs are unanimous in feeling that examination results are not an appropriate way to measure performance.**
- **LEAs would like the Welsh Office to be more active in the pursuit of policies specifically oriented to the Welsh situation.**

### Educational reforms and accountability

The 1988 Education Reform Act has altered the role of the Local Education Authority (LEA) from that of service provider to that of enabler, leading to the development of a more strategic rather than operational role and also bringing a shift towards accountability for results and enhanced consumer choice. The 1993 Education Act raised the possibility of a radical reduction in the role and functions of the LEA because of the new arrangements for increasing the number of grant-maintained schools.

One of the objectives of the education reforms has been to enhance market accountability. Since the Education Reform Act 1988 the nature of accountability has changed. Accountability through the local election process has been reduced by reforms transferring responsibility for school inspection, for example, from LEAs. Local political accountability is also reduced when schools obtain grant-maintained status; they are then funded by central government through an unelected body, the Funding Agency for Schools. Individual schools are now directly accountable to parents (as the 'consumers') through the provision of information in the form of examination levels and truancy rates. This form of evaluation, with its emphasis on 'outputs', has also reduced professional autonomy in assessing the education process.

The reforms have increased the number of unelected quangos in the field of education. These are accountable directly through Ministers to Parliament.

These educational reforms have taken place in both England and Wales. However, separate cultural influences and administrative structures in Wales mean that in practice educational change takes place in a different context from that of England.

### Distinctive features of education in Wales

There is a separate administrative structure for education in Wales. Education is directed by the Welsh Office, rather than the Department for Education and Employment, with Welsh 'equivalents' to the English educational quangos. Since 1988, the

emergence of Welsh quangos has led to an increasing level of responsibility for education throughout the principality being held in Wales. At a local level, the service is provided through Local Education Authorities no different to those in England.

Whilst most education policies in Wales are identical to those in England, there are some differences. The Welsh Office has introduced separate reforms of its own, such as the 'popular schools' initiative which allocates extra resources to schools which are oversubscribed. This is intended to promote expansion in these schools and develop a competitive market in education in Wales.

Sometimes the reforms brought in in England are not introduced in Wales, for example, the Schools Funding Council (the Welsh equivalent of the Funding Agency for Schools in England) has not been set up because none of the current eight LEAs in Wales have 10 per cent of their pupils in grant-maintained schools, although this may change after local government re-organisation in 1996. There are only 16 grant-maintained schools throughout the principality; that is 0.8% of schools in Wales compared with 4% in England. Local political accountability therefore still operates over most schools in Wales.

The National Curriculum is different in Wales. The main distinctions are the Welsh language and the Welsh orientation of the school curriculum.

The networks in the education policy community in Wales are close due, in part, to its small size. It is likely that size also has an impact on the relationship between quangos and professional interests in Wales. The relationship between the Welsh Office and the LEAs is consultative (although this does not mean that LEAs support all Welsh Office policies).

The re-organisation of local government in Wales presents new challenges for its LEAs. Existing networks will need to be reconstructed and developed. The identity of an LEA will have to be established with new boundaries, a new electorate, new catchment areas and new parents.

## Views of LEAs

From interviews with LEA Chairs, the study found:

- LEAs would like the Welsh Office to be more active in the pursuit of policies specifically oriented towards education in Wales.
- LEAs in Wales do not support the emphasis in the reforms on accountability through the market. They resist its development and encourage professional accountability. This may be due to the dominance of Labour and Independent control of LEAs in Wales.
- They all encourage partnership, rather than competition, between schools; all LEAs expressed reservations about the appropriateness of the 'popular schools' initiative which they saw as increasing competition. LEAs also encourage networks of schools to share curriculum expertise. Effective partnerships between schools ensure that school catchment areas are maintained.
- LEAs feel the market is not an appropriate mechanism to improve quality in education; one LEA spoke of trying to reduce the influence of the market.
- Many of the LEAs in Wales feel there is no clear line of accountability between them and governing bodies.
- There is a unanimous view from the LEAs that examination results are not an appropriate way to measure performance and that they should not be published in a league table. A number of LEAs have developed their own data for evaluating schools' performance, which take account of local socio-economic circumstances. These are always used internally, between schools and the LEA. In some circumstances, politicians are excluded from this evaluation. This information is not made available to parents in a comparative form.

## Conclusions

The Education Reform Act 1988 changed the role of the LEA from a provider to an enabler. The Education Act 1993 has had little impact in Wales as yet. The low number of schools that are grant-maintained has meant that there is still a strong role for the LEA in the planning of education, as well as its other functions.

## About the study

The research was conducted by Catherine M. Farrell and Jennifer Law at the University of Glamorgan Business School. It involved research with the Directors of Education and the Chairs of the Education Committees in LEAs in Wales.

## Further information

The full report, Educational Accountability in Wales by Catherine M Farrell and Jennifer Law, is published by York Publishing Services in association with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Price £8.50).

### Related *Findings*

The following *Findings* look at related issues:

- 22** Meeting educational needs (Jan 93)
- 39** Current relationships between local authorities, colleges and schools in Scotland (Oct 95)
- 40** The role of Local Education Authorities in the provision of special education (Oct 95)

For further information on these and other *Findings*, contact Sally Corrie on 01904 654328 (direct line/answerphone for publications queries only).