

**Britain's plan to shake up school inspections pleases no one,
Labour replaces a simple but controversial system with a complex, clunky one
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When it took office Labour promised to “reset” relations with England’s unhappy teachers. Last autumn it earned a huge cheer from the profession when it announced that Ofsted, the school inspectorate, would stop handing institutions blunt overall grades (such as “Requires improvement”, and “Inadequate”). Yet the fuzzy feelings evaporated on February 3rd, when the government and Ofsted released fuller details of their plans to change how schools are monitored. Furious unions say the new regime looks even worse than what has come before.

Resentment towards inspectors began soaring two years ago following the death of Ruth Perry, a head teacher who killed herself after Ofsted gave her primary school a failing grade. A coroner concluded that inspection had at times been “rude and intimidating”, and that the experience had probably contributed to Ms Perry’s death. Soon after, Ofsted published tweaks aimed at making its visits a bit less stressful for school leaders. But last year Labour ordered it to cook up deeper reforms.

The proposals put out to consultation this month confirm that schools will no longer get overarching “headline” ratings. Instead, Ofsted is to begin issuing colour-coded “report cards” measuring how well schools perform in a minimum of eight different subdomains, such as “Developing teaching”, “Behaviour and attitudes” and “Inclusion”. For each category, schools are to be handed a grade on a five-point scale.

Though Ofsted will no longer brand any school as overall “Inadequate”, it will still inform the government of institutions it thinks are failing. The worst of these will get the same medicine as at present: takeover by a “multi-academy trust” with experience of turning schools around. But some poor performers will instead receive help from new squads of government troubleshooters (called “RISE” teams). Those boffins will also counsel “stuck” schools: institutions that repeatedly chalk up weak results, without ever doing quite badly enough to trigger automatic interventions.

Bridget Phillipson, the education secretary, believes all this is going to give parents and schools better information than at present. She implied in a speech that a move to more granular “report cards” will make it easier for even very good schools to identify ways they might improve. The hope is that the new RISE teams will cut the time it takes to get failing institutions back on track. The government says its plans will double the number of schools which, after inspections, receive some kind of mandatory help to improve.

Critics on all sides are unconvinced. Supporters of the old regime insist none of this needed fixing in the first place. Years of blunt inspections have helped English schools rise up international league tables, they reckon. Ditching headline grades for mealier-mouthed summaries is a disservice to children; asking inspectors to report on a wider range of metrics risks making their judgments less reliable. The much vaunted RISE teams are embryonic, their effectiveness unknown.

Yet the loudest yowls have come from teachers’ unions, which wanted much more radical reforms. They are happy to see the back of headline judgments. But they are furious that inspectors will instead begin handing schools more grades in more categories than ever before. The Association of School and College Leaders insists the new system will “subject a beleaguered profession to yet more misery”. The National Education Union says the “botched and rushed” rethink will lead only to “continued disaster”. The new regime will not be in place until at least November, by which time school inspections will have been operating under interim rules for more than a year. Should resistance to the government’s plans force a pause or a rethink, the system could end up stuck in limbo for even longer than that. Meanwhile, the furore is drawing energy and focus away from problems—including rampant absenteeism and a swiftly collapsing special-needs system—that almost everyone agrees are extremely pressing. Labour may end up wishing that it had left inspections well alone.