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ACTIVITY PLANNER

Who inspects schools?

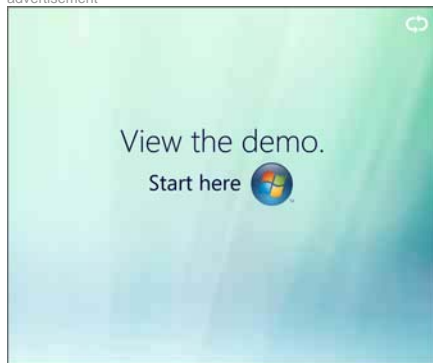
Last Updated: 3:36am GMT 31/01/2008

Who inspects schools?

The Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) ensures schools are up to scratch. The watchdog, which is directly answerable to Parliament, has traditionally inspected England's 22,000 state-funded schools every three or four years. A team of registered inspectors checks the standard of teaching, school leadership, the curriculum, attendance and behaviour, then publishes a report. If the Government is not satisfied it can close the school down.

• Muslim schools to conduct own inspections

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Do the same rules apply to private schools?

Yes. Under existing legislation, new private schools must register with the Department for Children, Schools and Families before they can open. There are almost 2,300 independent schools in England. Half are subjected to the same direct checks by Ofsted as state schools, although they are inspected once every six years.

What about the other half?

This is where it gets complicated. Around 50 per cent of private schools are members of the Independent Schools Council [ISC], the umbrella organisation that represents schools

including Eton, Harrow and Winchester. They were all formerly vetted by Ofsted, but in 1999 the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) was set up to keep an eye on ISC members. This came after concern from some schools that Ofsted did not understand the unique ethos of private schools. In turn, Ofsted "inspects" the ISI, subjecting it to annual monitoring reports.

So what about this new organisation?

In 2006, two other umbrella organisations - the Association of Muslim Schools and the Christian Schools Trust - wrote to the Government saying they, too, wanted to vet their own schools. They wanted inspections carried out by people who understood their distinct Christian and Muslim ethos. Last week, the Government approved the move. Like ISI, this organisation - the Bridge Schools' Inspectorate - will be closely monitored by Ofsted. The new body will only inspect the 110 schools which are members of the two groups - other Christian and Muslim state schools will still be inspected directly by Ofsted.

Is that it?

Not exactly. Focus Learning Trust runs 26 schools on behalf of the Exclusive Brethren, an evangelical Christian sect. They too have won the right to set up their own inspectorate - the Schools Inspection Service. So, in effect, that makes three independent watchdogs, all operating beneath Ofsted.

Is the system rigorous enough?

Ministers are considering new rules governing how these independent watchdogs operate. According to a consultation document published this month, ministers believe inspectors should be experienced in how different schools operate - not just Muslim or Christian schools. They should not have any link to the school involved and clear complaints procedures should be in place to allow for appeals.

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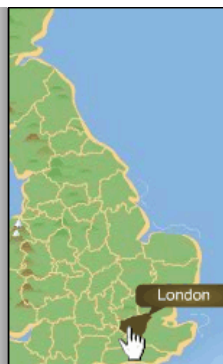

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