

Accounting for School Performance in Scottish Local Authorities

by Linda Croxford and Mike Cowie

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Over the past two decades, local authorities have increasingly been required to evaluate and monitor the performance of their schools as part of the drive towards school improvement and greater public accountability. This *Briefing* describes the approach currently being taken by local authorities to performance measurement and the challenges that they face in interpreting and using attainment data and considers some of the wider issues raised by the growing emphasis on monitoring and accountability. The *Briefing* is based on research carried out as part of the Applied Educational Research Scheme (AERS), funded jointly by the Scottish Executive and Scottish Higher Education Funding Council.

- ▶ Performance management, with a growing use of quantitative measures of performance, has become a common feature of Scottish education. Local authorities are now required to secure continuous improvement in their schools and recent Scottish Executive policies have introduced '*tough, more intelligent accountabilities*'.
- ▶ The quantity and nature of performance data provided by government and its agencies places heavy demands on the abilities of staff in schools and authorities to interpret and use statistical information.
- ▶ The task of analysing quantitative performance measures, and drawing from them appropriate lessons to inform future action, poses considerable challenges.
- ▶ Performance monitoring at the 5-14 stage is hampered by the lack of consistent and reliable measures of attainment. The measurement of performance in primary schools may therefore be based on shaky foundations.
- ▶ The introduction of new forms of testing by many authorities for monitoring purposes is at odds with the preference of parents and teachers to reduce the amount of testing.
- ▶ Publication of 'league tables' may be harmful, but may be enforced by freedom of information legislation.

Background

Performance management in Scottish education can be traced to the public service reforms of the 1980s and 1990s which introduced market principles to public services, including education. Parental choice, national testing, school league tables and target setting were all brought in as part of this process. At the same time, the powers, responsibilities and budgets previously held by local authorities were delegated to schools and more extensive and formal processes of accountability were introduced.

This *Briefing* describes the approaches currently being taken by local authorities' to performance measurement drawing on a recently completed survey of authorities in Scotland (see 'About this study'). It considers the challenges and issues raised by the drive towards school improvement via performance management.

Accountability since devolution

In 2000, the newly established Scottish Parliament passed the *Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Act* which set a new context for school education in Scotland. It introduced a school improvement framework encompassing a set of five National Priorities (Scottish Executive (SE) 1999). A series of performance indicators were identified for each Priority and authorities are now expected to agree targets with their schools for the achievement of these indicators. Authorities also have a statutory obligation to publish an annual 'Statement of Improvement Objectives' in respect of the National Priorities, with targets set for the achievement of the performance measures. Authorities are also required to publish an annual report on their success in meeting their improvement objectives.

The National Priorities are Achievement and Attainment; Framework for Learning; Inclusion and Equality; Values and Citizenship; and Learning for Life. However, "attainment" is easier to measure in practice, than other priorities, and there are well established mechanisms for the collection and monitoring of attainment data. One result has been that attainment is given much more publicity than the other Priorities leading to a perception that the others are of less value.

With the publication of *Ambitious, Excellent Schools* (SE 2004) the pressure for school improvement and public accountability is increasing, with action promised to build 'tough, more intelligent accountabilities'. At the national level, 'proportionate' systems of inspection, focused on outcomes and promoting self evaluation will be introduced. Local authorities are expected to 'drive improvement at the local level'; to 'have robust quality assurance systems and to promote rigorous self-evaluation by schools to a standard agreed with HMIE'.

The 2000 Act makes provision for the inspection of the education functions of local authorities by the Inspectorate. The first round of inspections was completed early in 2005. The inspections encourage authorities to implement the quality assurance procedures required by national government. However, some local authority staff find this role to be at the expense of the curriculum advisory and developmental roles they have played in the past.

Developing performance monitoring systems

The performance monitoring systems that are being developed in Scotland are strongly influenced by the availability of measures of attainment, and in this respect there are key differences between the primary and secondary sectors.

At the secondary stage, national examinations provide valid and reliable measures of attainment. But performance monitoring at the 5-14 stages is hampered by lack of consistent and reliable measures. National examinations are not used at these stages and, in contrast to other parts of the United Kingdom, there is no system of national key-stage testing in Scotland. The Scottish Survey of Achievement, an annual national survey of pupils' attainment in the 5-14 curriculum at P3, P5, P7 and S2, is not suitable since it does not provide the school-level information.

From P1 to S2, assessment focuses on teachers' judgements as to the appropriate 5-14 level achieved by each pupil. Until 2004, local authorities were required to collect this data on pupils' attainment of 5-14 levels from primary schools on behalf of the national government. Most local authorities also used the data for their own monitoring purposes. But now that these data are no longer required by national government there is a question as to whether local authorities will continue to collect and use them. The key issue is what local authorities will use instead.

Moreover, although almost all of the local authorities responding to the survey confirmed that they were attempting to use the 5-14 attainment levels to evaluate performance, it is widely recognised that 5-14 assessments are not appropriate for this purpose. Consequently, most authorities have supplemented them with additional tests. For example, over half use baseline assessment at the start of P1 and many use standardized tests of reading and/or mathematics most commonly in P3, P5, P7, S1 and S2. In some cases these tests have been designed for the English curriculum and there may be some questions about their relevance in the Scottish context.

Understanding attainment data

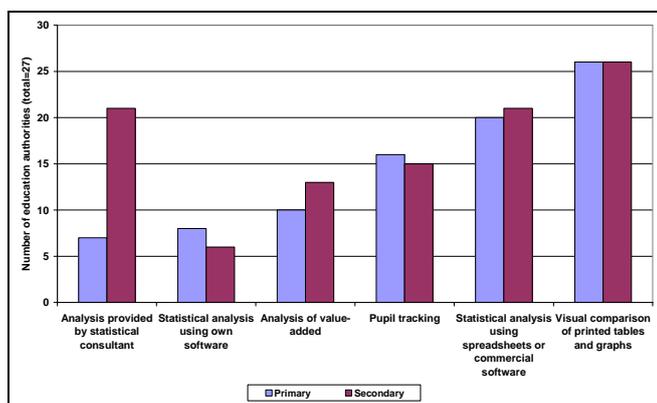
Local authorities receive an enormous quantity of information about secondary schools from the government and its agencies. For example, the Standard Tables and Charts (STACS) is a package of statistical

information about examination performance in each secondary school that is issued each year. They compare performance by subject departments within a secondary school and also compare school performance with national figures. The quantity and nature of the data impose a new requirement for staff in schools and authorities to understand statistical information such as scatter-plots with regression lines to illustrate relative performance in each subject and progress between year stages.

Statistical reports are also provided by HMIE following the 1998 initiative ‘Setting Targets – Raising Standards in Schools’. A set of tables for each secondary school is intended to help it in working towards its attainment targets, and is also used by HMIE to inform their inspection of the school. Each school’s performance is compared with the average of 20 comparator schools with apparently similar intake characteristics (ie similar percentages of pupils entitled to free school meals). The assumption is that any school with lower measures of attainment than its comparator schools is in some way underachieving.

The task of analysing, interpreting and using quantitative data poses considerable challenges for authorities. Most authorities responding to the survey had Quality Improvement Officers analysing data, and over half have specialist staff including research/information officers and statisticians. However, comments suggest that staff with high-level quantitative skills are in short supply.

Figure 1: Methods of analysis by EAs



Methods of analysis vary (Figure 1). In all authorities the basic method of analysis is visual comparison of printed tables and charts. The STACS package lends itself to this because it provides tables and charts for each secondary school, and for subject departments within schools. For primary schools the current management information systems provide *summary* tables that can be used for visual comparison but not at the level provided by STACS, and there is a danger that small differences in these data may be over-interpreted.

Although the statistical analysis in some authorities is very basic, others have developed extremely elaborate systems for analysing their data according to local priorities. About half of authorities carry out sophisticated analyses including value added and pupil tracking – these are predominantly the authorities in which statistical skills are rated as ‘very high’.

A large number of authorities employ statistical consultants to analyse attainment data for the secondary stages and in particular, a group of consultants has established a *niche* re-processing STACS data and adding qualitative statements about each school’s performance. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some headteachers prefer to have the qualitative statements to tell them how well they are doing rather than rely on their own interpretation of the STACS charts.

How do authorities use attainment data?

All authorities provide statistical feedback to schools and also support schools in analysing their own data. However, the extent and effectiveness of feedback to schools may vary, and this will be examined at a later stage of the research.

Authorities reported that they used information about attainment differences in a number of ways (the number of LAs concerned is indicated in brackets):

- monitoring school performance over time (24)
- discussions between the Quality Improvement Officer and the school (24)
- setting targets for the school and authority (23)
- identifying and addressing issues (23)
- focusing initiatives to improve performance (23)
- school self-evaluation (22)
- evaluating initiatives (21)
- discussion of school development plan (19)
- tracking pupils’ performance (18)
- self-evaluation by teachers (16)
- public information for parents (9).

These are in line with the model of quality assurance promoted by HMIE. Typically, the authority’s Quality Improvement Officer uses the information on attainment as the basis for discussion with senior management on regular visits to the school. The attainment data have been described as ‘a can opener’ because observed differences in attainment can reveal underlying weaknesses in school provision that need to be addressed.

Issues

It is clear that government and local authorities are putting a great deal of effort into measuring and monitoring school performance. This places heavy demands on the abilities of staff in schools and authorities to interpret and use statistical information.

We cannot be sure that the amount of effort put into such work is worthwhile.

Quantitative data can sometimes give a spurious impression of precision and objectivity - how reliable is the data typically used to make judgements? There are also questions about the suitability of the outcome measures used to measure performance. Although the measures based on National Qualifications are fairly reliable, those based on 5-14 levels are not. To some extent this is recognised by the decision of the Scottish Executive to stop collecting the 5-14 data, but the survey shows that 5-14 levels are still being used for monitoring and accountability purposes by the vast majority of local authorities. It seems unfair to hold schools to account on the basis of unreliable evidence. A number of authorities have started to introduce other forms of testing in the primary stages, but these may lack validity if they are not relevant to the curriculum being used. Overall, we have concerns that the measurement of performance in primary schools has a very shaky foundation.

The introduction of new forms of testing for monitoring purposes is contrary to the conclusions of the National Debate in Education that parents and teachers want less assessment, especially in the primary stages (SE 2004). It is also contrary to the Scottish Executive's own policy on assessment (SE 2005), which is promoting *formative* assessment (the continuous process of gathering evidence of learning to inform next steps) rather than *summative* assessment (arriving at judgement at a particular point in time). However, formative assessment does not provide appropriate measures for performance monitoring. There are some tensions between the public preferences for less testing, identified by the National Debate, and the government's requirement for performance monitoring, enforced by HMIE. Local authorities have to walk a fine line between the two.

There are also tensions between the desire of authorities and schools to undertake performance management in an atmosphere of trust and confidentiality, and the demands of some members of the public and media for information to be made public. The recent decision by the Scottish Information Commissioner to support demands for the release (and publication) of primary school performance data under freedom of information legislation is a worrying development – the assessment data are not appropriate for this purpose and the 'league tables' themselves are

misleading since they do not take account of differences in school intakes.

The discourses surrounding performance management assume that accountability will lead to improvement, but is this warranted? Tymms and Albone (2002), for example, suggest the demands of external accountability may reduce trust and thus inhibit genuine self-evaluation but that monitoring systems that keep the data and discussions confidential between schools and local authorities are more likely to result in a productive outcome. This is an issue we will investigate at future stages of the research.

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About this study

As part of AERS School Management and Governance network, a network of researchers, local authority officers and headteachers is undertaking collaborative research into aspects of school performance management in Scotland. As part of this research, a survey of Local authorities' current practice in measuring school performance was carried out in spring 2005; 27 of the 32 authorities in Scotland responded.

A fuller article "Measuring and Monitoring School performance in Scotland" appears in the December 2005 issue of *Education in the North*.

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