

**Schools causing concern: government proposals should focus on enhancing their capacity to improve**  
*Melanie Ehren - November 2015*

The Department for Education (DfE) has launched a [consultation](#) on ways to intervene in failing, underperforming and coasting schools. The document puts forward a new set of interventions specifically for ‘coasting’ schools, which are defined as those where fewer than 85% of pupils achieve the floor standards across reading, writing and mathematics in three consecutive years, and where pupils make insufficient progress. These schools would face interventions, such as support from teaching schools or national leaders of education, changes in the governance of the school (e.g. appointing additional governors, or replacing the governing body with an Interim Executive Board), or converting the school into a sponsored academy.

Two questions come to mind when reading the proposals. First, is the definition of a ‘coasting’ school a relevant and accurate one? Does it make sense to frame the definition around past performance of students? Particularly when interventions aim to prevent further decline in performance, or prevent a stagnation of improvement. Should we not define ‘coasting’ schools as those that lack the capacity and culture to improve, and which are not capable of providing high quality all-round education to the children in the school, or are unwilling to do so?

The current focus on achievement does not allow us to identify such schools and offer warnings to prevent them from failing their children. The choice of student achievement results as the primary indicator for ‘coasting’ implies that the schools which will be identified are already failing; inadequate teaching and leadership in these schools have after all led to low student achievement, and not the other way around.

Defining ‘coasting schools’ as those lacking the capacity and culture for improvement (as for example signaled in substantive changes in student or teacher population, staff turnover and sick leave) would be more suitable and would allow us to intervene in schools that may still show good outcomes (as the data is based on school capacity and culture in the past), but where there are high risks for such performance to decline in the future. A number of countries, such as the Netherlands, have developed early warning analyses in an attempt to identify such high risk schools (e.g. using data on teachers’ sick leave and turnover) and to prevent declining performance. We could learn from those models.

The second question concerns the appropriateness of the interventions proposed. Does a change in governing body improve the quality of the school? Research suggests that such an impact is limited at best. Available school effectiveness studies indicate that governing bodies only change student outcomes through their impact on, and provision of, leadership in schools, and through changes in the school’s structures and culture that Claassen et al., 2008; Hofman et al., 2002; Land, 2002; Saatcioglu et al., 2011;. Saatcioglu et al. (2011) describe how school boards’ policies, decisions and activities need to ‘trickle down’ to the school organization and then to the classroom level before they can have an impact on the interaction between teachers and students. School effectiveness studies (see Scheerens et al, 2007) also clearly highlight that it is primarily conditions on the classroom level, such as ‘time on task’ and high expectations of children, that explain high student outcomes. Interventions would therefore be more effective when addressing these conditions.

Ensuring that interventions are appropriate also involves a consideration of the risks that need to be remedied and addressed. Not every risk is serious enough to require sanctions on a school and replace its governing body, and the context in which schools operate will also be different in terms of their capacity to address those risks.

Some schools will have a very supportive environment, with parents who have high expectations of their children's performance and a local education authority that can come in to help. The consultation document very wisely acknowledges these differences in allowing Regional Schools Commissioners and Local Education Authorities to use 'soft intelligence' to decide on appropriate interventions.

Such decisions could however be more deliberate and purposeful when informed by a 'pyramid of interventions' for different types of risks and failure. This notion has been described by a number of scholars as 'responsive regulation' where regulators can escalate deterrence in a way that is responsive to the degree of uncooperativeness of an organisation, and the moral and political (un)acceptability of the risk and failure (Ayres and Braithwaite, 1992). The lowest level of the pyramid would seek compliance by persuasion, while the top level (e.g. issuing an academy order) is preserved for those who are unwilling or unable to comply and improve. The pyramid advocates a more thoughtful process of intervening, which would also allow for the use of more transformational bases of power, such as 'expert' and 'informational' power (see French and Ravens, 1960; Ravens 1965). Expanding the current intervention powers would be more effective if they address the conditions that matter most for high quality teaching and learning, while also being fit for purpose.