



Centre for Education Systems

INTERNATIONAL COMPARATIVE REVIEW

ACCOUNTABILITY POLICY

Summary of country report (3 pages)

Authors: AI generated with human checking
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Northern Ireland

A decorative graphic in the bottom right corner consists of several overlapping, semi-circular segments in shades of dark blue, light blue, and light green, creating a layered, abstract effect.

Authorship. This AI generated summary has been created and checked by the CES team (see ces.partners/resources/methodologies). It is based on the original Country Reports created by EPPI. The author of the full report has not made final checks for accuracy.



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Northern Ireland – AI generated Accountability Policy summary

RQ1: Purposes, Values and Aims

The accountability system in Northern Ireland aims to uphold minimum performance standards, enforce legal and policy compliance, and drive strategic improvement. These aims are underpinned by core public service values of integrity, honesty, objectivity, and impartiality, complemented by the Education Authority's values of excellence and equality. Inclusion is a legally enforceable requirement, monitored through school self-evaluation, governor oversight, and external inspection. A key trend is a shift away from a narrow, academically focused model toward a broader, values-driven approach that integrates pupil emotional health and wellbeing into the framework.

RQ 2 – Levels, measures, and mechanisms of accountability

Accountability is structured across a multi-layered system involving the Department of Education (DE), the Education Authority (EA), Boards of Governors (BoGs), and individual schools. The DE is accountable to the Northern Ireland Assembly, while schools and their BoGs are accountable for strategic direction, educational standards, and financial management. Quality is measured through school self-evaluation, student attainment data, and inspections by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI), which introduced a new improvement-focused framework in September 2024. Vertical accountability is driven by ETI inspections, while horizontal accountability is facilitated through stakeholder feedback and the sharing of good practice. Although official league tables were abolished in 2001, performance data remains publicly accessible through inspection reports.

RQ 3 – Managing change and policy processes

The DE leads accountability policy development, with the ETI playing a key role in informing policy direction through its inspection findings. Major reforms, such as the recent Empowering Improvement Framework, are not bound by fixed legislative cycles but are typically initiated in response to independent system reviews or changing political priorities. The process involves broad-based consultation with stakeholders including principals, governors, and sectoral support bodies to ensure reforms are collaborative and contextualised, focusing on supporting improvement rather than simply ensuring compliance. This approach allows the system to remain responsive to evolving challenges.

RQ 4 – Assessments of effectiveness and evaluation

Evaluation of accountability policy occurs at multiple levels, including school inspections by the ETI and governance audits by the Northern Ireland Audit Office. However, there is no formal, ongoing framework to evaluate the effectiveness of the accountability system as a whole. Consequently, key issues such as the impact on teacher workload or unintended curriculum narrowing are not systematically tracked or monitored. Despite this, evaluation findings do influence policy development, with recent strategies like TransformED NI directly responding to feedback from system reviews.

RQ 5 – Historical, cultural, and political influences

Northern Ireland's accountability policy is deeply shaped by its unique context. Historical religious and cultural divisions have led to a fragmented governance structure, with different types of schools reflecting community identities. The political system operates a hybrid governance model that balances local school management with central oversight from the DE. The legacy of the Troubles has influenced inspection priorities, with an emphasis on social cohesion and emotional well-being. Economic pressures, particularly budget deficits and austerity, are also a significant factor, often forcing school governors to focus on financial survival rather than broader community accountability.

RQ 6 – Impact on outcomes and workforce

Research indicates that inspections cause significantly elevated levels of stress and anxiety for teachers, with negative impacts on their personal lives. Many teachers are skeptical that inspections lead to meaningful improvements, with only a small percentage agreeing they result in concrete actions beneficial to pupils. Some headteachers, however, view traditional inspections as a key motivator for school improvement. Studies on network-based "polycentric" inspections suggest this collaborative model can improve student performance and facilitate the sharing of best practice between schools. Nonetheless, the public accountability function of inspections can create emotional strain rather than fostering constructive change.

Timeline- recent accountability reforms

- **1986 Education and Libraries (NI) Order:** Rationale: To formalise educational oversight. Key Features: Established the statutory duties of inspectors to monitor, inspect, and report on the standard of education provided in schools.
- **2001 Abolition of League Tables:** Rationale: To reduce the negative impacts of school rankings. Key Features: The Department of Education ceased publication of official school performance league tables.

- **2021 A Fair Start published:** Rationale: To address educational inequality. Key Features: An action plan that prioritised tackling educational disadvantage and embedding accountability for pupil wellbeing.
- **2024 Empowering Improvement Framework:** Rationale: To create a more supportive inspection process. Key Features: ETI launched a new inspection model focused on professional dialogue, reduced paperwork, and supporting school improvement rather than compliance.
- **2024 TransformED NI launched:** Rationale: To create a modern, coherent education system. Key Features: A comprehensive DE strategy to reform curriculum, assessment, and accountability with an emphasis on equity and values.