

South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) response to Northern Ireland Assembly Inquiry into the Education and Training Inspectorate and the School Improvement Process

1. Within the SEELB the CASS service oversees school improvement. CASS provides support for schools to help raise standards. CASS also ensures that all schools located in the Board Area, that are required to do so, have an agreed action plan in place to address areas for improvement identified by the Education and Training Inspectorate within the required timescales. Furthermore, CASS provides support to help schools deliver progress against the action plan and in the case of catholic maintained schools, this is taken forward in liaison with the CCMS.
2. Within existing resources, the CASS service prioritises support for schools using the following criteria:
 - i. Schools in the Formal Intervention Process
 - ii. Schools who have received a grade 4 in their recent inspection
 - iii. Schools where performance improvement will have the most effect in closing the gap between the highest and lowest achieving pupils, prioritising Programme for Government requirements
 - iv. Other schools in support of their self-evaluation and school improvement plans
3. The SEELB have considered the terms of reference for the Education Committee's Inquiry and given the degree to which the CASS service works to support schools experiencing difficulties, it was felt that the SEELB could submit written evidence with respect to point 2 namely:

'Identify the key issues impacting on schools experiencing difficulties and any gaps ... in terms of the... support services provided by the ... Education and Library Boards.'

Key Issues Impacting on Schools Experiencing Difficulties

A. Leadership/Governance

- The quality and stability of the Senior Leadership Team (including the Principal) tends to vary leading to inconsistencies and difficulties with providing and sustaining a strategic direction to sustain improvement, and to inspire confidence amongst staff.
- There can be difficulties with the recruitment and retention of effective governors.
- There is a lack of flexibility in the principal recruitment process particularly around the terms and conditions of employment.
- There is a shortage of high calibre candidates applying to principal positions in schools in challenging circumstances.
- There are particular challenges experienced by teaching principals in smaller schools.
- There are challenges for leadership teams with capacity and capability issues in the requirement to address a range of issues identified through inspection within a tightly defined timescale of 12-18 months.
- There are pressures on schools particularly in areas of social disadvantage, targeted for participation in a wide range of educational and/or community initiatives, to ensure that this does not impact adversely on the core business of providing high quality teaching and learning.
- There are challenges within schools to effectively engage in sustained, systematic and rigorous self –evaluation processes to inform school development planning to effect improvement, whilst ensuring accountability at all levels.
- Poor pupil and staff attendance can often impact on the school's ability to improve.
- School policies and procedures may be incomplete, not current, or are being inconsistently implemented.
- There are often poor relationships and/or poor channels of communication, including a lack of effective consultation and dissemination.
- There is often a lack of robust and effective continuous professional development (CPD) in the context of school development planning priorities and the use of school development days.

B. Standards and Attainment

- The overall standards achieved by pupils, particularly in external examinations, is often well below the Northern Ireland average.

- It is often difficult to demonstrate 'value added' within the context of a range of factors e.g. a high percentage of newcomer children, children with special educational needs, which may impact on the overall standards achieved.
- For primary schools in particular, the lack of standardised baseline assessment for children on entry to school makes the measure of 'value-added' more difficult to compare across schools.
- For post primary schools, an inherent tension often exists between improving standards system wide to meet PfG targets and providing courses to meet the needs of individual pupils.
- The use of data, particularly to plan interventions for under-achievement, is not always utilised to optimum advantage.

C. Learning and Teaching

- There is often a mismatch between the pedagogy of the revised NI Curriculum at key stage 3 and the examination courses at key stage 4 and 5.
- There can often be differing expectations of teachers and pupils and difficulties with challenging all pupils by matching the curriculum provision and teaching and learning strategies to their abilities and interests.
- The quality of learning and teaching in literacy/English and/or numeracy/mathematics are often identified as priority areas for improvement.
- There is a lack of a robust procedure to effectively support schools to identify and support teachers whose work is borderline satisfactory or inadequate.
- There is a lack of a rigorous and robust procedure for dealing with teachers whose work is identified as unsatisfactory.

D. Sustainability and Financial Planning

- Sustainability of the school is often linked to schools experiencing difficulties, including pupil enrolment trends, the school's financial position, and standards achieved.
- Financial planning can be less than effective in securing school improvement whether in deficit or surplus.
- Entry in to the Formal Intervention Process, in some instances, may lead to negative media attention which may be detrimental to the profile of the school in the local community and the longer term sustainability.

4. In terms of support services provided for schools experiencing difficulty, it is important that the support services are resourced adequately to meet the challenges of the wide range of issues impacting on these schools. The SEELB CASS service continues to provide high quality support to schools against a backdrop of reduced resourcing and the uncertainties surrounding the introduction of ESA. The proposed

new regional governor support service and regional school development service should go some way to addressing these resourcing issues.