

The Association of Controlled Grammar Schools

INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION AND TRAINING INSPECTORATE AND THE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PROCESS

RESPONSE TO REQUEST FOR WRITTEN EVIDENCE

From The Association of Controlled Grammar Schools

The Association of Controlled Grammar Schools is a group which represents the Head Teachers of the sixteen Controlled Grammar School in Northern Ireland. The group meets regularly to discuss issues of common interest many of which have the potential to have important public impact. We welcome this opportunity to respond collectively to the invitation from the Education Committee to express our views on the issues put out for consultation by the Education Committee on the Education and Training Inspectorate and the School Improvement Process.

We see changes happening to the structure of inspections in Northern Ireland schools, with the apparent intention of making school inspection a much more frequent activity in our schools. We regard inspection on a regular basis for schools that are sustaining healthy intakes and producing good examination results that are above average against the main indicators as not the best use of inspectors' time, unless there are significant changes in the school since the last inspection, such as a significant lowering of results or a change in leadership. The inspection process is often disruptive to the work of teachers and to the day to day running of a school and consequently should not be unnecessarily or overused. The present movement seems to be towards an inspectorate based on the Ofsted model, which has the potential to threaten the good professional relationships that exist in Northern Ireland between schools and the inspectorate and which have effectively quality assured the work in Northern Ireland schools over the years under a number of challenging and demanding Chief Inspectors.

The inspectorate should be using as much data as is available to them and currently value added data is available from most schools. Where it is available it can illuminate the comparative results in the data which the inspectorate collect from schools. In some cases this will show that some schools are achieving far more than is evident from the data the inspectorate collects.

The crude questionnaire used by the inspectorate to survey the staff about the leadership of the school are unreliable and open to abuse by those who have a vested interest in damaging the leadership of the school. This approach within the current inspection framework needs to be reviewed and the expertise of those qualified and experienced in leadership training needs to be used.

The use of free school meals as an indicator of social deprivation is unreliable. Although this is fairly widely known it is still used as a measure when analysing examination results. The inspectorate should look for a more robust measure to use for this purpose.

In an age when examination re-sits alone will not secure either the job or the university course applied for the inspectorate should be much more interested in the evidence of a broad education which encourages a wide range of practical skills, which employers are looking for. The inspectorate process should take account of the enhancement opportunities that are offered by schools, the positive behaviour that is encouraged and the stretch and challenge offered by individual schools. It must ensure that they leave schools no worse off than when they arrived and that they capture those things that schools are doing well as well as those things that need to be improved. The volume of inspection must be matched by the quality of those same inspections, indeed arguably quality is more important than volume.

The inspectorate must be and be seen to be independent of the Department for Education and The ELBs. They must not be seen to be the servants of either of these two groups in the Local Area Planning discussions. This will not be easy for them but they must be beyond reproach in relation to this matter. Indeed their timing of the increase to the volume of inspections is unfortunate.

The improvements brought about through the inspection process must be real improvements in educational outcomes resulting from real improvements to leadership and teaching and learning. Anything less will not represent real and lasting change. This takes time to effect and the notion that schools can be changed almost instantly is a deception. Schools can improve and will improve but with proper strategies adopted within a sensible timeframe.

- Give priority to quality inspections before rushing to increased volume.
- Find a common value added measure.
- Look at all the outcomes not only examination results.
- Replace free school meals with a more robust measure of social deprivation acceptable to all.
- Review the surveys used as part of the inspection process.
- Provide support from Heads and retired Heads to Heads of failing schools.
- Provide support from successful Heads to new Heads.

Peter McCallion
Committee Clerk
Committee for Education
Room 241
Parliament Buildings
Belfast, BT4 3XX
E-mail: committee.education@niassembly.gov.uk