

Catholic Heads Association

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The Catholic Heads Association comprises of twenty-nine principals of Catholic voluntary grammar schools. The association welcomes the opportunity to respond to the inquiry into the Education and Training Inspectorate and the School Improvement process conducted by the Education Committee.

The educational landscape in Northern Ireland is unique and any inspection process should always place schools in that context. The inspection process should best suit the education system in Northern Ireland.

Principals welcome any inspection process which will lead to school improvement and enhanced student outcomes. Such a process should involve genuine engagement between ETI and schools and professional discussion and debate including honest, frank conversations where necessary. When difficulties are identified the school should be informed, recommendations proposed and support given to implement agreed actions. Inspections, by their nature, are rigorous and robust and should lead to a fair rounded judgement. It is vital that the inspection process has the confidence of schools, staff, students, parents and the local community.

The overall approach taken by ETI inspection teams is variable. In some cases the focus seems to be on school improvement through challenging, supportive evaluation leading to establishing pathways for improvement in the quality of educational outcomes. At other times the focus seems to be solely on inspection, evaluation and unhelpful challenge which can lead to confrontation and resistance to change. The overall culture should have a clear emphasis on supportive challenge rather than a wholly

evaluative inspection. There should exist a quality audit process which results in more consistent approach to all inspections.

Schools' experience of the role of the District Inspector is also variable. In some cases schools see the District Inspector very infrequently. There are other examples where schools are visited often by the District Inspector, who provides excellent support and makes a positive contribution to improvement. Given the demise of ELBs/RTU there is a need for district inspectors who are keen to help schools improve.

Members of ETI are hardworking committed professionals. The training for ETI inspectors must ensure that those who, do not have experience of leading and managing a school, are fully aware of the breadth, depth and challenges of the roles within the Senior Leadership Teams in schools. The outcomes of recruitment and training must be that everyone has the highest level of confidence in inspectors.

Boards of governors make an enormous contribution to schools. Members give a lot of time and expertise on a voluntary basis to provide support, leadership and, if appropriate, helpful challenge to principals and their senior leadership teams in schools. Governors have a vital yet onerous role. Boards are constituted with personnel from a wide range of backgrounds and bring their expertise to the benefit of schools. Any increase in the role of Governors could have a detrimental effect on the numbers who would volunteer for such a role. Well organised, high quality training for Governors is required.

Grammar schools' intake to Year 8 is broadening. Much of the assessment arrived at by ETI is based on school performance against a group based norm. Other factors such as socio-economic context, geography, feeder primary schools do have an impact. At the moment there is no agreed value added measure available from DE as a measurement for benchmarking. It would be difficult for an inspection to produce a fair and rounded judgement if there is not an agreed value added measurement.

Schools have grave concerns regarding the use of anonymous questionnaires (staff and parents). The concerns centre on the misuse and manipulation of questionnaires. It seems that questionnaires can be downloaded repeatedly and a person can then submit multiple responses.

Any member of staff or a parent can make negative comments which have no foundation whatsoever without any request for evidence to support such comments. The completed questionnaires are not shown to schools and this adds to a sense of injustice on the part of principals and boards of governors.

The appointment of Associate Assessors is viewed as positive. It enables school personnel to join an inspection team, to see at first hand the inspection process and to have a valuable input to the process.

It is hoped that the comments above are viewed as helpful. The CHA is willing to engage in any further discussions which would have the aim of improving and enhancing an inspection process which would ensure school improvement.