



**Response of the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools to the Northern
Ireland Assembly Committee for Education Inquiry into the Education and
Training Inspectorate and the School Improvement Process**

1. Introduction

1.1 The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (the Council) is the employer of all of the teachers and principals in the Maintained schools sector. It also has responsibility for the standards in those schools.

1.2 Council has very considerable experience of the work of the Education and Training Inspectorate. For example, during the period April 2012 to March 2013 there were 61 inspections in Maintained schools.

1.3 The inspection of schools is one of a number of processes which should work together in their contribution to school improvement. Inspection processes, their emphasis and the frequency with which they occur should fit appropriately with the improvement work that governors and school leaders are undertaking as well as with the work that CCMS and the Education and Library Boards undertake to monitor school progress and provide challenge and support where necessary. This coherence is currently underdeveloped and is something that the Committee of Inquiry might wish to examine.

1.4 Council is very pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to the Committee's inquiry and looks forward to seeing its recommendation

2. The effectiveness of ETI's current approach in respect of school inspection/improvement – considering particularly how ETI assesses the value added in those schools which have lower levels of examination attainment

2.1 The Education and Training Inspectorate has made a very important contribution to school improvement for many years both through its inspection work and its contribution to dialogue and guidance about school improvement. The introduction of Together Towards Improvement (a resource to support schools in the process of self-evaluation) the requirement for schools to make greater use of assessment data and the encouragement of appropriately managed systems for monitoring and evaluating pupil progress, have all made very important contributions to school improvement. However, the education environment is ever changing and it is important that the inspection service keeps pace with current trends and makes the necessary adjustments to what it does when inspecting schools.

2.2 Current practice in inspection examines many aspects of school life including, for example, the views of governors, parents and pupils, quality of teaching, educational achievements, quality of pastoral care and many others. However, the value that is added to the personal, social, physical and spiritual development of the pupils may not be sufficiently acknowledged in inspection reports. More effort could be made to find an appropriate balance between measuring and reporting the academic progress children make and the other very important aspects of their development. There may be very good reasons for the current approach because many of the non-academic aspects of a child's development can only be measured qualitatively. However, by making some changes to the reporting of inspections more could be done to get this balance right.

2.3 The inspection process in Northern Ireland is taking place in a society where academic selection leads to educational segregation both on the basis of ability and of socio-economic status. The

absence of an appropriate social mix leads to a concentration of problems in those schools in areas where the intake is socially unbalanced with high numbers of children coming from homes facing multiple levels of deprivation, and where the post primary curricular offer may be constrained with consequentially poor levels of attainment. This difference in the educational challenge that schools face makes comparison of schools by use of a narrow range of standardised indicators such as the percentage achieving Level 4 and above or the percentage achieving 5+GCSEs at grades A*-C (including English and Maths) very problematic. The failure to employ and report on a wider range of value added measures may also give rise to the perception that some schools are characterised by educational stagnation or decline while failing to give sufficient recognition to the very good work they do given their circumstances. The removal of academic selection and the establishment of an enrolment policy which ensures that schools have a better social mix would help address this problem.

2.4 The current inspection process does not go far enough to measure accurately and reliably the value that schools add for their pupils. While there is an increasing amount of assessment data available in schools, more needs to be done to use it as part of the value added evaluation. A more effective model for assessing academic value added would look at progress against an initial educational baseline position and allow for the impact of special needs and other personal and social factors. It would consider the pastoral and social contexts in which the school is working and include these as part of the assessment of how well the school has done for the children it has enrolled?

2.5 Council acknowledges that there is the need to have an overview of how schools are doing relative to one another and that grouping them into broadly comparable sets may be helpful. However, the inspection process must have its prime emphasis on measuring the school against itself - where has it been on its improvement journey and where is it now? If a school's work is only measured in terms of Key Stage 2 assessment outcomes or GCSE results then much of the other excellent work it does will go unacknowledged. Hard working principals and teachers will be left feeling that their efforts will have come to nothing if the publicly reported account of how they are doing does not reflect the value added given the educational reality of the school.

2.6 Best practice in inspection involves the well informed evaluation of pupil progress during their time in the school. This is based on close observation of the children and an associated study of their school assessment history at individual level. When inspection is undertaken to this level of detail it often finds that, while performing at a relatively low level, many children have made great progress and have had a lot of value added to their education. It is only by inspecting in this way that a true assessment of value added can be achieved.

The need to introduce a wider range of value added indicators is a challenge for the education system to face and is not the sole responsibility of the ETI.

3. Key issues impacting on schools experiencing difficulties and any gaps both in terms of the ETI review process and the support services provided by the Department of Education and Education and Library Boards

3.1 Issues impacting on schools experiencing difficulties with standards can include:

- 3.1.1 The high number of pupils being admitted to nursery, primary and post primary schools with significant developmental or learning deficits.
- 3.1.2 Poor school attendance which can be indicative of a poor parental attitude to schooling and is often associated with low educational aspiration and motivation.
- 3.1.3 Disruptive pupil behaviour which impacts on the success of teaching and learning.
- 3.1.4 Lack of family capacity to support children with their learning and the need for more effective family intervention strategies in schools.
- 3.1.5 Lack of vision, community, team working, challenge and ambition in school leadership.
- 3.1.6 Personnel issues such as strained staff relationships or weak leadership often left unchallenged and unsupported.
- 3.1.7 Poor governor awareness of the reality of the school and the absence of governance practices for monitoring school performance.

3.2 Gaps in the ETI Review Process

To provide a more accurate and reliable evaluation of the quality of provision in a school the inspection process should:

- 3.2.1 Examine specifically the educational (instructional) leadership provided by the principal and senior leaders;
- 3.2.2 Assess the professional relationships within the school community, as this is a major contributor to effective working;
- 3.2.3 Examine the impact of the communication strategies in the school on pupil and parental engagement and on staff commitment to the strategic improvement priorities and actions ;
- 3.2.4 Evaluate teacher effectiveness by looking at pupil progress relative to their educational baseline with account taken of the other factors which are impacting on their education;
- 3.2.5 Seek information about the nature and effectiveness of learning support provided for families and by parents;
- 3.2.6 Examine the role played by governors in promoting school improvement including the presence of a governance plan and the quality of leadership provided by the Chair;
- 3.2.7 Look for evidence of the strength of shared understanding by all staff and Governors of the School Development Plan, the school curriculum, compliance with the Entitlement Framework, strategies for assessing learning and for monitoring and evaluating pupil progress and the quality of staff development;
- 3.2.8 The efforts the school has made to share curricular access, good practice, staff development, planning and resources with other schools;

- 3.2.9 Evaluate the quality and effectiveness of the transitional arrangements with other schools and organisations;
- 3.2.10 Assess the effectiveness of the management of the school budget and resources in the best interest of pupil learning;
- 3.2.11 Record the view of the school about the quality of support provided by the ELB/ESA.

4. Alternative inspection approaches which might better assess value added and recognise improvements in schools

4.1 This is not just a matter for the ETI. It is a system wide matter which would need to be reflected in education policy before being implemented and subsequently inspected.

4.2 When considering alternative approaches which might better assess value added there are a number of issues that need to be considered.

- 4.2.1 An appropriate range of value added measures are likely to have a greater improvement impact than the use of a narrow range of free school meals based benchmarking data currently used and they will do more to inform changes in school improvement policy.
- 4.2.2 Current approaches inspect only part of the value that teaching adds to the education of children. Agreement is required about the aspects of teaching and schooling that we place value on and which might therefore provide the focus for subsequent inspections. The processes by which we establish baselines and reliable progress measures for these also have to be discussed and agreed.
- 4.2.3 Key stage and GCSE data are unreliable indices of educational effectiveness and should not be used as the primary indicators of value added. They need to be considered alongside information about a number of other value added measures all of which need to be set in the community contexts in which the school is working.
- 4.2.4 The need to have some measure of how schools are doing relative to one another is accepted. This overview needs to be informed by a more extensive assessment of value added than is currently used.
- 4.2.5 Inspection should focus on the improvements that a school has achieved with each cohort of pupils that it has admitted. This requires, for each of an agreed set of value added measures, the establishment of a baseline against which progress can be assessed. Pupils will have different baseline positions and require differentiated teaching strategies. Any approach to measuring value added must be able to do so at the individual pupil level.
- 4.2.6 If a wider range of value added measures are introduced schools will need training to ensure that they are being evaluated correctly. It is possible that some teaching strategies might be better suited to some pupils than others. This can lead to unintended differences in teacher effectiveness. Inspections of schools should be alert to this and look for evidence of it happening.

4.2.7 The literature on value added emphasises the importance of getting to know the school context. This is an established part of inspection practice but more could be done to extend this and to look at its impact on teaching and learning. It also reinforces the importance of classroom observation. However, periods of observation need to be of sufficient length to allow a reliable evaluation to be made. Feedback should also be given directly to the teacher and to the principal and a record of this retained.

4.2.8 Attempts to broaden the range of value added indicators in other educational jurisdictions have looked at:

- a. the inclusion of progress against student learning objectives,
- b. the use of student surveys and student feedback measures to assess their satisfaction with the educational experience they are receiving and the quality and suitability of the school environment,
- c. measures of pupil enjoyment and parental satisfaction,
- d. And the use of teacher portfolios and videos of lessons.

All of these face challenges about their reliability and the need to remove the possible impact of subjectivity and bias.

4.2.9 High levels of academic achievement do not mean that pupils will have had similarly high levels of development with their personal and social skills. If employers and society place high value on the development of those skills and if the school is a place in which they are developed, some effort needs to be made to assess how successful the school is at providing opportunities for this to take place. Inspection should also look at the pastoral care arrangements which are in place to help pupils facing problems affecting their personal and social development rather than looking only to ascertain if appropriate procedures are in place and what the general provision of pupil care is like.

5. Priorities and Actions that need to be taken to improve ETI's approach to the school improvement process

5.1 Agree what we value and inspect those things using a wider range of value added measures

Council supports a move away from the application of generic assessment standards to schools in broadly comparable groups, toward a model where the educational value added by a school is measured by reference to a wider range of indicators with information available both within the school and from sources external to it.

5.2 More frequent inspection tailored to the needs of the school

5.2.1 Currently, school inspection is a largely cyclical activity with schools being inspected once every seven years. If inspection is important it should happen more frequently, have an

emphasis on quality assurance for the better schools and a focus on strategies for school improvement in the rest.

5.2.2 Changes in education may see the gradual shift to schools with varying levels of autonomy. Those with the highest levels will have demonstrated the capacity to be almost completely self-managing using many of the characteristics outlined in section 3. Others will have lower levels of autonomy and will continue to require varying amounts of support and guidance. Models of inspection will have to reflect these differences in levels of autonomy. The recent introduction of 'Sustaining Improvement' inspections is a welcome first step toward recognising the different stages that schools are at in their improvement journeys.

6. Leading education is a key process

6.1 During school inspections the current evaluation of leadership and management is fairly wide ranging. This is good but it may not place sufficient emphasis on the quality of instructional leadership, that is, how good the principal is as an instructional leader, how well is he/she developing the teaching staff and implementing monitoring and evaluation strategies and how much time is given to these things. Similarly, there is a need for a greater focus on relationship development and the management of effective communication at all levels.

7. Governing for improvement

7.1 In some schools there are frequent governor meetings and a great deal of business is done at them. However, the key business that a Board of Governors should do each year is an informed examination of the progress of the school in meeting the needs of pupils and the actions that are being taken to promote better outcomes, if possible. In this context the Chair of the Governors needs to be a highly competent school improvement governor able to guide the governing team through an assessment of the pupil outcomes, holding the principal and other staff to account and agreeing the remedial and other actions that may be required. Inspections should be looking for evidence of the effectiveness of governance and encourage governors to be more strategic in their work and more aware of the school as a partnership with others in an area to ensure access to quality education for all.

7.2 Council welcomes the recently introduced evaluation of governance as part of school inspections. This change has been managed sensitively during its introduction but quickly needs to become a more important and consistent part of all school inspections.

8. Change the range of outcomes that may result from inspections

8.1 School inspections are currently reported on a six point scale from 'Outstanding' to 'Unsatisfactory'. This needs to be reviewed. Council recommends that the six point scale is removed. Instead there should be no overall assessment of the provision of the school. This should be replaced with a system in which each of the aspects of school life that are inspected is evaluated and reported as being either 'very good' 'good' or 'requiring improvement'. The school would then have a reliable

indication of where its strengths and weaknesses are and could begin to work on its improvement strategy and action plans.

9. Comments on school sustainability

9.1 Current inspection reports often make reference to school sustainability issues and include a comment such as “the employing authority needs to look at the long-term future for the school”. If a school is performing well within its current context but the limited enrolment is having an impact on the access to curricular and extra-curricular opportunities for pupils this should be stated more directly in the report.

10. The inspection workforce

10.1 It would be helpful to review the experience and qualifications required by staff of the ETI to ensure that they are well equipped to undertake the work of inspection. It may also be important to review the staffing structure and the range of expertise available with the potential to move toward a smaller fulltime staff and the extension of use of inspection associates who would be very highly regarded school leaders currently in post and very well placed to provide an objective evaluation of the quality of provision in a school. These associates could be seconded for a term or possibly two terms rather than through the current approach.

With the move toward higher levels of autonomy it may be helpful to use people with expertise in financial management and administration as part of inspection teams in future.

11. Who inspects the Inspectorate?

11.1 Consideration should be given to the processes used to ensure that inspection services are provided and reported consistently and to the very highest standards. While CCMS does not have concerns about the consistency of inspection and the voracity of inspection reports there is a need for these matters to be kept under review and quality assured by an appropriate agency.

12. Should ETI be independent of the Department of Education?

12.1 It is unlikely that full independence could be achieved by any inspectorate as they invariably exist to contribute to the governmental agenda such as the raising of standards which is a shared policy objective of many governments. As policy and practice are closely linked it is unlikely that the ETI could ever be fully independent of the Department of Education. However, it is very important that the ETI has as much autonomy and independence as possible if it is to do its job in the way it should.

12.2 Part of the problem of disconnecting ETI from the Department of Education is that the Department sets the standards against which schools are inspected and is entitled to receive the reports of these in order to know how the system of schools is performing. The independence of the ETI is also affected by the Department’s reliance of other educational bodies such as CCMS and the ELBs to implement policy and procedure arising from inspection outcomes. ETI is therefore caught between the policy makers and those charged with implementing it.

12.3 It is important that ETI has independence in a number of areas. ETI should be able to establish a schedule of inspections, carry them out and report their findings without interference from either the Department of Education or other bodies. However, if schools will continue to have the right to challenge the outcome and conduct of inspections this indicates that inspectorial independence can only be partial. While schools, government and the wider community need an inspection process which operates to the highest standards and is beyond reproach, it may not always be possible to deliver a flawless inspection service. If this is accepted, full operational independence is not achievable.

12.4 In the context of a debate about the purpose of inspection it is important that the Department of Education does not exert its influence to the extent that inspection is seen only as a driver of policy but rather that it operates as a support to governors and principals as they work to provide the best possible education for their pupils. There is a balance to be achieved here and one that will only be reached if the inspectorate can get on and do its job as an agency which in observing and reporting what is happening in schools and does so in a supportive manner.

12.5 What might the role of inspection be in a context where schools operate in an environment with varying degrees of autonomy? For the more autonomous it would have to be the formal quality assurance agent on behalf of the system.

13. Conclusion

13.1 The process of school inspection cannot be seen as something that happens in isolation of other school improvement activities. These include the on-going work of schools, the school improvement interventions from the employing authorities and other support agencies (including the proposed 'Sectoral Support Bodies' envisaged in the Education Bill) and the improvement initiatives being promoted by the Department of Education, including, for example, the recently announced Community Education Initiatives Programme. Council would welcome an initiative to review the wider school improvement strategy with the hope that it might bring greater coherence to the range of initiatives and strategies currently in play. The Committee's review of the contribution of the work of the ETI to school improvement can play a very important part in that.