

Ballymoney High School

Inquiry into the Education and Training Inspectorate and the School Improvement Process

Submission to NI Assembly Education Committee

On behalf of the Governors and Staff of Ballymoney High School

September 2013

Ballymoney High is a controlled secondary school in the town of Ballymoney County Antrim, currently under the authority of NEELB. The school's present Enrolment is 650 pupils aged 11-16 years, with 47 teaching staff (full and part time).

The school was subject to an Eti Standard Inspection in the first week of October 2012. The school's provision overall was assessed as Satisfactory, but pupil attainment was deemed Inadequate. Three Areas for Improvement were identified and the school is currently addressing these across a 24 month follow-up period.

In the light of our experience of inspection we would offer the following observations and opinions which are chiefly focused upon the Committee's Terms of Reference 1 & 2.

1. Terms of Reference 1: effectiveness of approach

- I. we strongly believe that the approach is currently statistically driven and that performance in public examinations is the over-riding factor in judgements reached
- II. schools like ourselves are well aware of their position against relevant benchmarks and are seeking to make improvements through the regular process of self evaluation and action planning – we believe insufficient credit is given to this planned or existing work of the school during inspection
- III. equally, the drive and focus on performance figures is to the detriment of other aspects of school provision (eg pastoral care or curriculum offer) which we feel are adjudged less favourably in consequence to “match” the final conclusion of the report against the starting point of inadequate results – similarly the concept of “value added” to the lives and learning of the pupils featured very little in our inspection experience – the primary emphasis was on performance figures and the need to raise these and there was a strong perception amongst teaching staff that Inspectors came “looking for” reasons to explain results rather than an objective “looking at” provision alongside results
- IV. such a statistically driven approach naturally operates in a “clinical” manner, which tends to erode or devalue a due sense of context and character important to any school's personality and provision
- V. also, an approach in which the term “Satisfactory” is defined as strengths outweighing areas for improvement, but then goes on to major on the latter, leaves staff feeling under-valued and demoralised – this does not stimulate improvement, but more often generates “paralysis”, unhealthy introspection or doubt about going forward
- VI. the subsequent action planning process proves very bureaucratic with schools needing to satisfy the expectations of both their ELB and the Eti – energy is drained

from the actual practical work of response we believe this approach is not effective in fulfilling the Eti's own stated purpose of improving standards and often leaves a school in a "lower" or "reduced" baseline position from which to commence any planned response to inspection – the school is then action planning with meagre support and faces follow-up visits and inspection where it expects that results will again predominate findings without due recognition of improvements worked – a sense or "fear" of continuing follow-up inspection(s) arises, predicated on the drive for results alone – it majors more on listing deficiencies rather than promoting good practice

- VII. we believe schools would value more and respond more positively to more detailed reports made directly and even privately to the school – this would be more informed and measured both in terms of receiving and responding to areas for improvement – it would fit better too and complement the school's existing self-evaluation and planning and would be less of a "disruptive" moment
- VIII. schools would benefit too from more specific sharing of inspection standards and expectations especially when observing classroom lessons – inspectors are very reluctant to offer any insight in this regard and teachers would value it

2. Terms of Reference 2: follow on review and support

- I. the current regime of inspection majors on the challenge function with performance statistics and contributes little to follow-on support – during inspection some advice may be offered informally, however formal report back (verbal initially and subsequently written) focuses upon areas for improvement identified and offers no advice on appropriate responses by the school – since the Inspectorate gathers a wealth of evidence on good practice could they not at least provide a list of appropriate actions set against specific areas for improvement which would guide and benefit schools
- II. planned response and necessary support require a school to liaise with the CASS service in its area ELB – this service is currently seriously inadequate in terms of staffing and resources and relevant expertise (this is not to apportion blame to CASS, just a statement of fact of current resource levels)
- III. with numbers of inspections and follow-ups growing, the support function of the school's District Inspector is disappearing and the value of positive rapport and professional dialogue and guidance that offered disappears with it
- IV. as with paragraph 1 above, the Eti primary purpose of improving standards is poorly served – schools are not having a positive or supportive regime when the current practice is chiefly to inspect, list areas for improvement and then return to inspect without intervening adequate support function
- V. school improvement depends more upon the effective practice, continuing education, expertise and energy of teaching staff rather than the periodic intervention of inspection process which lacks follow-up support and is diminishing regular contact with its schools beyond the inspection regime – the importance of good will and confidence must not be neglected and are being "threatened" by the current regime