



## **Aspect Group of Prospect**

### **Submission to the Education Committee of Northern Ireland Assembly**

#### **Inquiry into The Education and Training Inspectorate and the School Improvement Process**

Aspect Group of Prospect as the autonomous professional voice of experienced school improvement specialists accepts that the focus of government has shifted towards a more rigorous accountability process in terms of school performance and pupil achievement. The policy document “Every School a Good School” (ESaGS), published by DE, sets out future aims and objectives in relation to school improvement and governance. In response to this, ELBs are moving towards an agreed set of criteria for identifying individual schools which require formal intervention in order to address serious deficiencies in pupil achievement and school performance, as measured against comparable data from schools of similar type. Future school improvement services must therefore be flexible enough to be able to respond to a range of emerging school needs as identified by performance data or external audit. It is the Education and Training Inspectorate that provides the external audit for schools in Northern Ireland. The function is to quality assure the provision of education in schools and colleges and youth organisations in Northern Ireland and education provider organisations up to tier 4 but only as far as tier 3 provision.

In its document “A charter for Inspection” ETI describes its purpose “is to promote the highest possible standards of learning, teaching and achievement throughout the education, training and youth sectors. In achieving this purpose, we: Provide an unbiased, independent, professional assessment of the quality of learning and teaching, including the standards achieved by learners.”

Aspect fully supports the principal of independent quality assurance of teaching and learning within the context of a partnership arrangement with the education authorities and school support and improvement services. While ETI insists that the inspection process itself is pivotal to school improvement it is not the only nor the most important factor in the school improvement process.

Recent ETI documents emphasise the value of self-evaluation processes which are encapsulated in the Quality indicators first published in “Together Towards Improvement” document. Aspect believes that supported self-evaluation is a powerful tool in establishing the baseline for a school’s performance at any given time and the key role of ETI is to quality assure the self-evaluative process and to report on the school’s capacity to identify issues

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that are risk factors in poor performance and the resources and capacity to address those factors.

It is Aspect's strong contention that the predominant focus of ETI and the inspection process is on the external audit function. This is how it should be. It remains the function and responsibility of the employing authorities to take whatever action is necessary to address any issues that may arise from such external quality audits. It is the responsibility of government to ensure that the employing authorities have the resources and structures to support the school improvement actions that follow many inspections recently reported on in schools.

In this submission to the Education Committee Aspect Group of Prospect wishes to draw attention to some key issues surrounding ETI and the School improvement process

1. Accountability taking precedence over strategic improvement planning
2. Openness and transparency of the Inspection process
3. Information flow in the education system
4. ETI view of what drives school Improvement
5. Consistency of approach across all schools types and locations
6. Inspection process informing or being driven by external priorities

### 1.0

All schools are accountable for the welfare, education and achievement of the pupils. The principal and teachers are accountable to the parents, the education authority, Department of Education and the community. Recent changes in the regulations relating to School Development plans have specified clearly where the lines of accountability lie. However what appears to be emerging is the particular foci of the work of the principal, governors and teachers towards setting goals and targets that will fulfil criteria for success for the institution rather than success for the individual pupils. This impacts on the nature and type of courses offered to pupils in order to maximise achievement in external award bearing courses. There is an incentive for school managements to become risk averse to avoid the pitfalls of being open, dynamic, stimulating and challenging organisations that state that their pupils are at the centre of all their deliberations and then practise this by demonstrating pupil centeredness in the school planning and delivery of the curriculum, and extracurricular activities.

### 2.0

Much work has been done by the inspectorate to explain the process and methodology of the inspection. Schools however still approach the announcement of an inspection with fear and trepidation. This is because of the aura of uncertainty surrounding the process. This is not so much that Principal, Governors and Staff do not know what the procedure is but are unclear about what inspection teams expect to see in classrooms during lessons and at senior leadership meetings. Aspect welcomes the introduction of quality indicators in

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relation to the inspection process and is supportive of further measures to demystify the purpose and outcomes of classroom observations.

### 3.0

There is a plethora of data and information emanating from schools to education and library boards, CCMS, DE and C2K. There is currently no central administration for this data, while efforts are being made to streamline the access to data and the use of such data to inform the school improvement agenda. Since much of the performance data is already contained within the School Development Plan which all schools are obliged to produce and send copies to the Education authorities, then ETI could utilise this evidence reducing the burden on overstretched schools and principals and seek only what additional data is required for the purposes of the inspection process.

### 4.0

ETI have the view often stated in Chief Inspector's reports that the inspection process and ETI in particular are the key drivers of school improvement. This may have some validity in some schools and circumstances but by no means gives the whole picture. If this was the case then it is interesting to note that the inspection process and the inspectorate has been in existence for over 150 years while the Curriculum Advisory and Support Services of the Education and Library Boards have existed for just over 30 years. The truth lies somewhere in the middle. The partnership between ETI and CASS has without doubt accelerated the pace and scope of the school improvement agenda. The research evidence relating to what constitutes a good school is much more explicit and the professional development of the teaching force now focusses much more on raising standards for pupils and developing school leaders that have as their main priority raising attainment for pupils. It is essential that this partnership continues to exist and that both groups of professionals recognise in each other the unique contribution that each makes to reduce the level of underachievement among some of our children. School improvement professionals in CASS should be integral to the inspection process with contacts with ETI prior to inspections during the process and particularly at the feedback report.

### 4.1

Recent proposals by the Chief Inspector to "put" subject specialist inspectors in literacy and numeracy into a number of identified schools across Northern Ireland to carry out baseline inspections followed by advice and support over a sustained period of time with the aim of raising the number of pupils in receipt of free school meals that achieve 5 GCSEs at Grade A\* - C including English and Mathematics. This represents a major shift in role for inspectors and raises a number of potential conflicts. For example, if ETI support these schools and then subsequently carry out a follow up inspection to evaluate the outcomes of this support how can the inspection process be seen as independent? Currently ETI undertake quality audits of the advice and support given to schools by CASS. There is most definitely a potential conflict of interest at best and an undermining of the widely recognised and valued work of the advisory services at worst.

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### 5.0

There is a widespread perception, real or imaginary that different types of schools are treated in different ways during the inspection process. This perception relates to anecdotal stories about inspections in schools in rural versus urban areas, secondary versus grammar schools and schools in socially deprived areas versus schools in more affluent areas. The perception is sometimes reinforced by the wording of the inspection report. To remove this perception many of the recent actions taken by ETI to make the inspection process more transparent are to be welcomed, though there is much still to be done in this area. There needs to be a robust mechanism for recognising the “value-added” nature of the work of schools in areas with high levels of social deprivation, coupled with actions designed to address the constraints on schools in such areas. The recent report chaired by Sir Robert Salisbury on school funding alluded to ways in which the matter could be alleviated.

### 6.0

Since the publication of the document “Every School A Good School” (ESAGS) there has been much debate about the mechanisms to address underachievement and lack of adequate performance in schools as evidenced by external examination results or the outcome of inspections which grade schools from outstanding to unsatisfactory. Aspect does not doubt the necessity and efficacy of quality assurance in our schools and the need to intervene in order to improve the situation when required. However the establishment of an action plan to remedy the situation must take into account the context of the school and the circumstances that have given rise to the underperformance. The changes to the evaluation of governance in schools has followed very rapidly on the production of School Development Plans which are still very much work in progress for governors in terms of having a firm grasp of the key elements of these pivotal documents. The potential effect of a heavy handed approach to the work of often busy dedicated individuals that constitute Boards of Governors may well deter even the most conscientious and experienced governors and Chairs of governors from giving further service in what is after all a voluntary and unremunerated activity. Aspect supports the right of ETI to comment on the governance in schools but is wary of the methodology used where Boards of Governors are obliged to justify their record of work by providing extensive evidence of the outcomes of meetings and procedures. We must bear in mind that the key purpose of inspections is to raise standards by providing information on the quality of teaching, learning and governance in schools.

### **Conclusion**

Aspect recognises the highly professional expertise of inspectors and the role they play in seeking to improve standards of achievement in schools. Much has been done by ETI as an organisation to develop processes and procedures that take account of the sensitive nature of quality assurance and the potential effects of inspections on the principals, teachers and governors in schools. Aspect further recognises the partnerships that have been established between many individual inspectors and Aspect professionals in the CASS services and supports the formalisation of these partnerships by ETI as an organisation and by education

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authorities. To this end Aspect strongly believes that there must be a range of partnerships developed by all the main key players in the education sector. This would facilitate the flexible interchange of personnel across the organisations involved in education at all levels and allow a much greater movement of expertise, skills and talent within and across the partner organisations in temporary or longer term position.

Sean Maguire, Aspect Group Vice President

Peter McAlister, Aspect Group Council Member for Northern Ireland

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### **The Aspect Group of Prospect**

International House

Turner Way

Wakefield

West Yorkshire

WF2 8EF

Telephone: 01924 207890

Email: [aspect@prospect.org.uk](mailto:aspect@prospect.org.uk)

[www.aspect.org.uk](http://www.aspect.org.uk)