

St. Dominic's Belfast

ETI Inquiry

Response by Carol McCann, principal of St. Dominic's, Belfast

Thank you for the opportunity to take part into a consultation regarding ETI.

VALUE-ADDED

1. I believe that there is a need for ETI to give cognisance to value-added outcomes as this is one of the most significant factors in school effectiveness. One might expect that schools focused on self-improvement should be able to demonstrate for ETI how they are committed to value-added provision leading to improved outcomes for pupils and that this would be reflected in inspection reports. There is undoubted value in benchmarking graphs as they clarify how School A compares to comparable schools and indeed identifies School A's areas of strength and for development. Notwithstanding their value, the context of comparable schools can vary significantly eg. challenges of an inner city school vs a school in a suburban or rural area. FSME is the main indicator of disadvantage and while it is a significant factor, many disadvantaged pupils do not have access to FSM. Entry levels in terms of levels of achievement can also vary greatly across schools in all sectors. These aspects should be taken into consideration.
2. As stated above FSME is one of the main indicators of deprivation. It can be a crude indicator. As principal of a school where 66% of Post-16 pupils are in receipt of EMA, our FSME while well above the average for grammar schools doesn't reflect that many of our pupils belong to families of the working poor who don't have access to FSM.

SCHOOLS EXPERIENCING DIFFICULTIES

1. There is a need to exercise care that a school should not be destroyed by a negative inspection report. While inspections should be robust and rigorous, it is important that ETI consider the wide spectrum of contexts that schools find themselves in. Constructive criticism and transparency are important but equally so is the need that a school should not be left so demoralised that the community it serves lose faith in the school. The impact of a negative inspection report could be counter-productive to engaging the young people and the parents. It is my belief that there is a need for a robust and rigorous inspection process which challenges but this must be complemented by the provision of effective support, guidance and development for the school. With the changed context of ELBS, I believe that the position and remit of the Area Inspector should be strengthened.

2. Area Inspector Role re support

- As principal of St. Dominic's I have received consistent, excellent support from the school's Area Inspector, Dr Paddy Shevlin. He has challenged and enabled the school to improve its outcomes significantly.
- For the past three years, the school has had the highest performance at A Level in the Belfast area and one of the highest in NI (2011- 90% of students achieved three A levels at grades A*-C, 2012- 92% of students achieved three A levels at grades A*-C, 2013 – 96.55% of students achieved three A levels at grades A*-C). This is despite an average intake of approximately 30% A grade students for each of the years. GCSE performance in 2013 is 99.3% for seven passes at grades A*-C and 98.6% for seven passes including English and Maths.
- Dr Shevlin knows the school extremely well and has provided excellent guidance, support and challenge since I was appointed principal in 2007. While advising and guiding the school by promoting the use of evidence-based self-evaluation, the Area Inspector is always careful to remain within the parameters of his position.
- He has been extremely helpful in directing the school to centres of excellence in specific areas of the curriculum and other processes and has also supported the school in developing effective use of data to improve. This, I believe that the improvement in performance achieved by the school would not have been possible without the challenge and support provided by Dr Shevlin.
- Dr Shevlin doesn't just work with an individual school but rather has embraced the concept of schools working in collaboration to promote improvement and deliver the best outcomes for pupils within an area. I believe that there has been a great improvement in the overall outcomes for young people in West Belfast through close working relationships having been developed between principals /senior leadership teams and the Area Inspector. The Area Inspector has also supported greater links with the BELB advisor, Mark Hewitt and this has been very beneficial for schools.
- The appropriate balance of challenge and support as provided by our school's Area Inspector has been invaluable. I believe that this model of support and challenge by the Area Inspector should be extended across all schools and areas and be a model in proposed changes to the ETI process.

GOVERNANCE

- Governance is onerous as governors have significant responsibility in both challenging and supporting the principal in the leadership and management of the school. I believe that

it is very important that governors do challenge as well as support. Challenge ensures proper accountability and also provides protection for all. Governors currently give generously of their time to schools providing support and guidance across a wide range of important issues including human resource management, recruitment, policy development, finance etc. While it is important for governors to be well-informed, to support and challenge, we must be careful not to put off the most capable and conscientious governors by putting excessive pressure on them. They carry out important work on a voluntary basis.

TRANSPARENCY

- The need for transparency in all spheres of life is of paramount importance. Schools are charged with what is undeniably one of the most important influences on young people's lives. It is important that all processes are transparent.

Carol McCann