North Eastern Education and Library Board

INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION AND TRAINING INSPECTORATE AND THE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PROCESS

SUBMISSION FROM THE NORTH EASTERN EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD

SEPTEMBER 2013

* **Board officers would welcome the opportunity to give oral evidence to the Committee**

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Submission from the North Eastern Education and Library Board

Introduction

1. The Board was established in 1973 and its constitution as revised is laid down in the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986. The Board's area covers nine of the current twenty-six District Councils in the north east of the province, including: Antrim, Ballymena, Ballymoney, Carrickfergus, Coleraine, Larne, Magherafelt, Moyle and Newtownabbey. Within the Board's area there are 15 nursery schools, 207 primary schools and 48 post-primary schools. The Board has a statutory duty to secure support for teachers within its area, a duty which applies to teachers in schools of management types.

2. In recent years, with the introduction of key policies around raising standards of achievement of children and young people, including 'Every School a Good School' and 'Count, Read, Succeed' (Literacy and Numeracy) and, in the context of the Northern Ireland Executive Programme for Government Targets, there has been a significant re-shaping of services to support school improvement. The Board support services, incorporating a wide range of departments, eg. the School Improvement Service, Children and Young People's Services and Youth have increasingly worked in a multi-disciplinary fashion to meet the key needs of schools if they are to effect improvement. In accordance with the agreed five Board approach, the performance of schools is analysed, schools are identified for support and resources are deployed in a relevant manner as a result of the outcomes of a diagnostic model where Board officers support schools in action planning for the identified key areas for development.

3. The findings in Education and Training Inspectorate reports following inspection of schools are an important factor, both in terms of the overall findings on the performance of the school and the individual evaluations of key areas such as: leadership and management and learning and teaching. Inspection reports signal the key areas for development/improvement and these findings, in conjunction with the schools' own self-evaluation, form the basis of work, supported by Board officers, to identify key actions to be employed to effect improvement. In summary, the combination of Board analysis of school performance, school self-evaluation and the external evaluation of provision by the Education and Training Inspectorate forms the basis of school development and improvement planning. It is important to stress that all aspects of the analysis of schools' performance are important, not simply the findings of external inspection, particularly in a climate where the Board and ETI are at one in promoting the competence of schools to self-evaluate and self-improve their own practice.

    The Board provides support to all schools which, following inspection, have an indication that further development/improvement work is required and where a Follow-Up Inspection by ETI is required.

4.   The Board would request that the Education Committee give serious consideration to including the recommendations below in its report.

Recommendations

(i)   The role of the Education and Training Inspectorate to be mainly focused on the Quality Assurance of schools' own self-evaluation of their performance.

(ii) Reduce the notice given to schools in advance of inspection. The advance notice should be sufficient to allow inspectors time to consider the Self-Evaluation Report submitted by schools in advance of the Quality Assurance activity conducted by ETI.

(iii) A self-evaluation framework detailing the elements of best practice across key areas such as Leadership, Governance, Learning and Teaching etc should be developed in collaboration with schools. This will then form a consistent approach to self-evaluation in schools and for the Education and Training Inspectorate Quality Assurance work.

(iv) School Self-Evaluation and ETI Quality Assurance should have an emphasis on value added and make more effective use of data based on appropriate use of standardised tests and individual pupil tracking systems which are used by schools to assess the impact of the school on pupil achievement as well as considering examination outputs. The outcomes of the forthcoming report from OECD on the assessment/evaluation of the education system in Northern Ireland need to be considered in respect to this matter.

(v)   Robust procedures are required to address under-performance in Governance, Leadership and Teaching in schools, including the provision of an option to permit school leaders and teachers to leave the profession with grace and dignity where relevant.

ISSUE 1

5. **The ETI's current approach in respect of school inspection/improvement and how/whether ETI properly assesses the value added in those schools which have lower levels of examination attainment**

- Notice for inspection adds considerably to the stress in schools. As the purpose of inspection is to assess the quality of provision giving shorter notice of inspection would:

  - encourage schools to have effective self-evaluation processes which work effectively and be in a position to submit a self-evaluation report on the school. Make it more likely that ETI would see the school in its normal operation, rather than in the "prepared state for inspection";
  - reduce pre-inspection stress;
  - enable ETI to provide a much more accurate assessment of the practice of schools;

- given the current emphasis on school self-evaluation there should be a much more significant move towards school self-inspection, with ETI involved in quality assurance of a school's own findings. Such an approach would provide greater empowerment for schools, yet would still provide the opportunity for ETI to bring a wider perspective to the inspection process;

- schools could produce reports based on their self-assessment and evaluation processes in tandem with the School Development Planning cycle, including annual updates. Such a process would be integral to the school improvement process rather than the current perception of "extra work" which must be completed in the period before a notified inspection;

- in general it would be helpful to move towards a position where the quality assurance work of ETI were much more integral to a school's own improvement processes rather than being perceived as an "external event";

- the current policy emphasis on standards, eg. 5+ GCSEs at Grades A* - C (including English and Maths), is recognised as important in respect to the future life choices of the students. However, in a time when the impact of school enrolment patterns during a period of demographic downturn has resulted in a number of schools serving socially deprived areas having large numbers of very challenging young people, many of whom have low educational expectations or who place low value on education. The opportunity through Area Planning to address issues such as this is recognised as being of particular importance;

- schools which have a profile of students reflecting that described above often report that, while they recognise and are very appreciative of the positive reporting from ETI on the practice observed in the school, they believe that the lack of effective value added measures within the suite of statistics available for school performance has the inevitable effect that they believe that, in the context of the young people in their school, it is often impossible to have substantial numbers of these pupils achieving at a level that would equate to a C grade in GCSE. Despite the fact that there is often evidence of the improvement brought about in the individual pupils' outcomes, schools often feel this cannot be recognised by ETI in their overall assessment of the quality of provision in the school. Where it is perceived that a school, even with very effective practice in dealing with challenging young people, cannot achieve an ETI evaluation above satisfactory and this can have a demoralising effect on teaching staff, the pupils and the wider school community.

  This is felt even more acutely in many schools where they have sophisticated pupil tracking mechanisms in place, often using standardised tests, and where they can provide clear evidence of pupil improvement. The current practice in primary schools of using unmoderated teacher-based assessment lacks reliability and validity.

- research on school improvement across education systems in various parts of the world indicates that external intervention, support and challenge have a significant effect on school improvement. While recognising that the evaluation of ETI provides schools with clear indications of the areas for development, the current approach to the evaluation of external support provided by Board support services could be developed to articulate best practice. While it is acknowledged that ETI review and comment upon the impact of support, the ongoing process of school improvement would benefit from empirical evidence regarding the particular aspects of support which benefit schools, including a detailed exposition of good practice.

  There is a need for a clearer understanding of the interplay between evaluation, identification of areas for development and the process of development, including support and challenge, to bring about improvement. The focus of the work of all agencies beyond the school is clearly to ensure that all children and young people have the maximum opportunity to achieve their potential and it is, therefore, essential that there is a clear co-ordination of the complementary roles of the various bodies;

- Effective school improvement should involve the complimentary and connected process of; school self evaluation and development, intervention, challenge and support from a "critical friend" and external Quality Assurance.

- A detailed, agreed framework which should form the basis for self-evaluation by schools and subsequent ETI Quality Assurance. Such a framework should be developed with the involvement of schools and presented in an open, transparent manner. Such an approach should assist greatly in the understanding of school improvement processes and standards and will also assist with making self-evaluation and quality assurance consistent across the schooling system.

ISSUE 2

6. **The 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 or the Education and Library Boards to help schools improve.**

    Key Issues impacting on Schools

    Leadership/Governance

    - The quality and stability of the Senior Leadership Team (including the Principal) tends to vary leading to inconsistencies and difficulties with providing and sustaining a strategic direction for the school to inspire confidence amongst staff and sustain improvement.
    - Difficulties with recruitment and retention of effective governors.
    - The lack of flexibility in the principal recruitment process particularly around the terms and conditions of employment.
    - The shortage of high calibre candidates applying to principal positions in schools in challenging circumstances.
    - The particular challenges experienced by teaching principals in smaller schools.
    - Challenges for leadership teams with capacity and capability issues in the requirement to address a range of issues identified through inspection within a tightly defined timescale of 12-18 months.
    - Pressures on schools in areas of social disadvantage, targeted for participation in a wide range of educational and/or community initiatives, to ensure that the impact of sometimes conflicting 'projects' does not impact adversely on the core business of providing high quality teaching and learning .
    - Challenges within schools to effectively engage in sustained, systematic and rigorous self –evaluation processes to inform school development planning processes to effect improvement, whilst ensuring accountability at all levels.
    - Poor pupil and staff attendance impacts on the school's ability to improve.
    - School policies and procedures may be incomplete, not current or are being inconsistently implemented.
    - There are often poor relationships and/or poor channels of communication, including lack of effective consultation and dissemination.
    - There is often a lack of robust and effective continuous professional development (CPD) in the context of school development planning priorities and the use of school development days.

Standards and Attainment

- The overall standards achieved by pupils in schools in challenging circumstances, particularly in external examinations, is often well below the Northern Ireland average.
- The issue for such schools in demonstrating 'value added' in the context of having a range of factors eg high percentage of newcomer children, children with special educational needs (SEN) which may impact on the overall standards achieved.
- For Primary schools in particular, the lack of standardised baseline assessment for children on entry to school makes the measure of 'value-added' more difficult to compare across schools.
- For Post-Primary schools an inherent tension often exists between improving standards system wide to meet PfG targets and providing courses to meet needs of individual pupils.
- The use of data, particularly to plan interventions for under-achievement is not always used to optimum advantage.

Learning and Teaching

- The pedagogy of the revised NI Curriculum and the Entitlement Framework may be inconsistently implemented. There can often be differing expectations of teachers and pupils and difficulties with challenging all pupils by matching the curriculum provision and teaching and learning strategies to their abilities and interests.
- The quality of learning and teaching in literacy/English and/or numeracy/mathematics are often identified through inspection as priority areas for improvement.
- The lack of robust procedures to effectively support schools to identify and support teachers whose work is borderline satisfactory or inadequate.
- There is a lack of rigorous and robust procedures for dealing with teachers whose work is identified as unsatisfactory.

Sustainability and Financial Planning

- Sustainability of the school including pupil enrolment trends, the school's financial position, and standards achieved.
- Financial planning can be less than effective in securing school improvement whether deficit or surplus.
- Entry in to the Formal Intervention process, in some instances, may lead to negative media attention which may be detrimental to the profile of the school in the local community and the longer term sustainability.
- Area based planning has the potential to manage education provision to ensure that schools are viable, sustainable and in a position to support pupils to achieve their potential.

7. **Support for Schools**

The Board recognises the significant shift which has taken place in terms of the nature of support services to schools in recent years despite significant financial pressures and the challenges of changing the modus operandi of support personnel. Empirical evidence in Inspection Reports illustrates that the support being provided is of high quality and having a positive impact on school improvement by assisting schools to address areas for development/improvement identified in school inspection reports.

It is important that schools continue to take more responsibility for their own improvement and that, as has been shown through school improvement research, external support has an important role to play in assisting the strategic development of school improvement strategies, providing advice on action planning and, most importantly, acting as a "critical friend" who can bring a wider perspective on school improvement and challenge the actions and processes being used by the school to help them refine their work to effect improvement. This external support role should support the building of school improvement capacity in the school and in its ability to effectively evaluate its performance and, with the assistance of external quality assurance from ETI, engage in a process of continuous improvement. This must be an enabling process and must avoid any danger of those giving advice being placed in a position to evaluate the outcome of their advice.

8. **Alternative inspection/improvement approaches which might better assess and recognise improvement by schools**

- As indicated in the recommendations contained within the introduction to the submission, and further articulated in the response on Issue 1, the Board believes that the Education and Training Inspectorate role in respect to schools' performance should move to one where they quality assure the findings of a school's self-evaluation of its own performance. It is recognised that there is a range of survey work done by ETI which is useful in determining detail around a range of educational issues and can inform policy development. A quality assurance approach will provide the opportunity, through self-evaluation, for schools to address issues around value added in terms of their work with pupils by using the data systems and processes which have been the subject of significant development in individual schools in recent years.

- Schools should be provided the opportunity, within an agreed framework (as proposed in the introduction) to demonstrate their performance through their self-evaluative reporting. As indicated earlier in the submission, an agreed quality framework for self-evaluation will be crucial to ensure consistency of evaluation and enable schools' performance to be demonstrated.

   It is recognised that in some successful school systems, such as Finland, external inspection is not part of the framework for education with the responsibility for school performance resting solely with schools. In the Northern Ireland context a move towards such an autonomy for schools through an emphasis on meaningful self-evaluation, coupled with external quality assurance, could be of great benefit to the development of the evaluation system in general and would have immense potential in addressing key issues such as under-performance of particular areas of the system.