Southern and Western Education and Library Boards

Response to Northern Ireland Assembly Inquiry into the Education and Training Inspectorate and the School Improvement Process

1. Introduction

This paper is being submitted on behalf of the Southern and Western Education and Library Boards (SELB/WELB). The Education Order 1989, Article 29 states that each Board shall prepare and submit to the Department a scheme for the provision of advisory and support services in relation to the curricula and staff of schools. In this context, both Boards have well established Curriculum Advisory and Support Services (CASS). However, as a result of Savings Delivery Plans imposed by the Department of Education these services have been considerably reduced.

The key principles underpinning the work of these Services are based on current research evidence on School Improvement, ETI identified good practice, and our experience of supporting schools in School Improvement initiatives. They are founded on the belief that school improvement is most effective and sustainable when it is driven from within.

These principles are:
- sustainable improvement needs to be inclusive of all stakeholders, both internal and external to the school;
- regular and rigorous self-evaluation using performance and other data is central to school improvement;
- priorities for action should be limited and focused;
- targets must be set at pupil, year group and whole-school level with detailed plans drawn up;
- quality teaching and learning must be at the heart of such plans;
- success criteria should measure performance against pupil outcomes;
- learning from monitoring and evaluation should inform the next cycle of improvement;
- learning and best practice should be shared, both internally and externally; and
- contextualised school-based support for strengthening leadership at all levels, including governance, is essential to improving the quality of leadership and management at all levels within schools.

These key principles are underpinned by the following key practices:

- in collaboration with employing authorities and sectoral support bodies the targeting of support for schools based on evidence from ETI inspections, performance data and local knowledge;
- the deployment of trained and experienced officers to support the schools in the key processes of self-evaluation, data analysis, target setting, action planning, monitoring action and evaluating impact;
- the strengthening of leadership within the schools through sustained and regular support, with the objective of supported autonomy;
- the sharing of good practice from those schools deemed, through inspection, to be outstanding/very good to support those schools with less effective practice to improve, including the use of ESaGS TV;
- a coherent continuum of support within available resources, clearly linked to DE priorities, for the professional development of personnel within the school;
- contextualisation of school improvement plans within the parameters of sustainability, i.e. finance, staffing levels, enrolment, curriculum provision; and
- development of the potential of Area Learning Communities for school improvement.

Key Priority Areas:

In order to ensure that support resources are effectively deployed in a manner which maximises the opportunity for the key outcomes to be achieved, support will be differentiated to meet the specific needs of schools in addressing this agenda. The nature and intensity of support provided to schools will be based on a wide range of evidence, i.e. DE statistics, assessment outcomes, ETI inspection reports, and information from employing authorities. Support will embed the process of School Development Planning with a focus on improving practice, including outcomes in Literacy and Numeracy (DE's '*Count, Read: Succeed'* Strategy).

As a consequence, support is provided to the following spectrum of schools:

- schools in the Formal Intervention Process (FIP);
- schools found to be Satisfactory in inspection and thus addressing improvement issues identified by ETI;
- schools where performance improvement will have most effect in closing the gap between highest and lowest achieving pupils, prioritising Programme for Government requirements; and
- other schools in support of their self-evaluation and school improvement plans.

2. Effectiveness of ETI's Current Approach to School Improvement

SELB/WELB staff at all times endeavour to work in partnership with ETI colleagues, particularly post inspection, to ensure that areas for improvement are clearly articulated and understood by schools. As appropriate, SELB/WELB staff will then support schools in the construction and implementation of an improvement action plan.

However, the current School Inspection process appears to place an over-emphasis on school performance both in terms of identifying schools for inspection and reporting on inspection outcomes. School performance is too often measured using only raw examination outcome data which is neither contextualised nor referenced in any way to social disadvantage. Also, there is an over reliance of reference to Northern Ireland (NI) averages as a bench-mark for school performance where, for some schools, achieving the NI average is an unrealistic and unachievable goal whilst for others it should be considered failure. This raises a fundamental issue – the lack of reliable and robust value added measures for schools. The current practice of using purely numerical data is crude and unreliable and does not take into account the major determinant of educational performance that is social advantage.

In this respect, there is an urgent need for the development of robust, system-wide approaches to measuring "value-added" in schools, not least to give proper recognition to the impact which schools, serving areas of social disadvantage, are making (or are not making) on pupil attainment.

Finally, schools report a desire to develop a more sustained and formative link with a "district inspector" and have expressed concerns about inspection teams with little or no prior knowledge of a school carrying out inspections and making evaluative judgements within a very short timescale. Some schools report that in the past they were able to develop a very effective working relationship with their "district inspector" and they regret that this approach appears to be disappearing

3. Key Issues Impacting on Schools Experiencing Difficulties

Leadership and Governance
- The quality and stability of the Senior Leadership Team. This is critical in order to inspire confidence amongst staff and provide and sustain a strategic direction for the school.
- Recruitment and retention of effective governors.
- The shortage of high calibre candidates applying to principal positions in schools in challenging circumstances.

- 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.
- Challenges within schools to effectively engage in sustained, systematic and rigorous self –evaluation processes.
- Ability to ensure school development planning processes to effect improvement, whilst ensuring accountability at all levels.
- Poor pupil and staff attendance which often impacts on the school's ability to improve.
- School policies and procedures that may be incomplete, not current or are not being inconsistently implemented.
- Poor relationships and/or poor channels of communication, including lack of effective consultation and dissemination.
- 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 lack of a reliable value–added measure for school performance.
- The lack of standardised baseline assessment for children on entry to school makes the measure of 'value-added' more difficult to compare across schools.
- An inherent tension 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 Principals/teachers whose work is borderline satisfactory or inadequate.
- 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.
- Entry into 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.

4. Gaps in Review Process and Services Provision Include:
- Lack of strategic direction for Education Northern Ireland.
- The need for the establishment of an educational infrastructure that is fit for purpose and functional.
- Delay in Review of Teacher Education.
- Reduction in ELB support services, particularly CASS. This promotes a deficit model of support where services engage with only 'at risk' or intervention schools. It stymies on-going professional development of teachers and schools, hinders innovation and promotes inward looking institutions.

5. Alternative Approaches and Models of Good Practice
There should be greater use made of the wealth of international school improvement data that is currently available. A Northern Ireland Research and development unit might be established to ensure that the best practice of other countries is considered in terms of application in a local context. Links with other countries should be established with a view to longer term working relationships rather than information sharing only. Good practice from within the region needs to be disseminated and shared locally and promoted beyond Northern Ireland.

6. Priorities and Actions to be taken to improve ETI's approach to school improvement
Consideration must be given to providing greater opportunity, within the inspection process, for greater in-depth discussion regarding standards and achievements and the reasons which may contribute towards them in a specific school context. Consideration should be given to the inclusion of school improvement professionals in such discussions, in the situations where

such staff have been involved in working with the school to bring about improvement.

Greater attention might be given to mitigating the emotional impact upon school staff of less than positive inspection outcomes.

Introduction of a more inclusive and collaborative approach to post-inspection improvement work, involving greater consultation and discussion with school staff, governors and support services throughout the improvement programme

Consideration should be given to an "appeal" mechanism through which schools which feel that an inappropriate evaluation may have been arrived at by ETI have an opportunity to engage in discussion and provision of appropriate evidence in advance of the publication of an inspection report.

Schools report concerns in relation to consistency of approach across inspections and inspection teams. This is a crucial issue for the credibility of any inspection system which should be addressed