

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

Submission from Victoria College Belfast.

<p>Issue 1 The ETI 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.</p>	<p>The rationale behind any inspection of an educational establishment should be to provide an accurate assessment of provision across a number of different areas in a drive to identify strengths and areas for improvement for the service provided for our young people. Research indicates that external assessment is not necessarily effective in achieving this result. Most high-achieving schools are proficient in self-evaluation and this level of self-awareness would seem to be a more appropriate assessment of provision that a conclusion drawn by ETI inspectors based on a 2 ½ day visit to a school.</p> <p>The ETI approach seems to focus very much on accountability as measured through the published examination results. All schools are judged against criteria for GCSE and A level passes which are different for selective and non selective schools but which take no account of the contextual value added. Within the College we use baseline testing at Year 8 and again in Year 11 to set target grades and to track pupil progress. As a result, we are very aware of the value-added that we provide for our pupils at both GCSE and A level. A number of our pupils present with serious pastoral and/or home-life problems and may be advised by staff to sit a reduced number of GCSE and/or A level subjects. As we are a selective school, the benchmark for attainment is set at 7+ GCSEs grades A* - C and 3+ A levels grades A* - C. Under extenuating circumstances we sometimes permit a girl to take fewer GCSEs or 1 or 2 A-levels as this meets her needs at the time, despite the negative impact that we know this will have on our academic outcomes. The pressure of league tables that are widely publicised in the media is intense and yet the figures do not provide the value-added background and cannot be accurately interpreted by the public. However, this does not prevent the newspapers publishing articles which highlight “failing” grammar schools and the “Top 20 schools”. Correlation between ETI/DENI expectations and benchmarking would be welcomed.</p>
<p>Issue 2 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.</p>	<p>If a school has concerns about the ETI inspection process and the published report a written report must be produced with supporting evidence. However, this does not prevent the report from being published. The impact on staff morale resulting from a negative ETI report cannot be underestimated. The staff in a school that is experiencing difficulties will be under constant scrutiny which is a difficult situation for SLT and Governors to manage. The confidence in a school's performance as perceived by current and prospective pupils and parents can be severely damaged as the result of a crude inspection categorisation based on a short 2 ½ day inspection. The reputational risk to the school as a result of an unfavourable inspection report is huge and may adversely impact on pupil intake for many years thereafter.</p> <p>School improvement can be achieved with the support of ELB. However, due to funding cuts, the CASS service provided to schools has been dramatically reduced. In our opinion, ETI should therefore be an active participant in the school improvement process which takes place after inspection. The Department of Education currently do provide statistical data for benchmarking examination results and a set of quality standards as published in Every School a Good School and Together Towards Improvement. However, we believe there is a gap in training for teachers and Senior Leadership Teams in self-evaluation methodologies which</p>

	<p>would make a very positive impact on school improvement.</p> <p>Many of the support networks we avail of are internal or within the South Belfast Area Learning Community. We would welcome more widespread support.</p> <p>We are experiencing a lack of core literacy and numeracy support and would like to express our concern at the increasing levels of pupils presenting with SEN and the impact this has on school performance and provision for individual pupils.</p>
<p>Issue 3 Alternative inspection/improvement approaches which might better assess value-added and recognise improvement by schools.</p>	<p>Ofsted measure Contextual Value Added. We know that every child is different and each will have their own learning needs: some will have to do a lot of catching up to get five GCSEs or equivalent; for others seven or eight good grades will be relatively easily attained; and for some (perhaps with significant special educational needs) one or two qualifications might be a huge achievement. Ofsted therefore also measure the progress made by pupils from one stage of their education to the next.</p> <p>A number of other factors which are outside a school's control, such as gender, special educational needs, English as a Second Language, movement between schools, and family circumstances, are also known to affect pupils' performance. CVA therefore goes a step further than simple VA by taking these factors into account and thus gives a much fairer measure of the effectiveness of a school. That means that comparisons against other schools are more meaningful, for example, when comparing the performance of a school in a leafy suburb against the performance of one in an inner city area – both of which might face quite different challenges.</p>
<p>Issue 4 The priorities and actions which need to be taken to improve ETI's approach to the school improvement process – does ETI need enhanced powers?; should ETI make more/any use of alternative measures of achievement (other than examination performance) to assess school performance?; should ETI be independent of the Department of Education (as Ofsted is)?; does ETI need a better complaints/feedback procedure?; Do schools always understand the conclusions produced by ETI – is more transparency required in this regard?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ETI should give more weight to school self-assessment and provide support and training to enable schools to more effectively self-assess. In some countries, self-assessments are used by external reviewers to make a preliminary appraisal of a school before it is visited (Faubert, 2009). An advantage of school self-assessments is that they encourage schools to engage with the criteria (indicators) and to reflect on their own practices and improvements. • ETI should measure progress over time and not simply judge a school by a snapshot in time. • There needs to be an improved relationship between teachers and inspectors with ETI assessors viewed as professional practitioners who are helpful to school leaders in improvement planning. ETI should also be able to identify certain schools/individual teachers/leaders as examples of best practice and aid collaboration between schools experiencing difficulties and those schools who are deemed to be providing excellent education for children and young people. • In our opinion, a school should be judged by the people who are currently best placed to identify strengths and areas for improvement – namely pupils, staff, parents and governors. The role of ETI would then become one of support to help the school to develop strategies to become even better. • In our opinion, the inspectorate should be an independent body and not linked to the Department of Education as it is presently.
<p>Issue 5</p>	<p>We note with interest how the education system in one of the top</p>

<p>Other matters relating to ETI and the school improvement process that are worthy of further scrutiny.</p>	<p>performing countries, Finland, is geared towards the professional development of teachers. Overall, Finland invests 30 times more funds in the professional development of teachers and administrators than in evaluating the performance of students and schools, including testing. In testing-intensive education systems, this ratio is the opposite, with the majority of funding going to evaluation and standardised testing.</p> <p>In many countries, standardised testing is used to assess a school's performance. That's not the case in Finland where, in the absence of standardised tests, schools are responsible for assessing student achievement. A high-performing school in Finland is one where all students perform beyond what would be expected based on their socioeconomic background.</p> <p>ETI should consider enhanced incentives for individual and whole school improvement supported at school level and by the Department of Education. This was evidenced in New Orleans, USA during a leadership study visit during the last academic year.</p>
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