

CM/GMcM

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Committee for Education  
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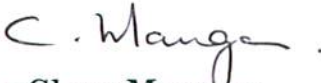


Dear Mr McCallion

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

Please find attached, the Belfast Education and Library Board's response to the Inquiry into the Education and Training Inspectorate and the School Improvement Process.

Yours sincerely

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

**SUBMISSION FROM THE BELFAST EDUCATION  
AND LIBRARY BOARD**

**OCTOBER 2013**

## **Introduction**

The Belfast Education and Library Board (BELB) welcomes the opportunity to engage in consultation as part of this Inquiry into the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) and the School Improvement Process. BELB places great value on the work done by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) and its role in promoting improvement in the interest of all learners.

In response to the issues raised in the inquiry, this paper will firstly present a brief context of the Belfast board area and its current programme for school improvement before outlining a detailed response to each of the four issues.

## **Context**

The Belfast Education and Library Board is charged under the provisions of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Orders with responsibility for providing an education service, including a youth service, in the Belfast area. It serves a very socially diverse area across the city with a population of approximately 270,000. Twenty per cent of the population are under the age of 16, and the city has one of the youngest populations in Europe.

The schools population of 57,000 is catered for by 163 schools (31 nursery, 85 primary, 33 post primary, 14 special). These include controlled, maintained, integrated, Irish medium, voluntary grammar and preparatory departments.

This social diversity is reflected by a range of schools, from those in the most challenging circumstances to prestigious grammar schools. This is also reflected in the results with some of the highest achievements in the UK along with schools which are struggling to meet the basic standards in literacy and numeracy.

Recognising the key role that is also played by ETI in the school improvement process, BELB would like to present the following response to the issues identified by the inquiry.

## **Issue 1:**

**Review the effectiveness of ETI's current approach in respect of school inspection/improvement - considering particularly how ETI assesses the value added in those schools which have lower levels of examination attainment**

### **1. No standardised baseline**

- a. The absence of a standardised baseline for children on entry to primary schools in NI makes the measure of 'value-added' in the primary sector more difficult to compare across schools. BELB would welcome a standardised approach to the assessment of children on entry to school in order to more accurately ascertain the 'value-added' impact of the educational provision.
- b. Many post-primary schools report that they pay little attention to the baseline submitted to them in terms of end of key stage (KS) results from their feeder primaries. This suggests that a baseline, which is intended to be criterion referenced, but in reality is often based on teacher judgement, produces varying levels of confidence across the province.
- c. BELB would welcome a more stringent consideration of a school's ability to 'close the gap' via an agreed mechanism which seeks to track the improvement of all children on entry to and from primary and post primary schools. An agreed approach to the factors which determine 'value-added' would be welcome, in line with the approach used in England. This would be particularly valuable for those schools that have lower levels of educational attainment, yet internal base-lining and tracking of pupil performance would indicate that children are achieving in line with their ability and predictions. This dichotomy can only be addressed when NI has a clear and robust 'value-added' system in place.

### **2. Realistic expectations of end-of-key stage attainment levels**

- a. No particular cognisance is currently taken of NISRA data in the assessment of the educational 'value-added'; multiple levels of social deprivation impact significantly on the educational attainment of children and this knowledge should be factored in to the equation when measuring the 'value-added' by individual schools. (The '80/20 rule' purports that school is only responsible for 20% of a child's

education, 80% is gained outside of that eg in the home and community. If this is accurate, then there could be a case for greater collaboration between ETI and other agencies in the inspection of schools, as is the case in Scotland).

- b. Whilst current benchmarking data seeks to identify performance of 'like' schools, 50% of schools will always be below the 'median'. In the past, DE published graphs with 'regression' lines; these were useful for ELBs and schools to determine how close their performance was to this comparative line.
- c. ETI measure 'value-added' by comparing schools to NI average and the ELB average. By definition, this necessitates that 50% of schools will always be below average.

### **3. Public nature of the inspection findings**

- a. Where there are 'serious concerns' it is recommended that a school should be given 6 months to act on the initial findings before the report goes public. This would give ETI a better idea as to whether or not formal intervention was necessary (ie less internal capacity, the greater the need for external support).
- b. The public nature of the findings can often lead to a 'trial by media', which often distracts from the impact which the report should have on improving the quality of educational provision with immediate effect.

### **4. Criteria used for inspections needs to be open and transparent**

It is recommended that:

- a. ETI should make the criteria used for each category of schools transparent and discuss this openly with schools: a particular grade should not come as a shock to a school, nor to the ELB.
- b. Some level of discussion would be welcomed prior to an 'inadequate' or an 'unsatisfactory' grade being given to a school. This would allow for useful information to be shared, which may have a bearing on the overall outcome of the school.

### **5. Emotional impact**

- a. ELBs have a duty of care to all ELB employees and the label of for example, 'inadequate' given to schools achieving standards consistently below NI average leaves an indelible mark on the

principal and staff alike. This often impacts negatively on morale before the leadership and management are in a position to move forward and to act on the areas for improvement. However, the emotional impact may never completely be ameliorated.

- b. BELB welcomes the 'sustaining improvement model' which is due to take place which will involve a one day assessment of a school which has previously been labelled as 'excellent' or 'very good'.

**6. Schools often report inconsistencies in approaches used and comments made by various district inspectors and teams**

It is recommended that:

- a. ETI should ascertain whether or not this is a valid concern; and
- b. consider an independent evaluation of the inspection process.

**Issue 2:**

**Identify the key issues impacting on schools experiencing difficulties and any gaps both in terms of the ETI process and the support services provided by the Department of Education and Library Boards**

**1. Identification of factors which create the main barriers to learning**

- a. Social deprivation factors (particularly multiple levels of social deprivation) create barriers which are difficult to overcome for example lack of education of the parent, multi-generational unemployment, lack of aspiration and hope. Schools alone cannot overcome these barriers and ELBs and government bodies should pull resources and work together to address the factors which contribute to underachievement: one example of this might be 'full-service' provision primary schools in areas which are most in need.
- b. In areas with high levels of social deprivation, the rate of progress in reaching the required level (for example Level 4 at KS2) can take longer; this should be taken into account when reaching a judgement on the progress between Key Stage 1 and 2.
- c. Some consideration could be given to pupils being assessed when they are developmentally ready.

**2. A broader view than just educational attainment should be factored in to the final analysis**

- a. Schools focus on the 'all round' education of the child, not just academic attainment at specific times in a child's life. This supports the ethos of the NI Curriculum (2007).

**3. To what extent does the quality of teaching directly impact upon the standards achieved?**

- a. In many schools entering formal intervention process there are no 'inadequate' lessons reported by ETI. In many cases, 'quality of provision' is satisfactory or better but yet the overall judgment on the school is 'inadequate'.

**4. Teachers no longer receive informal (oral) feedback from the ETI on their observed lessons**

- a. This allows a knowledge vacuum to develop, where teachers do not feel that the published report recognises their contribution or, perhaps more worryingly, that they could be responsible for any short-comings in teaching.
- b. BELB would welcome a return to formative feedback being given to all teachers as a norm within the inspection process.

**5. Patterns of concern**

Once a school enters a formal intervention process (FIP) it should be a 'priority' area for all departments within its ELB; where there are several schools in a local area which have been deemed inadequate then other relevant government bodies should make this community a priority area within a co-ordinated support framework.

### **Issue 3**

**Identify and analyse alternative approaches and models of good practice in other jurisdictions in terms of school inspection, the assessment of value added and improvement**

**1. BELB would welcome DE/ELBs undertaking significant research into education systems in other countries. Here are just a few examples:**

- a. To develop autonomy of schools it may be worthwhile to consider other systems which require schools to self-evaluate an identified aspect of school improvement on an annual basis. This self-evaluative report is returned to the education authority at the end of the year (for discussion and verification with their 'link officer').
- b. ETI 'quality assurance model' is a useful system whereby schools can invite ETI to self-evaluate an aspect of school life which they have been addressing. Whilst not mandatory, if widespread, this should enable schools to develop an ongoing relationship with their district inspector, which would focus on self-evaluation and improvement.
- c. BELB support the view by GTCNI that inspection and review works best when it works in partnership and would promote the autonomy of schools in playing a key role in self-evaluation and external review.

**2. Consultation with ELBs**

- a. It is recommended that the timing, frequency and/or the final outcome of a school's inspection should be a consultative process between the ELB and the ETI. The main question should be 'how do we best promote improvement in the interest of all learners?' Is an 'inadequate' or 'unsatisfactory' outcome the best way of achieving this goal.



#### **Issue 4:**

**Consider what priorities and actions need to be taken to improve ETI's approach to the school improvement process including the need for enhanced powers; alternative measures of achievement; improved governance; and transparency**

#### **1. Enhanced powers**

It is recommended that:

- a. ETI should have the power to identify 'inadequate' and 'unsatisfactory' teachers; these teachers should be entered in to a rigorous and robust 're-training' programme which brings them back to the basics of good quality teaching and learning, whilst at the same time supports them in addressing specific aspects of their teaching which is below standard. This external validation, which should support the principal's findings, would be useful in providing an external perspective on a school's internal judgement.
- b. An ongoing professional development programme for all teachers would be welcomed. This would enable teachers to self-evaluate their own practice based on an agreed and shared set of 'success criteria'. GTCNI are currently exploring active registration whereby teachers would be required to produce a portfolio of evidence on, for example, a five year cycle to show that they are keeping up-to-date with changes in education. BELB would welcome this as a means to ensure that all teachers remain focussed on quality teaching and learning in their classrooms.
- c. Where there are concerns about the quality of leadership and management (particularly the principal), more immediate and focused action should be taken. A dedicated competency-based programme should be drawn up and fully-completed. This may involve the principal and/or others taking a sabbatical.
- d. BELB would welcome a review of the current PRSD programme for both teachers and school leaders.

#### **2. Alternative measures of achievement**

- a. A fixed and published 'floor target' would be a clearer way for schools to judge their relative success.

- b. The NI Curriculum (2007) has at its core the importance of educating the whole child ie the inclusion of a new area of study Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (PDMU) in primary schools and Learning for Life and Work (LLW) in post-primary emphasised the importance of educating the whole child particularly with respect to 'how to do life'. The current emphasis on standards of attainment being the main indicator of a school's success seems to negate this and is a 'throw back' to a previous curricular age.
- c. Explore a common understanding of 'functional' literacy and numeracy: what does it mean and what does it look like in practice?
- d. A measure of an outcome can only truly be determined in terms of value-added when you have a clearly established starting point. Unfortunately, not all children come in to school with the same educational 'start' in life, nor do they have the same ongoing support. This fact cannot be ignored when determining the educational impact which a school has on the community which it serves.
- e. BELB would welcome a NI wide consensus of 'low' achievement and 'underachievement'. Underachievement exists in many contexts and this should be highlighted to a greater extent than is currently the case.

### **3. Improved governance**

- a. Should ETI be an independent body which remains impartial?
- b. Should schools be able to engage in a 'two-way' discussion re. evidence base determined by ETI? The inspection process is one-directional and based primarily on what is 'seen' during a 2.5 day span (in the case of a focussed inspection). BELB would welcome a more formative approach which focuses on next steps in a school's development, in line with the principles of assessment for learning.
- c. In terms of governance of schools, ELBs need to explore ways of providing training on Quality Indicators for Governance (ETI) as a judgement on this is now reported in all inspection reports with effect from April 2013.

### **4. Transparency**

- a. 60-day period for schools entering FIP is sufficient, however DE could grant 2 additional School Development Days, which would

have to be taken during this 60-day period. Schools receiving a satisfactory grade (30 days to prepare action plan) could be given one day. This is particularly pertinent if a school is inspected in the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> term, where there may not be any school development days remaining. Schools could access SDDs from the following school year in advance.

- b. Follow-up inspection (FUI) reports are currently issued in the form of a letter. These inspections do not always provide the specificity and wealth of information required for the institution (or support bodies) to identify the clear reasons behind an inspection grade. As these inspections can result in a school dropping a grade or entering FIP, this clarity of evidence is even more important. In Scotland, the current practice is to provide a short report for publication and a more detailed confidential report for schools.
- c. ESAGS identifies a 'School Improvement Fund' for schools in the FIP. However, there should be clearer mechanisms detailing how this funding can be accessed. There is currently no clear guidance for schools and/or ELBs as to how this should be done. (Schools have benefited from the opportunity to see what 'good' or 'outstanding' looks like and initial funding would be useful to enable principals, SMTs and teachers to do this following an inspection, particularly in schools where budgets are in deficit.)

### **Summary: Priorities and actions – Recommendations**

1. Schools deemed to be in danger of entering FIP should be given a 6-month period to address emergent issues before the publication of their final report and 'outcome'.
2. The importance of key stage data needs to be reviewed– *should this 'outweigh' all other aspects of the provision of a school?* Without a standardised baseline the over emphasis on educational outcomes seems unfair to those schools that work in the most challenging of circumstances.
3. Entry and exit points for Formal Intervention should be more clearly defined. A school should be able to self-evaluate against open and transparent criteria: an 'inadequate' or an 'unsatisfactory' school should not be a surprise. The introduction of the QA model would give greater autonomy to schools and enable them to decide when they are in a state of readiness for inspection against aspects of provision which they have

developed as part of their ongoing school improvement work. This would promote and encourage a culture of school self-evaluation and review.

## **Conclusion**

Many educationalists embraced the theory, principles and practices of the NI Curriculum (2007) because of the important role it places on autonomous learning: within an assessment *for* learning process, each child is supported in the identification of the 'next steps' in their learning, based on an ability to self-evaluate and engage in the setting of personal goals and targets, with a view to ensuring sustained and ongoing self-improvement. These same principles should be applied to our schools as they too engage in an ongoing process of school improvement and self-evaluation.

HM Inspectorate of Education (Scotland) believe that 'Inspection and review works best when it is conducted in the spirit of partnership' and have developed a two-way collaborative approach, which aims to develop positive working relationships between inspectors and reviewers. As a result, they have also developed greater collaboration with the school support service.

This seems a very worthwhile development to explore for education in NI so that the best educational provision and outcomes can be achieved for all our children.

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

## **Appendix to the Submission from Belfast Education and Library Board**

Further to consideration of this issue by board members, the following additional points have been received.

The end of Key Stage data is a highly unreliable indicator of school performance. At primary level, tests are internally administered and marked. As principals have become cognisant of their centrality to inspection, the integrity of the data has become increasingly dubious.

Principals, out of fear of inspection, are in some cases, setting about designing 'inspection-proof curricula', potentially causing extreme stress and workloads for staff, and at risk of delivering a very narrow range of test-led learning experiences for pupils.

Many report a marked dichotomy between the ETI's rhetoric of 'collaboration and professional discussion', and the interrogative, data-driven, mechanical and perceived demoralising nature of the actual process.

There is a view that a 'call-back' to schools judged as 'very good' or 'outstanding', is an appropriate strategy. The rationale underpinning this approach is unclear. In the primary sector, it would be entirely possible for a school to be unable to replicate or improve on a previous year's KS2 results, due to a weaker year group having reached P7. Under the current inspection system, such a school would be judged as having failed to maintain its standards.