

I retired this year (August 2013) from the privileged role of Principal for 14 years at St. Colm's High School, Twinbrook where I began my career in 1977. During that time, there have been many initiatives which rightly focused on the identification and promotion of strategies which positively impact on the school's ability to continually improve and support achievement for all pupils. It would be fair to note that some were more successful than others. Support services to schools for development and improvement work has varied in quality and more laterally has all but disappeared. It is hoped that a new and more school centred and effective model will develop and soon emerge.

However, I would wish to note the historic and ongoing contribution of ETI in driving school improvement. Insufficient consideration has been given to the positive impact that ETI can, and does, bring to what is a shared and prime goal for all involved in education. There is often a misconception that Inspectors are removed from the reality of school life, have a limited understanding of context and the particular and unique challenges in each institution. That was not my experience.

Firstly, the inspection process naturally, but necessarily, presents challenge for school leaders and teachers. All who work in education want to do a good job and make a real difference to the life chances of the pupils and communities we serve. But no single organisation would claim to be 'getting it right' so it follows that professional pride dictates that the process and outcome of external and objective evaluation will bring additional pressures to schools. However, not enough cognisance is given to how the identification of strengths and areas for improvement through inspection can refocus all involved in schools and prove to be the catalyst in the identification of alternative and better ways to move the school forward. There is clear evidence that struggling schools have developed the capacity to overcome significant difficulties and show real improvement following inspection. The role and contribution of the Inspectorate in this pivotal change should be more widely acknowledged.

Secondly, formal inspection is only a part of the role of the inspectorate yet seems to be the only aspect of their work which attracts comment. It is important that the role of the District Inspector is not only maintained but strengthened particularly the support and the positive role of the District Inspector in the promotion and enhancement of school improvement processes within schools should be recognised. Over time, he/she develops a unique relationship with the school and awareness of its culture, structures, processes and practices, standards and achievements through formal contact and less formal school visits. Professional conversations support the Principal and Senior Leaders in learning about good practice, of which there is much in our system, and consider how approaches may be adapted to suit the specific needs and priorities of an individual school. The effective District Inspector will challenge thinking and encourage the development of a whole school culture of self-evaluation which empowers teachers at all levels to learn from each other and gain confidence in determining how the school moves forward. He/she will provide constructive feedback on key areas identified and audited by the school to inform future development work.

This is happening in our schools and should be highlighted as exemplar practice

I would wish to put on record my personal appreciation of the specific help and contribution of Dr Paddy Shevlin, ETI in his position as District Inspector in St. Colm's for over twenty years. Over that period, our understanding of quality learning and teaching, the development of effective self-evaluation processes to promote improvement and ultimately pupil achievement, was underpinned by Dr Shevlin's approach as District Inspector which was one of support but insightful challenge. His

involvement in St. Colm's exemplified the approach outlined above and was pivotal to the clear progress of the school.

St. Colm's serves an area of high social disadvantage and was formally inspected in 2010. The quality of education and pastoral care was judged to be Outstanding and evidenced the school's development journey over that time.

In conclusion, I believe that any future model and approach to school improvement should more fully recognise the expertise, skills and knowledge of ETI personnel in promoting positive change in education. It should be valued as complementary, yet supplementary, to the work of any other support networks which clearly need to evolve as a matter of urgency. The model should recognise the multi-faceted support and challenge roles of the District Inspector and ensure resources are available to facilitate this pivotal aspect of their work in schools.

Imelda Jordan OBE, M.Ed, D.L.I.S