

## **COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION**

### **Informal briefing event with Associate Assessors**

**Wednesday 19/02/14 at 6.00pm in the Long Gallery**

#### **PRESENT:**

**Members -** Jonathan Craig  
Danny Kinahan  
Trevor Lunn  
Robin Newton  
Sean Rogers

**Staff -** Peter McCallion  
Karen Jardine  
Sharon McGurk  
Sharon Young

### **NOTE OF ISSUES RAISED**

- 1. How effective is ETI's current approach in respect of school inspection / improvement – does ETI satisfactorily assess the value added in those schools which have lower levels of examination attainment?**

Many Associate Assessors (AAs) highlighted very positive views on the Inspection process; the role of the District Inspector; the very professional manner in which the Inspectorate conducted themselves; the genuine way in which the AAs are integrated into inspection teams; the value of Senior Teachers in schools operating as AAs as part of an excellent Continuous Professional Development process; and the ability of ETI to impact in a very constructive manner on the process of school improvement.

Associate Assessors (AAs) strongly felt that despite reduced inspection timescales and the reducing frequency of school visits, inspection remained a necessary and valuable component of the school improvement process.

Many AAs argued that the role of the inspector had changed. Inspections, it was suggested, have become a more information intensive, highly pressurised undertaking requiring an ever increasing time commitment from inspectors. It was argued that as a consequence, some pastoral input and contextual knowledge was being lost and that this was to the detriment of effective inspection and the facilitation of subsequent school improvement.

Some argued that AAs had a critical role to play in providing a degree of mentoring for schools as well as supplying the missing context in inspection teams. These AAs also advised that in some instances teachers and more senior staff struggled to understand

supporting documentation from ETI - including e.g. Together Towards Improvement – and that AAs were ideally placed as experienced senior practitioners to advise struggling principals and teachers. Others argued that AAs had only a restricted involvement in inspection teams; were not permitted to give feedback to schools and that they therefore could only have a very limited impact on inspection outcomes or school improvement.

Participants reported varied experiences in their own schools in respect of District Inspectors (DIs) – some reported regular meetings and a productive relationship; others indicated that they had not met or had any dealings with their DI for 5 or more years.

Some AAs reported dissatisfaction with inspection of pre-school provision – indicating that inspection outcomes were not always the result of a transparent process; provision was sometimes subject to different treatment depending on whether it was voluntary or statutory and descriptors were in some instances arbitrarily applied.

In respect of the descriptors generally used in inspection reports in all schools, some AAs commented that these were not always applied consistently and varied somewhat depending on the phase under inspection and the composition of the inspection team. Some AAs highlighted the very adverse impact that certain descriptors - “Unsatisfactory” or “Inadequate” - can have on teachers and whole school communities. These AAs suggested that alternative less pejorative descriptors should be adopted or that in addition to the ETI descriptor, schools should be allowed to set out their own views on their strengths and weaknesses in reports.

In respect of the value-added by schools, AAs supported the commentary from DIs that this was difficult to assess in the absence of robust measures which are consistently applied across schools. AAs commented on the flawed and inconsistent reporting by schools of End of Key Stage results and indicated that in their present form these could not be used as a measure of the value-added by schools.

Some AAs reported concerns that the absence of an agreed measure served to disadvantage schools with socio-economically deprived pupils who had poor prior attainment. Some AAs indicated that they believed that banding schools according to levels of Free School Meal Entitlement did not give a consistent prediction or reasonable basis for comparison of school attainment.

**2. What are the key issues impacting on schools experiencing difficulties? What are the gaps (if any) both in terms of the ETI review process and the support services provided by the Department or the Education and Library Boards?**

AAs – like DIs – indicated that poor leadership or bad relationship management within schools can have a hugely detrimental impact on every important aspect of a school’s effectiveness. AAs referenced the difficulties faced by teachers with a poor or incompetent principal or ineffective BoG. AAs indicated that meetings between principals, BoGs and inspection teams did not always occur. It was argued that this feedback was a useful component of the school improvement process. It was suggested that ETI’s inspection of leadership and management should extend beyond the role of the principal or BoG and include teachers and other staff.

Some AAs also highlighted the difficulties facing principals attempting to support and manage incompetent teachers. Some AAs highlighted the absence of individual teacher feedback from inspection teams / reports. These AAs argued that such feedback was very useful for principals and would facilitate school improvement.

AAs highlighted the adverse impact on struggling schools of the rundown of CASS - one AA referred to CASS as the “missing service”. Most AAs felt that the restriction of CASS services to struggling schools was undermining the school improvement process for others.

Some AAs commented on the unhelpful representation of struggling or improving schools in the media. It was felt that this served to undermine good school leadership and did nothing to improve parental understanding or buy-in for improvement measures.

### **3. What alternative approaches and/or models of good practice in other jurisdictions in terms of school inspection might ETI adopt in the assessment of value added and school improvement?**

Participants highlighted in very positive terms ETI's extensive and valuable engagement with inspectors in other jurisdictions, indicating the importance of such work to improving policy and practice.

Some participants highlighted other models of good practice in e.g. the Area Learning Communities where principals met to discuss difficulties and share best practice. It was argued that such practices are essential to limit the isolation which busy principals often feel.

Some AAs suggested that an extensive programme of teacher CPD including longer placements in ETI be undertaken which would help teachers to focus on inspections and best practice in other schools.

Some AAs commented on the limited duration and infrequency of inspections, claiming that inspection teams would almost never gain a true picture of the effectiveness of a school. These AAs argued for more frequent short or no notice visits and inspections which, it was felt, would reduce non-useful preparation time and inspection stress in schools.

**4. What priorities and actions are needed (if any) to improve ETI's approach to the school improvement process? Are alternative measures of pupil achievement or enhanced powers, improved governance and transparency measures for ETI needed to enhance school inspection / improvement?**

Some participants spoke very highly of the positive impact of ETI on the school improvement process. Others argued that inspection should be focused on facilitating improvement in schools rather than on simply measuring attainment and auditing compliance. Indeed all AAs agreed that, what was described as, an Ofsted-like compliance auditing inspection regime was not the way forward for Northern Ireland.

Some AAs commented favourably on the arrangements in Scotland wherein the inspectorate is aligned with the school support services. Other AAs highlighted the tension between the inspection and the improvement functions and suggested that this would be difficult/impossible to manage if both functions were in the same organisation.

AAs generally indicated that a well embedded self-evaluation process in schools might facilitate a lighter-touch inspection regime. It was argued however that the success of self-evaluation was very much linked to the quality of school leadership and the commitment of teaching staff at many levels in a school. Many AAs commented on the patchy understanding of self-evaluation in a number of phases and the need for more training and support for schools.

Some AAs commented that there was a need for an independent professional body like ETI to publicly comment on and review DE policy. Other AAs expressed considerable reservations in this regard highlighting questions in respect of the actual value of statutory independence for ETI or a formal change to its role in this regard. These AAs contended that ETI already made a very positive impact on school improvement that was the envy of inspectorates in other jurisdictions and that changes to ETI's governance arrangements were unnecessary.