



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE
FOR EDUCATION**

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

Successful Secondary Schools

23 June 2010

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

**COMMITTEE
FOR EDUCATION**

Policy Interventions for Successful Secondary Schools

23 June 2010

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)
Mr David Hilditch (Deputy Chair)
Mr Dominic Bradley
Mrs Mary Bradley
Mr Trevor Lunn
Mr John McCallister
Mr Basil McCrea
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr John O'Dowd
Mr Alistair Ross

Witnesses:

Dr Robson Davison)
Mrs Katrina Godfrey) Department of Education
Dr Chris Hughes)

Mr Peter Geoghegan)
Mr Stanley Goudie) Education and Training Inspectorate
Mrs Faustina Graham)

The Chairperson (Mr Storey):

We will have two briefings this afternoon. The first is from senior departmental officials to assist the Committee in scoping a possible Committee inquiry into successful secondary schools serving disadvantaged communities. Officials were advised that the Committee may be interested in

identifying the common key characteristics of successful secondary schools serving disadvantaged communities.

I welcome Dr Robson Davison, the Department's deputy permanent secretary; Mrs Katrina Godfrey, the director of curriculum, qualifications and standards; and Dr Chris Hughes, the head of the standards improvement team. I thank Dr Davison for the papers that he submitted to the Committee. I ask you to make your presentation, after which members will ask questions.

Dr Robson Davison (Department of Education):

Thank you very much, Chairperson. With your approval, we will split the presentation.

The shared starting point for us all, I hope, is the value and importance not just of education but of educational outcomes, from the perspectives of individual children and wider society and from an economic point of view. Employment, earnings, quality of life and economic competitiveness are all tied up with educational outcomes. I hope that we all share the understanding that there is a correlation between educational outcomes and socio-economic circumstances. That is our starting point this afternoon.

The two key strategic pillars of the Minister's reform programme are raising standards and increasing equity of or access to a quality education; those are threads in many developed and developing countries. The Minister's strategy is based on a recognition that although many children achieve well in our system — our GCSE and A-level benchmarks against England and Wales bear that out — many do not. We have evidence from the work of the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) on literacy and numeracy, our Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) outcomes and our level-2 figures at GCSE, including English and maths, that many children do not achieve well in the system. The Minister's strategy takes the view that, as a society, we are probably far too complacent about the outcomes of the system.

There is extensive literature on raising standards, and a great deal of expertise is available. In our consideration, we have drawn on the work of Barber, Hargreaves and Fullan, who are internationally recognised figures in the field, on the experience of Montgomery County in Maryland, one of the top performing school systems in the US, on work commissioned from PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC), and, in particular, on professional advice from within our system and especially the advice of our Education and Training Inspectorate. The Minister is putting policies in place that are designed to raise standards and tackle barriers to learning.

Some of those have already been implemented; others are in the process of completion or development. They are interconnected with raising standards and addressing equity.

Some examples are: the ongoing implementation of the revised curriculum and the associated assessment arrangements; the implementation of Every School a Good School, which I hope we will get a chance to explore with you today; the focus on literacy and numeracy in the curriculum and our work on a literacy and numeracy strategy; the draft special educational needs and inclusion policy, which you have seen; the ending of the 11-plus and the unnecessary division of children by ability at age 11; the draft early years strategy; the teacher education review; the introduction of extended schools; our planning for the education and skills authority (ESA), the main focus of which is the raising of standards; and the inspection, identification and dissemination of best practice. We have a raft of policies designed to implement the Minister's broad strategy for raising standards and tackling issues of equity.

Finally, I will offer some key considerations. Questions about raising standards and equity are not easy to answer. Educational progress is a long game, because we are trying to do three things: achieve, sustain and develop progress in a context where individual schools can regress as well as progress. Secondly, from our perspective, the focus has to be on teaching and learning, leadership and planning and development in the schools themselves. We feel that a key emphasis has to be on raising standards in literacy and numeracy while maintaining a broad curriculum.

Professional development and support structures have to be focused on challenging and supporting schools on educational outcomes. Although there is a strong relationship between educational outcomes and socio-economic circumstances, we must not accept that as an iron law. The school can, and does, make a difference, but there is also a powerful parental and community dimension to progress through the raising of aspirations and the supporting of high expectations at school level.

The Department's role is to set out the strategy and supporting policies, to provide funding support, and to promote consistent and effective implementation. That is what we are trying to do. That is a broad overview of the issues that you are considering. I will ask Katrina to develop them.

Mrs Katrina Godfrey (Department of Education):

I will pick up where Robson left off. The Every School a Good School school-improvement policy is absolutely critical to the wider efforts on raising standards and improving outcomes for pupils. You may recall that the starting point of that policy was the recognition that it is the work of teachers in classrooms — supported through effective school leadership — that delivers outcomes and improvements for pupils.

As Robson said, Every School a Good school is developed from a clear evidence base, including consideration of performance data and the findings from inspection and research carried out locally and internationally. You will know that the final strategy that we are implementing was also shaped by consultation views. Many people felt that the original document was, if anything, slightly too heavy on performance and data and too light on recognising the centrality of teachers in classrooms. That important change to the final document was also informed by the publication around that time of the McKinsey report, which, you will recall, considered the top-performing school systems internationally, and which reached the important, and possibly obvious, conclusion that the quality of a system can never exceed the quality of its teachers.

That focus on teachers — and also the focus on teaching competences that had been developed by the General Teaching Council and endorsed by teachers themselves — has been built into the shaping and development of the final strategy. That strategy is built on the belief, underpinned by inspection and other evidence, that schools are best placed to raise standards. It sets out — and this is particularly relevant to the inquiry that you are considering — what we consider, from inspection and other evidence, to be the four main characteristics of a good school. They are set out in page 13 of the document: pupil-centred provision, high-quality teaching and learning, effective leadership, and a school connected to its community.

We have fleshed out those characteristics with a detailed list of indicators that provide a useful tool for school self-evaluation and for schools to benchmark and assess themselves. They are reflected in what inspectors now look for during school inspections, and they are reflected in the new regulations and guidance on school development planning, which will come to the Committee for consideration shortly.

Comparing those indicators in the context of the Ofsted report on the characteristics of outstanding secondary schools in England, we see huge overlap and complementarity. That is not by design but because, as Robson said, we know from local inspection evidence and international research that the presence of those characteristics points to a quality education for pupils.

What does that tell us? Every School a Good School tells us that six key areas need to be the focus of any school improvement policy. That means that we expect our policies, schools and those who support schools to focus on effective leadership and that an ethos of aspiration and high achievement is vital. A further key area is high-quality teaching and learning; another is, as Robson said, tackling the barriers to learning that many young people face. We also expect schools to focus on embedding a culture of self-evaluation and self-assessment and using performance data and other information effectively to bring about improvement.

We expect them to focus on ensuring that a support structure and a challenge structure are in

place to help schools to improve, with clarity about the place of more formal interventions, where quality of provision for children is not what it should be. The final key area is increasing engagement between schools and the parents, families and communities that they serve, recognising the influence that local communities can have on attitudes to education and on pupil attainment. Those are the key areas on which we have been focusing in the school improvement strategy.

One of the challenges in the early days of implementing the strategy was ensuring a shift, particularly among those who support schools, from important ally to critical friend. Whether at governor, leadership or support level, that shift is to ensure a recognition of the importance of the combination of support and supportive challenge and of asking questions about how things can be improved.

As you will be aware, there is also a focus on formal interventions and on a formal intervention process, which is a necessary step towards ensuring a clear response from schools whose provision the inspectorate finds less than satisfactory. There is a focus on action plans that are designed to address the areas for improvement and which are monitored closely to effect improvement.

It is also important to recognise that formal intervention is only one of three types of intervention that are set out in the strategy designed to trigger tailored support from the local Curriculum and Advisory Service (CASS), with the help of the relevant sectoral body, where appropriate. The most important aspects of the intervention process are those where the school initiates self-improvement or where the education and library board, assisted by the relevant sectoral support organisation, picks up risk factors and works with a school to tackle them so that when the inspectorate goes in, the issues that could have led to poor quality have been picked up and addressed. We hope that, as the strategy rolls out, that will prevent a school's provision being regarded as "less than satisfactory."

The other challenge has been the need to focus not only on tackling quality issues but on capturing and celebrating good practice, and Robson referred earlier to disseminating good practice. Earlier this week, we held an event for all the schools that had been inspected in the past year that had been found to be outstanding or very good. That was done to mark their achievements and to ensure that the good practice that they demonstrate is captured and fed back into teachers' professional development and, ultimately, into initial teacher education so that there is a loop back from good practice in a school to what informs the training and development of teachers.

The final characteristic of our system that I wish to mention is the combination of excellent practice with small pockets of unsatisfactory practice; it is a feature that we cannot ignore and which we must tackle. We cannot easily defend the variation in performance of schools at every level and of every type; that is one of the issues that the school improvement policy is designed to address. Chris Hughes will outline what we mean by variations from school to school and the issues that that throws up for us in implementing the school improvement policy.

Dr Chris Hughes (Department of Education):

The Committee asked us to take a particular look at schools serving disadvantaged communities. In considering how to identify such communities, we looked at the free school meals intake of each school, particularly those with an above average free school meals intake for the post-primary sector. The average free school meals intake in Northern Ireland is 17%, and the two scatter graphs that we have provided focus on such schools. One of the graphs looks at free school meals entitlement: performance versus Key Stage 3 results. That illustrates that as the number of children receiving free school meals rises, achievement levels fall — the correlation is quite strong, which means that the free school meals element affects the performance of children in those schools.

On the graphs, yellow denotes selective schools, those with a partially selective intake are red, and the dark blue or black are non-selective. The expected level of school performance across Northern Ireland is 77%, but the vast majority of schools with above average free school meals

entitlement do not achieve at that level; their performance is below the Northern Ireland average. Within that performance there is quite a variation between schools faced with the same challenge of what to do with their free school meals intake. For example, one school gets far fewer of its children to the expected level; whereas another with the same free school meals intake reaches roughly the Northern Ireland average. The challenges in individual institutions have an effect, but they can be addressed.

The second scatter graph —

Mr B McCrea:

Might that suggest that free school meals are not a good measure?

Dr Davison:

They are one of our key measures.

Dr Hughes:

They are strongly associated with deprivation. Whether there is a causal —

Mr B McCrea:

Are you drawing a causal effect from free school meals that may not be justified?

Dr Hughes:

I did not say that there was a causal effect; I said that there was a strong association. It indicates the challenges that they face, and the strong correlation provides clear information about a school's underlying challenges. Schools find it harder to perform and the correlation line shows that.

Mr B McCrea:

Sorry; I will let you finish before I ask another question.

Dr Hughes:

The second graph shows the number of five or more GCSEs, including English and maths; members should note that the Northern Ireland average has dropped by 20 percentage points. Two years previously, we were getting 77% of our children to the expected level; however, when we get to five or more GCSEs, including English and maths, there has been a noticeable drop. The pattern of performance is similar in that as the number of free school meals pupils goes up, performance in a school goes down.

The graph shows that six schools are performing above average, despite having an above average intake of free school meals pupils — three of those schools are selective and three non-selective. When we look for examples of good practice in schools serving disadvantaged communities, we are not looking at a large number of schools. I prepared a quadrant to illustrate that point for members; it shows schools on the scatter graph.

Another group of schools has high free school meals entitlements and they are performing below the average: it is the majority of schools on the scatter graph. Those are schools for which we want to remove any association between free school meals and performance. We want that to improve.

The schools in the third quadrant have low free school meals intake and above average performances. This group typically includes a fair number of grammar schools; it is about one third of schools.

However, a fourth group does not have a high free school meals intake but still performs below the Northern Ireland average.

This graph tells us that there is massive variation in the system but also that there is a strong correlation between a high intake of free school meals — typically in disadvantaged communities — and a shortfall in children’s performance.

Dr Davison:

That ends our presentation. I apologise for having taken so long, but, as members know, this is a key issue. We wanted to get across both a high-level and a detailed view of it.

The Chairperson:

Thank you, Robson. That is huge amount of information, on which various views will be taken; Basil has expressed one of them. There is a clear difference of opinion among educationalists about the validity of using of free school meals as an indicator in this issue.

I want to make this comment and then pass on. You say that the schools improvement policy will be supported and complemented by other key policies, including removing academic selection.

How can the Department continue to ignore the legal position whereby it is the right of a school to use academic criteria in its admissions policy? It is clearly permissible in law, but the Department seems to continue to ignore that fact and tries by every method and means to create confusion. The Department is responsible for creating confusion rather than accepting reality; its confrontational style of administration does immense damage to our education system.

You said, Robson, that a raft of policies was key in raising standards and removing barriers. However, some of those policies are half-baked, some unachievable, and some contradictory. The special educational needs policy has gone out for consultation and come back with a raft of criticisms. It has gone back into the Department and we have no idea when we will see it, or whether we will ever see it again in its current form. There is absolutely no guarantee on the

entitlement framework. It is almost 3.00 pm and I will not comment on the outcome of the football match, but I am surer about that than I am about meeting the targets for the entitlement framework for 2013. The numeracy and literacy policies also face huge problems in the time taken to bring forward the report and so on. The Department's every policy is like a sieve — riddled with contradiction. That is the shifting sand on which the Department is building its plans to deal with underachievement.

How does the Department feel about building on half-baked policies that, as the Committee for Education said, unfit for purpose? We need only go back to a discussion that we had a couple of weeks ago on the early years policy. We are in a dire position, yet the Department is still pursuing those policies.

Dr Davison:

Chairperson, you would be terribly surprised if I said that that was a wonderful analysis of the position.

The Chairperson:

I know that I am biased.

Dr Davison:

You must realise that I simply do not accept that analysis. We have a fundamental —

The Chairperson:

A whole raft of people agree with me, Robson.

Dr Davison:

Those are matters for debate; that is why we are here. We are here to talk about educational underachievement. A starting point in any debate on educational underachievement is the fact that some people do not accept that such a thing exists. People's complacency about the outcomes of the education system is difficult to breach.

The starting point is to accept that there are problems around literacy and numeracy, around the lack of pupils achieving five GCSEs, including English and maths, in grades A* to C, and around our position on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) PISA outcomes. There are two approaches to tackling that problem: the first is to tackle school improvement and standards head on; the second is to attempt to put policies in place that enable schools to overcome the barriers that children, some more than others, inevitably face when they go to school.

Every School a Good School is a key policy in that approach; I do not accept that it is built on shifting sands or that it is half-baked. It has created a fundamental shift in how we regard how our colleagues in the inspectorate inspect and report on schools and what the Department chooses to do about that. The policy puts considerable pressure on schools to self-evaluate and self-improve and on the support system to ensure that it is supporting schools in their endeavours to deal with the issues that they face. I could have the same debate on all the policies that you mentioned. Those policies are genuine efforts to tackle a genuine problem.

The Chairperson:

Some of us have declared an interest as members of boards of governors at primary or post-primary schools or both. Let me paint a scenario: say that you were appointed to the board of governors of a school in a disadvantaged area that faces issues of raising its standards and addressing problems relating to children's ability. Which of the four key indicators in the Department's policy — child-centred provision, high-quality teaching and learning, effective leadership, and a school connected to its local community — would you prioritise, and how would you go about changing that situation?

Mrs Godfrey:

The key point — members will have seen this in the Ofsted report — is that those key characteristics need to be viewed together: one cannot pick and choose. If effective leadership is not underpinned by high-quality teaching and learning, there will be a problem. The key is leadership supported by quality teaching and a focus on pupils' needs, as well as the work on a

school's connections to its community.

I have done quite a few sessions with governors over recent years, and one of the most powerful things that they have fed back to us is that they recognise that one of their jobs is to ask questions about how their schools' standards compare with similar schools'.

We published indicators to support the four characteristics. It is helpful to look at those indicators in the context of the effective advice on self-evaluation and self-improvement that is available for schools and to use them as the starting point in looking at how a school is doing and how certain areas can be picked up on and taken forward in the school development plan.

That will be the key starting point for anyone who wishes to sit on a board of governors or take up a position in a school. Governors have told me that confidence comes from knowing what questions to ask and what areas to look at. The feedback that we have received tells us that there is a sense that having areas to focus on, indicators and the material that is available from the inspectorate on self-evaluation and self-assessment, helps a school make its own start. The most sustainable improvement is delivered by those in an organisation, not improvements imposed from without.

Dr Davison:

I add to that the importance of governing bodies, whose members come from the community in which a school is located, in maintaining high aspirations and expectations. All the work that has been done locally, nationally and internationally on that subject stresses the importance of aspiration and expectation.

The Chairperson:

Two things come out of that. First — correct me if I am wrong — none of those indicators has a penalty. People will not evaluate themselves on a scale of one to 10 and give themselves minus

2. I know of a school that has had a problem with its principal for six years. Numbers in the school have fallen from 132 to 64, solely because the education and library board in the area was held by legal restraints, with its head against the wall. It is a scandal. That school has suffered.

It would be easy for our opponents to say that we should have had the ESA; it is almost as if the ESA will solve all our problems with magic dust. However, within the current legislative framework for the administration of schools there seems to be no penalty for teachers or schools that do not deliver for their pupils. In the case that I mentioned, the dispute had nothing to do with the pupils, but they got caught up in it. It got so bad that the school, which is brand new, is not considered eligible to have a vice-principal.

Who is legally responsible if there are no sanctions? The ESA Bill contained a clause that gave the ESA a duty to raise standards. There seems to be a view that that is somehow not the responsibility of the board of governors of a school or that it is not the responsibility of the education and library boards. Who is legally responsible for ensuring that a school measures up to the standard that is required to give its pupils a good standard of education?

Dr Davison:

It is a combination of the management of the school and its governance. The school is where children are taught, learn and where they achieve; therefore, it behoves the professionals in a school to achieve the highest possible standards for their children. They, in turn, are answerable to their boards of governors, who have oversight of the school and who have, in many cases, employed the principal and the teachers.

The Chairperson:

When a school gets a bad report and it is clear that it has problems — we will pursue that with Stanley Goudie and his colleagues — what mechanisms exist to ensure that either financial sanctions or disciplinary sanctions are available? I could be wrong, but ultimately — this is a personal view; I am not speaking on behalf of the Committee — self-evaluation might prevent an

accurate picture being given. That is why we need an independent and robust inspectorate that has teeth and which can act in a way that is relevant to the school.

Dr Davison:

You take us to the heart of Every School a Good School. I will ask Katrina to give you a detailed answer on that. However, you should be careful not to parody self-evaluation; it is not about a school saying that it is -2 out of 10 or +196 out of 10.

The Chairperson:

It is more likely that they would go the latter way than the former.

Dr Davison:

That is not what it is about. It is about a group of school professionals taking a long, hard look at their school's strengths and weaknesses; that is what many schools do as part of their daily bread and butter. They take a look at how good they are compared to benchmarks against which they can set their performance. You will tell me that many schools do not do that.

The Chairperson:

Yes.

Dr Davison:

Every School a Good School puts self-evaluation and self-improvement at the absolute centre, and to that is added a formal inspection process. Inspectors come and, without fear or favour, give an honest assessment of a school, and the school that looks odd is the one that regards itself as +196 but which the inspectors discover is not up to the mark. There are schools where that is undoubtedly the case. My colleagues from the inspectorate will comment on that in due course.

Every School a Good School is designed to focus sharply on outcomes and on what a school is doing for its children against a background that every child should achieve according to their potential. That is what schools are there for; that is what the policy is designed to promote, and self-evaluation is the tool, based on inspectorate documentation, that enables a school to look seriously at its strengths and weaknesses. The other key piece in the process is that the flaws and problems that an inspection report identifies have to be addressed with the support of a support body, usually an education and library board. There are powers on governance and unsatisfactory teachers and so on.

Mrs Godfrey:

One of the key things that Every School a Good School introduced was a focus on follow-up action where the inspectorate finds provision less than satisfactory. That follow-up action requires an action plan that is not signed off by the school but by the managing authority, which has to have a look at it and has to be sure that it is satisfied that if the actions in the plan are taken they will address the weaknesses in the areas for improvement in the inspection report and will also confirm that it will provide the necessary support and training — irrespective of what the school thinks. That is an absolutely critical step.

Schools used to develop their own action plans in response to inspection reports; now schools develop those plans with external validation. Someone else who is responsible and accountable for the educational outcomes and the funding in that area will study the plans and decide whether the actions in it are sensible and will effect improvement. That huge change is now in place and is working with any school that is found to be less than satisfactory. It is also working for any school found to be satisfactory or, indeed, for any school in which an inspection report identifies significant areas for improvement. It does not just apply to schools in the formal intervention process. The process of action plans signed off by the managing authority is in place for schools that have received a satisfactory inspection report.

The Chairperson:

I do not want to get sidetracked on this, as it is a complicated issue. The 'National Standards for

Headteachers' report was published in 2005. The Department says in 'Every School a Good School' that:

"These standards will continue to have a place in the implementation of our school improvement policy, but one that is more closely linked with the Performance Review & Staff Development process as it applies to principals. The standards also need to be communicated ..."

In the next paragraph the Department says that the professional qualification for headship (PQH) is not to be made mandatory.

Is that not a contradiction? There is no deterrent for poor performance, given that one of the elements in poor performance is a school's leadership.

Why did the Department not make the PQH mandatory rather than voluntary, as it is at present?

Dr Davison:

One of the reasons is the notion of a mandatory qualification for headship. Some principals may not have access to the qualification or may not have the time to do it part-time. There was concern that a mandatory qualification could deter good candidates from applying for leadership positions when the numbers applying for leadership positions in schools are not as strong as they once were. That is happening everywhere else in the world.

You use the term "sanction". The sanction is that people are publicly accountable as leaders in schools; they are subject to a formal, transparent and public inspection process. The inspection report is not just for a school and its board of governors; it is published. That is a fairly hefty piece of the jigsaw, although it is not quite a sanction. Saving my colleagues' blushes, our inspectorate is highly respected; people take serious note of its views and opinions. Inspection is a key piece of the process, and it would be wrong to underestimate it. Making a PQH mandatory when only a certain proportion of the teaching force has it or has access to it is a step too far at this point.

The Chairperson:

Achieving Belfast and Achieving Derry — Bright Futures were initiatives in two locations that were having problems. In 2008-09, Achieving Belfast put 10 teachers into underachieving schools in its area, although those schools could probably have taken 20 teachers. What analysis has there been of the performance of Achieving Belfast? What evidence is there on the performance of the project in Londonderry?

Do we see direct intervention from those programmes, such as the provision of additional teachers? I worry that we overanalyse the problem and concentrate on it too much, although a degree of analysis is necessary to identify it. However, we have failed to emphasise the children in the schools.

Much of the policy that was central to Achieving Belfast and Achieving Derry — Bright Future was in the early stages of development when those projects were rolled out. In the absence of that raft of policies, is there any evidence that direct intervention has had an impact? Are there lessons to be learned from those two projects?

Dr Davison:

Before I ask Katrina to answer that specifically, I want to make the general point that policy is designed to focus heavily on raising standards generally by closing the gap between those who perform well and those who do not and by tackling issues of equity. Therefore every school will come under the auspices of the policies that we are putting in place.

I recognise behind your comments a degree of impatience; however, this is a long game. Important policies, such as SEN1, need to be consulted upon, developed effectively and brought to bear on the school system. That will take time. Take the introduction of the revised curriculum in 2007: it will be 2019 before the child who went through that in 2007 comes through the full curriculum. Therefore, we have to accept that this is a long play. Katrina will respond to the question on the Achieving Belfast programme.

Mrs Godfrey:

Achieving Belfast and Achieving Derry were always recognised in Belfast and in the north-west as being long-term programmes. We have done a couple of things, but the boards have come up with interventions that they think will respond most effectively to the needs of their areas. They know their areas and their schools and what is likely to work in them. Therefore, a very different approach is being used in Belfast to that taken in the Western Board. Although, as Robson said, this is a long game, we are not prepared to sit back. Therefore, very early on, we built in an early evaluation to the two programmes. In fact, my colleagues in the inspectorate completed a report, which was published a few weeks ago. It looks at the early progress of the programmes, provides an overall assessment, and makes recommendations for action that, if implemented, will strengthen the effectiveness of the two programmes. That report is publicly available, and I suspect that the Clerk has already circulated it to the Committee. That gives us a basis on which to check that the foundations are laid correctly and are sustainable.

At the outset, we set a series of indicators. As Robson said, we knew that the outcomes for pupils in relation to GCSE, for example, would take some years to feed through. Therefore, we came up with a series of indicators that we are about to revisit in the light of the inspection report and do a further update on for the autumn meeting of our Achieving Belfast and Achieving Derry project group. It does not look at the educational performance attainments but rather at milestone indicators, such as attendance rates and early progress. We are doing another stock-take against those to check that progress in those early indicators is being maintained, because if we get children to turn up to school on time and support them through early interventions, their educational outcomes should be much closer to what they are capable of achieving.

One of the successful elements in the Bright Futures programme is a focus on preschool and foundation stage through programmes such as the musical pathways programme on the core skills of listening, following instructions, participating, singing rhymes and those things that we know from research set children up for reading, writing and succeeding in school from the earliest stages. Those programmes are starting to tackle the barriers that Robson mentioned earlier. They are long-term programmes, but we are not going to sit back and wait 10 years to see the outcomes. We have had them inspected, we do regular checks on the milestone indicators, and

we make sure that if things are going off target, we have early information to ensure that boards take the action needed to develop the trajectory towards the final outcomes that we all want to see.

The Chairperson:

We are told that the policies in the evaluation of Achieving Belfast are child-centred; that was one of the characteristics; however, a cursory glance at the report shows that it is about commitment, procedures, staff and tailored support. There does not seem to be much about assessing the outcomes of the processes, about the child who was supposed to be at the centre of it, or about what the problem is and how you fix it.

Mrs Godfrey:

That is exactly what the report has done. In fact, at a recent briefing, folk from the Belfast board showed us some of the practical things that they had done, including looking at children's reading ages and their progress in reading; working with teachers to ensure that they are supported; and monitoring their progress. They showed statistics from years 8 and 9 that demonstrated the progress that children were making because of the systems and process that were applied.

The Chairperson:

It would be useful to see those statistics.

Dr Davison:

The inspectorate draws conclusions from its inspection reports through a variety of means, including the chief inspector's biennial reports. I assume that the Education and Training Inspectorate report on the 2008-2010 period can be expected reasonably soon, and colleagues can talk about that. In the past year, two publications were issued on best practice in English and maths. Best practice in the classroom is defined for all teachers through the findings of inspection evidence across the work that the inspectorate does in the round.

The other factor, which my colleagues in the inspectorate can also talk about, is that inspectors are in and out of schools regularly, and, along the way, they bring their professional expertise to bear with teachers and principals across the length and breadth of the system. We are trying to set out a picture of our attempt to shift fundamentally to a focus on educational outcomes. Inevitably, that is a long game. As Katrina said, we are also trying to build programmes and approaches and to draw on evidence from our inspectorate colleagues to work at that, not in the future but in the here and now. It is an attempt to raise standards and improve equity in the long and short term.

Mr Ross:

You mentioned low attainment and attempts at raising aspirations. Educational aspiration is a real problem in deprived areas, and part of that is that many children do not see the value in education. Can you give examples of what you mean by the importance of building links with parents and communities? We often hear about strategies but not about practical examples. Where are those being carried out?

Dr Davison:

Many schools have good links with parents and communities. I will not name them because that would be unfair, but I have visited schools in and around Belfast that deal with deprived communities and which put a major effort into working closely with parents and with the wider community. Sometimes that is done through formal parenting programmes and sometimes through informal means. We have tried to put extended schools funding on a fairly generous targeting social need basis, one of the aims of which is to encourage schools to reach out to parents and to communities with a bit of extra resource to try to draw in on that.

Aspiration and expectation are key. A long time ago, I attended schools as an inspector; I have returned to them in my present job to witness an enormous shift in how they perceive themselves and how they are perceived in their communities. Those schools have raised their standards considerably. That is a key feature.

Mr Ross:

We all agree that that should happen, but what is the uptake on it? Is it working, and how will you get parents involved?

Dr Davison:

There is a mixed picture on all those issues. Some schools understand how to seize the opportunity; others have not quite achieved that yet. We always tread the line between over-prescription and allowing schools to make their own determinations.

Setting broad criteria and allowing schools to develop would run the risk of their not developing the same areas at the same pace. There is evidence of some very good approaches in the extended schools programme. However, we also have evidence that some schools have not made the progress that we would have liked.

Mr Ross:

What do you mean by “very good approaches”?

Dr Davison:

We mean that some schools have introduced formal parenting programmes.

Mr Ross:

How many parents and communities are involved in that?

Dr Davison:

I cannot give hard numbers.

Mr Ross:

I am not asking for hard numbers. You said that some areas are successful, but what do you

consider a success? I am not asking for specifics; I just want a broad number.

Dr Davison:

Expecting schools to have 100% engagement is not realistic. It is about schools engaging with a group of parents who have influence and who can grow aspiration and expectation. Successful schools are those that know how to focus on parents who can influence the communities in which they live. One particular school is extremely good at that.

Mr Ross:

I am getting a sense that I will not get a number from you.

Dr Davison:

It is not one of those ones that —

Mr Ross:

It is difficult to listen to you talk about success when we have no idea how you judge success or how many parents are involved.

Dr Davison:

Let me put it like this: I am sure that you know which schools in your constituency work successfully with parents, but such engagement is not amenable to a score. Nevertheless, you will know instinctively which schools have good relationships with parents and communities and which keep parents and community at arm's length. Research tells us that good engagement with parents and the community raises aspirations and expectations, which were key factors in the work of the former Department for Children, Schools and Families.

Mrs Godfrey:

It may sound obvious, but it is a two-way process. It is vital that a school reach out. We have been working with our colleagues in DSD, who are responsible for neighbourhood renewal, to

articulate to disadvantaged communities in particular the importance of aspirations and of valuing the work of their local school. Such aspirations are increasingly being built into neighbourhood renewal action plans; therefore, it does not all have to come from the school.

Communities are recognising the importance of education and of children doing well and being supported to do well at school. Consequently, they are asking schools how they can help, what can they do and how they can do more. That dynamic is hugely important. Working with other Departments gives us a route into communities in certain areas that schools would not necessarily have. That two-way process and the joining up of the dots between, for example, the neighbourhood renewal programme and our work to raise standards have been hugely useful to us as well as to our colleagues in other Departments.

Mr Ross:

Last week, a teacher from Ballysally Primary School told me that many teachers who have spoken to the parents of problem children encountered hostility because of the parents' negative attitude towards teachers and their bad experience of schools. She said that many of the parents did not want to know that their child was misbehaving and that there were difficulties; they simply told the teachers to bring their child back at 3.00 pm. Some of the teachers told me that in other places, such as Glasgow, liaison officers, who are not teachers and who are not seen as teachers from the school, visit parents. Is that going on anywhere in Northern Ireland? If not, are there plans to start doing it?

Mrs Godfrey:

That model is being used in parts of Glasgow. It is also a feature of the Deis programme in the South, where home school liaison officers are appointed in areas of disadvantage to carry out that role; that is less intimidating for parents than if someone from the school were to do it. The other thing —

Mr Ross:

Are there such officers in Northern Ireland? If not, are there plans to appoint any?

Mrs Godfrey:

It is one of the areas that we are looking at in the context of the North/South work on educational underachievement. We want to see the impact that those officers have had in the South and whether there are lessons to be learned. The same applies to the programme in Glasgow.

Recently, we did work on literacy and numeracy and assessment reporting with parenting groups. Through that work we got the sense that even hard-to-reach parents and groups from the most disadvantaged communities want to do the right thing to support their children, but, often, they do not know how to go about it. I was talking to a principal the other week who had sent for the parents of a pupil to talk about a problem. She said that, until the parents came in, she had not appreciated that they were absolutely terrified, as their association with the principal's office when they had been at school had not been a happy one. Although the principal thought that she was having an adult-to-adult conversation, she realised suddenly that she needed to adopt a reassuring tone to get her message across.

The principal said that that was an important lesson for her. She had not regarded the meeting as a big deal, but now she is aware that she must remember that being called to meet a school principal is a big deal for some parents, and finding strategies and ways around that is important. The principal was able to point to what she had done to build trust and confidence and to inform me of the benefits that that had for the child and the message that had got out in the community about the importance of supporting the school.

As Robson says, when you see it happening at first-hand, it can be enormously effective. The key thing for us, and our colleagues in the inspectorate, is to capture good practice in an area as we do for teaching, learning and standards and to disseminate it more effectively, particularly in initial teacher education and continuing professional development, because it is a skill set that is quite distinctive in many ways.

The Chairperson:

Before I go to Basil, I have one comment. Collaboration with neighbourhood renewal sounds

very good, but funding for nurture groups will come to an end. The Department gives groups a project and tells them to pilot it; the project is successful and the outcomes are delivered. However, when a group asks the Department for more money, the Department says that there is none and the project folds. You can have all the collaboration you want, but that is what happens.

I visited a school in Sandy Row, where there had been intervention. It did a good job, but the money ceased, the intervention stopped, and it was back to square one. We see that repeatedly with nurture groups. They are doing a good job; in fact, there were no referrals to the psychologist or any interventions in Ballysally school last year because there was a plan and parents were involved. We talked to parents. However, what happens next year? The money will not be there. The Department has given a vague commitment — in fact, it has said that it is not going to do it — end of story. That is a scandal. The rhetoric does not measure up to the reality. That is the problem.

Mrs Godfrey:

The key issues to emerge from engagement are changing attitudes and the realisation that education is important not just to our future but to that of the children in schools. We have been getting that message across effectively and working with other Departments to help it be received. That is where it is most effective. It is not the stand-alone programmes that are most effective, but the message from community leaders that education is important and that children doing well at school is important, and when the schools' work is being supported and valued in the community. That is the real benefit of our work.

Dr Davison:

You put your finger on a broader point that innovation is required, and for innovation we need to test. However, it is difficult to move from pilot to full-scale implementation because the pilot usually involves only a small number of players.

The Chairperson:

I do not want to dwell on this because I know that Basil wants to get in, and he has to go to

another meeting, but you said earlier that we are in a long game. I could name a dozen programmes that the Department has introduced. In 1989, a PAC report said that a numeracy and literacy programme cost £40 million.

Then we change that and go to something else. The Department has no stickability; it tries a thing for a while, throws it out and then it tries something else for a while. We need an initiative that works, and nurture classes work. There are other examples: the Achieving Belfast programme seems to be delivering. We will get more information to see how that works. However, as soon as it works, the Department pulls the money out and the initiative disappears. There is no long-play there; you have a short-playing record. You have no long-playing record on that one.

Dr Davison:

You draw two comparisons. Literacy and numeracy is not a pilot or an initiative. The 1998 piece was not short play. We had to look at the outcomes from the 1998 strategy — the Committee would have been first to criticise us if we had not. The Northern Ireland Audit Office helpfully produced an analysis of it for us. The Audit Office did not regard the strategy as bad; what it regarded as bad was its inconsistent implementation across the Province. We have tried to look at a much more consistent way of delivering literacy and numeracy.

However, we must never produce literacy and numeracy as an initiative or a pilot or anything but the bread and butter of what a child should expect from its 12 years of compulsory education. I regard that as a different order of things to decisions on nurture groups, where the pilot point is a moot one. Initially that funding, I assume, paid for a small number of schools to engage in nurture activity. The need is probably much greater than that, but, I assume, the resource to meet that need is not there at present.

I do not disagree with much of what you say, but this is incredibly complex territory. That is why I make the point about keeping both long game and short game in play. However, we cannot

pretend that we can do everything; we have to learn lessons as both go through.

Mr B McCrea:

I am deeply disappointed once again in all of this. All I have heard is meandering, wishful thinking. Someone says something, you try to argue it back and in fact it takes both of you to have an answer back on it.

I have no clear understanding about how the Department will get to grips with educational underachievement. You produced statistics for free school meals and we looked at them. We could equally take statistics about the number of homes with 50 books or more and we could draw a nice graph on that. The long and short of it is that educational underachievement starts at early years, but we do not see any effective intervention coming from you in that.

I have to say that that begins to reflect badly on the Department and the inspectorate. I want to know who inspects the inspectorate and who inspects the Department. You have had years to try and do all of this. You come back and tell us, you know what, this is a long play. Every year that you take is another generation that you condemn to the rubbish bin. In this situation we must find out how we get our children to read and write. How else can they equip themselves to survive a very competitive modern world?

I am sorry to say this. You can waffle all you like, and come back at me and say, Basil, you do not quite understand that we are doing all of this and so on. I see no strategic vision; no one tells me what is cause and effect. This is having done the literature research, the good practice from other places, pulling it together and devising a strategy that will bring about outcomes that we can improve upon.

It may well be that, when we go around as a Committee, we only see little bits of things that are going right. However, it just beggars belief that we cannot say that where a programme is

working, we will do more of it, we will find a way, we will get resources to do that. I am waiting for someone to tell me yes or no: does differential funding make any difference? When you talk about Achieving Belfast, I seem to recall the Belfast Education and Library Board telling me yes, but we have had to let go 300 teachers over the last period of time because the common funding formula, that we changed, brought down the number of teachers in areas of social deprivation.

So then you put a little bit back in and it makes no difference.

I will finish on this point. There are fundamental areas. You talked about the PAC and underachievement. As I understand it, the Westminster PAC was rather disappointed in the Department's performance and it asked for a comparative study to be made between Glasgow and Belfast. It identified a particular section of our community that is struggling particularly with educational underachievement, which, from memory, was working-class Protestant boys. I see nothing in this discussion that gets to the root of that. We are now facing a situation of unprecedented financial pressures and we have to get it right. You need to build consensus among colleagues from all political parties to get it done. It is an absolute travesty that we do not have a strategy that we can all agree on.

Dr Davison:

A strategy on which we can all agree is a political matter. However, to argue that there is no strategy is unfair. I understand that you are unhappy with the early years strategy, but it was deliberately constructed to feed into the issues that we are discussing today. It tries to bring together what happens in preschool with what happens when a child goes into the foundation stage of the revised curriculum. There is a strong focus on improving quality, raising equity and making sure that there is a coherent development of standards in the basic skills from preschool to early years.

The revised curriculum is developed with literacy and numeracy at its core; they are key skills to be developed by every child who goes through the revised curriculum. We are in the fourth

year of implementation, but it will eventually play its way through to all children in all schools. It takes away much of the heavy prescription and enables teachers to focus on the needs that they see in the classroom. The emphasis is on ensuring that, after 12 years of compulsory education, children come out with the appropriate literacy and numeracy skills.

We have put in place a school improvement programme that suggests that if the inspectorate tells us that a school's performance is not good enough, the school should go into a formal intervention process that focuses entirely on the concerns that the inspectorate has identified and asks that school to address those concerns with external support. If they are not addressed, action will result.

We have brought in a special educational needs and inclusion policy, designed to improve the capacity of teachers and the structures around which special educational needs and inclusion are taken forward. I understand from your comments that you are not happy about that.

With respect to teacher and leadership development, we have worked with the initial teacher education providers; we have done work in preparation for the ESA on continuous professional development and with the RTU on leadership. At the same time, we have worked with the Western Board and the Belfast Board on developing approaches to urban problems.

That is a strategic approach to dealing with the problem of too many young people coming through our school system without appropriate literacy and numeracy skills. I do not like using terms such as "back to basics", but we are putting literacy and numeracy at schools' core.

Mr B McCrea:

Robson, you have restated the case that the Department knows what it is doing. I tell you here and now that you do not convince me; I am not convinced that the Department has any idea what it is doing or that there is any coherence. As for whether this is a democratic or political point, so

be it. We are here to hold you to account. That is the issue. All of us here have a particular opinion and, I have no doubt would like to make a contribution.

I conclude on this point; there is no point in extrapolating at this meeting. I am not convinced. I suspect that others are not convinced. You need to do something about it.

Dr Davison:

Whether you are convinced or not, I will take what you say on board. I will go on attempting to convince you and others that we take that problem seriously. As I explained, we are trying to develop a strategy that puts literacy and numeracy at the core of what schools are about. It tells schools that they must produce educational outcomes for all their children commensurate with their potential. That is what the education system is focusing on.

The Chairperson:

Before Dominic asks his question, can you tell us when we will see the revised numeracy and literacy strategy?

Dr Hughes:

It is in the final stages of completion. We needed to take account of the implementation of the revised curriculum and revised assessment arrangements. We are trying to ensure that the strategy is completely coherent with those two fundamental elements, as literacy and numeracy are at the heart of the curriculum. We want to ensure that the revised strategy is not seen as an additional strand but that it is clear that the curriculum and assessment arrangements support it completely coherently. It is in the final stages of completion.

The Chairperson:

Will we see it in autumn?

Dr Hughes:

Yes. Absolutely.

Mr D Bradley:

Good afternoon. I agree with the remarks about the quality of the Department's policies and the criticism of them. For example, the Committee severely criticised the policy on supporting newcomers, yet, three weeks later, the Department published it without any change whatsoever and without taking on board the Committee's criticisms.

To my knowledge, the SENI policy does not have the support of a single advocacy group for children with special educational needs. Something is terribly wrong with how the Department communicates with important stakeholders if those stakeholders return a very negative response. The Department believes in the document's proposals; in fact, it is prepared to spend £28 million before consultation responses are even analysed. Surely the Department should do fundamental work on policies first to ensure that they have currency among the stakeholders at whom they are aimed.

Committee members were also underwhelmed by the nought-to-six strategy. The first version of the literacy and numeracy strategy seemed to indicate that the person who wrote it thought that it was an SENI policy directed solely at children with special educational needs, whereas it is supposed to be directed at underachievement.

Therefore, although you say that that fine suite of policies is one core column that supports the Department's approach to raising standards, I suggest that those columns are not always based on the most solid foundations.

Dr Davison:

Let me respond to your remarks on the special education needs and inclusion policy. An

enormous amount of stakeholder input went into the policy before and during its drafting; the Department received 1,700 responses to the consultation. Departmental colleagues are going through those responses in considerable detail to consider the issues that stakeholders raised.

We will, soon, I hope, bring forward proposals to respond constructively to the issues that were raised. We recognise that, particularly with regard to SEN and inclusion, that this is an important and difficult area, because of all the things that surround special educational needs. We will come back as soon as possible with our response to what has been an unbelievably sized response to the consultation.

Again with regard to SEN, we have not spent the money yet. At the moment, we are planning to build teachers' capacity to deal more effectively with special educational needs. However special educational needs structures and the approach to them play out, building teachers' capacity to identify particular special needs difficulties and to work out strategies to identify them at classroom or whole-school level is something that we should be helping to develop. There is complementarity between planning how to build teachers' capacity to deal with special educational needs and the outworking of the special educational needs consultation. There will be congruence between those two things.

I do not accept that we do not listen to stakeholders. My colleagues and I are carefully considering the 1,700 responses to the special educational needs consultation. Big issues are coming up through that consultation, and you will see that in due course.

Mr D Bradley:

We found it difficult to locate the stakeholders who were consulted in the first place.

Dr Davison:

I will not get into that. A broad range of people was involved; they were groups that took the

policy forward. I will not get into an argument over that.

I am disappointed by yours and Basil's "underwhelmed" response to the early years policy. As I said to Basil, that policy is a serious piece about how best to bring together what happens preschool and what happens in school so that we can tackle issues of literacy and numeracy at the earliest stage. It is an attempt to get it consistently right. Perhaps we will get another opportunity to discuss it, as, like SEN, it is an extremely important part of the policy picture.

Mr D Bradley:

Are the policies that you finally establish as core policies assessed by the Education and Training Inspectorate?

Dr Davison:

Yes. At one level, ETI assesses and evaluates the outworking of our policies at every inspection and it evaluates specific policies on another. The chief inspector's report draws together the evidence and sets much of it out in due course. Katrina mentioned specific policies such as Achieving Belfast.

Mrs Godfrey:

That policy was put out to inspection evaluation to give us a basis for moving forward.

We check the validity of any policy that we are developing with the evidence base, inspection findings and practitioners. The core and starting point of the literacy and numeracy consultation document was quality whole-class teaching. We have accepted that the use of the wave terminology in that document was a wee bit confusing, although it was promoted by teachers and practitioners because it was in line with the support material previously available. That is why we used it. However, those who did not have in-depth knowledge of the issue found it confusing. That is the point of having a consultation. You will see different terminology used and greater

clarity, referenced at every point with people who do this every day.

We have the policy-making and analysis skills, but, in the policies in which I am involved, we road-test them for practicality and reality-check them with teachers and principals. That is a key part of the process to make sure that there is no gulf between the research and the evidence base and how policies are implemented. That is a hugely important part of the work in which Chris and I are involved.

Dr Davison:

One of the big changes is the revised curriculum; we are into the fourth year of its implementation. Each year we took a report from the inspectorate on the implementation of the revised curriculum, and each year we responded to what the inspectorate told us about how we take forward implementation. Therefore, we make extensive use of our colleagues as our source of professional advice on the outworking of our policies. Our inspectorate colleagues rarely spare us; they tell it as it is to us and the schools.

Mrs M Bradley:

I return to nursery education. We visited a school in Derry. I declare an interest: I am on a board of education, although not at that school. I came out of that school quite depressed. A mother whose eight children all have special educational needs told us that the system had let her children down. That is what she said to us: “The system let my children down.”

That woman is trying as hard as she can to get the help that her children need, through no fault of the school. The school is running the nurture centre now at its own expense, but there will be no nurture centre because the school can no longer sustain it. We talk about improving life for children, but surely that is the stage of life that we need to improve. They should not have to go to primary school, and leave primary school and move further up in their education to other schools, and then the other schools are looking for money to try to improve their lives. There is no sense in it at all.

If we do not start with them when they are that age, we are just wasting money as the children are going through the school, and we are still not helping those children. I felt deeply, deeply sorry for that mother. I came out of the school very depressed. There was also a young father there with a child who cannot get the full attention that it needs to make its way in life. It is just so depressing when you go out into communities.

Some of those schools are in highly deprived communities. Those are not the sort of parents who have the money to keep funding a school; they just do not have it. They would have to choose between feeding their children and giving it to the school. It is just not fair the way the system is. That young mother felt that the education system had let her children down.

Dr Davison:

One can only share your disappointment and unease. What we are trying to do at a broad level through the early years and special educational needs work is to put in place a system that will enable us to do that. I could wax lyrical about the attempt to bring consistency of approach to those issues across the Province, instead of having to deal with them in separate ways.

On the specifics of nurture groups, there is a discussion to be had on how to transfer pilot work into a coherent delivery to all the schools that need it. The nurture groups are in a small number of schools, whereas, Mary, you know as well as I do, that the need in that area is much broader than just the small number of schools with nurture groups. Therefore it is a question of finding limited resource to develop a validated approach across the full range of schools that require it. That is the conundrum.

Mrs M Bradley:

If everybody sits back and says that they cannot find the resources, what happens to those children? We do not improve their lives in any way; not at all.

Dr Davison:

The resources that we have through the Western Education and Library Board are there to help the children that you are telling me about; it is for the Western Education and Library Board to bring those resources to bear as best it can. It is the same in all the other board areas.

We are always working with finite resources, particularly those for special educational needs. Need may be much larger than the resources that we can bring to bear on it.

Mrs M Bradley:

The Education Department stopped putting any money into nurture education groups.

Dr Davison:

I assume that those groups were set up under the neighbourhood renewal programme.

Mrs M Bradley:

That is right. DSD gave them the money, but that money is no longer there. I do not remember how much money they got — I think that it was £116,000 — but none of the schools in Derry got any of it because there was not enough to go around.

Dr Davison:

That is the point. A small number of schools benefited from the pilot work on nurture groups. However, a big problem came about when the Department tried to universalise it, because it did not have enough money to cover the cost of replicating the pilot's work in a small number of schools in the generality of schools.

Mrs M Bradley:

The number of children who need that type of help is going up, not down.

Dr Davison:

Hence, I am saying that, through early years and special educational needs, we are trying to work towards a more consistent approach and a more effective use of the money that we have in order to best meet the needs of the people whom you so eloquently described.

Mrs M Bradley:

In the meantime, those people will just have to sit back.

Dr Davison:

To be fair to the Western Board, it brings its best efforts to bear in order to meet the special educational needs of the children in the schools in its area. That is what it is trying to do.

Mrs M Bradley:

The Western Board will not be getting any pats on the back from the parents of special educational needs children in that area.

Dr Davison:

I am disappointed to hear that. The Western Board does what it can with the resources that it has to provide a service for children with special educational needs at all the schools in the board area.

Mrs M Bradley:

You need to take note of the fact that there is no longer any regeneration money for such work. That issue must be looked at.

Dr Davison:

I agree that that is a problem.

Miss McIlveen:

Thank you for your presentation and for fully answering members' questions. I will be brief because I am mindful of the time. Parenting and early intervention are critical, and that has been recognised today. The Committee for Employment and Learning (DEL) is carrying out an inquiry into those who are not in education, employment or training (NEETs) and is therefore dealing with some of the outworkings of this issue. Prevention is critical in respect of NEETs; therefore, what discussions has the Department had with DEL about that?

Dr Davison:

First, I spent seven years in DEL where I learned about the extent to which the school system is failing to deliver effectively for the full range of children. That was evidenced by the fact that DEL has to spend an inordinate amount of cash on remediation for children after 12 years of compulsory education. I regard that as a waste of resource, because we should be getting the system right in the compulsory years of a child's education so that they emerge with the literacy and numeracy skills required.

Secondly, we work regularly with DEL on issues relating to 14- to 19-year-olds within which the issue of NEETs sits. We are trying — Katrina will say a bit more about this — to bring together both Departments' provision for 14- to 19-year-olds in a more effective and coherent way, and the Department's entitlement framework is a key piece in that work. Further education adds considerably to the options that young people aged 14 to 19 should have presented to them.

Mrs Godfrey:

DEL has been in touch with us on the specific scope and nature of its inquiry. The folk there have picked up on the importance of prevention, which was Michelle's point, and are looking at the characteristics of young people not in education, employment or training. Working back from those characteristics, they are looking at what they can do for children aged 14 to 16 when they have to be at school, as well as for younger children to ensure that their time at school is productive and enjoyable. It is important that they have aspirations to succeed.

Aspiration and early intervention and the actions associated with them are hugely important. Some of the areas that we discussed with DEL concern pre-14 education and early intervention as well as standards of literacy and numeracy in the curriculum, and, interestingly, alternative education provision. Many young people not in education, employment or training came through alternative education provision. That area is being reviewed and examined as part of a wider focus on improving outcomes for pupils to ensure that young people are ideally accommodated and given a good-quality education in school. Where, for whatever reason, that ideal situation does not obtain, they should get support and provision of no less quality if they are educated somewhere other than in school. That is one of the areas that our DEL colleagues have been keen to focus on: the trajectory from alternative education into not being in employment, education or training.

Dr Davison:

The original title of DEL's work, 'Status Zero Survey', tells you all that you need to know. These are young people for whom education did not deliver. That is unacceptable. We have a duty to ensure that the issues that we are debating — standards and outcomes — are central in everything that the Department of Education the Department for Employment and Learning do in training and further education. We must try to get children at least to level 2 in English and maths. That is recognised as the jumping-off point for employment and for further and higher education. That is what both Departments want to bend their wills to.

Miss McIlveen:

I notice that earlier communications that we received about the destinations and qualifications for 2008-09 set against PSA 19 seem to be positive that you have met those targets. When you are looking at that again, will you set more challenging targets?

Dr Davison:

We have a long-term picture that is not a part of the PSA, whereby we have set very challenging targets. We want most children to get to level 2 by the age of 16. That is a huge challenge. We aim to get 70% of children five GCSEs, A* to C, including English and maths. We are working

to a long-term plan, within which we have to play short term as well.

Mrs Godfrey:

The other point to pick up from those statistics is that, encouragingly for us, the number of children who, last year and this, stayed on at school post-16 has risen considerably. That is important as well, but it means that there is an even bigger onus on the system to ensure that those who stay on in school are doing courses that interest them and in which they can succeed.

Miss McIlveen:

What do you mean by “considerably”?

Dr Davison:

One thousand five hundred additional children stayed on post-16 over the past two years, although it has not been the trend. It is a very positive outcome. Set alongside that is our work with DEL to ensure that provision for young people is broad. From our perspective, they should take most courses in school, although they may take of them in a further education college. We are working towards a more coherent and effective method of doing that.

Miss McIlveen:

Thank you very much.

The Chairperson:

Is it not the case that the trend whereby children stay longer at school is a reflection of the fact that long-term employment prospects are poor?

Dr Davison:

I would have automatically jumped to that conclusion, but when that has been the case previously

we have not necessarily seen the same increase. Doubtless there is an element of that in it, but it does not explain it all.

The Chairperson:

Robson, Katrina, Chris, thank you very much.

I welcome the chief inspector of the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI), Mr Stanley Goudie, and his team. As always, you and your colleagues are very welcome. Thank you for taking the time to come to the meeting and for your patience. I ask you to make your presentation.

Mr Stanley Goudie (Education and Training Inspectorate):

Thank you very much, Chairman. We are glad to make a presentation on the key characteristics of successful post-primary schools that serve disadvantaged communities. I will talk through the presentation, after which my colleague Peter Geoghegan will distribute a case study of a non-selective post-primary school that we inspected recently. The purpose is to ground in reality the sense that that school has made a difference in serving a difficult area. Hopefully, that will give the Committee further evidence of what can be achieved in turning schools around.

The evidence on which our remarks are based has been taken from the inspection findings of individual schools and organisations; it is also based on cross-cutting evaluations, whereby we would visit more than one school in order to look at a theme. It is also gathered on unannounced incidental visits that inspectors make to their district's schools.

In the post-primary sector, the main inspection model that is used to evaluate a school's overall effectiveness is the standard inspection, through which the inspection team identifies, evaluates and reports publicly on the quality of a school's provision in the following key areas: leadership and management at all levels; achievements and standards; provision for pastoral care

and child protection; quality of educational provision; and a school's process of self-evaluation leading to self-improvement. In that framework, we have six performance-level descriptors: outstanding, very good, good, satisfactory, inadequate and unsatisfactory.

From our inspection findings and survey evaluations we have found that the key characteristics of successful post-primary schools that serve disadvantaged areas are as follows: with regard to leadership and management, the senior leadership team led by the principal has a clear overview of pupils' educational and pastoral experiences and demonstrates an appropriate vision for the school and a clear understanding of how to achieve that vision; the leadership team inspires and challenges all in the school community; distributed leadership and accountability structures ensure that a school's changing needs are met effectively; there is collective responsibility for the welfare and performance of all pupils; and a strong sense of collegiality permeates the school, which is reflected in high moral among staff.

In addition, there is effective communication with governors and the employing authority; they are well informed of a school's development and, in turn, provide an appropriate challenge function to the quality of provision. Through liaison with feeder primary schools and community representatives, a school is well informed of the barriers to learning that its pupils experience. As a result, the school has clear strategies to help pupils to overcome those barriers to learning.

A well-constructed school development plan guides the work of the school, with ownership by all, including governors, teachers, pupils and parents, and associated quality action plans to drive forward identified areas for improvement; a school has a culture of openness and transparency; performance information is shared across the school, and analysis includes trends over time.

A self-evaluating process enables a school to identify its key areas and priorities for improvement, thereby ensuring accountability at all levels for the quality of educational and pastoral provision; pastoral care provision is intrinsically linked to academic progress and strongly pupil-centred; teaching and learning are at the centre of all that the school tries to

achieve, and curriculum planning is creative and flexible to best meet the needs of individual children; pupils are encouraged to engage actively in their learning, and robust procedures are in place for those who require additional learning support.

Inspection evidence is that those characteristics hold true for all good schools, irrespective of social or economic deprivation. In areas of social deprivation, what becomes important is how those characteristics are contextualised by the school community to meet the needs of pupils, their families and the wider community that the school serves.

I turn now to the challenges of promoting those characteristics in less successful post-primary schools. Inspection evidence indicates that although a range of factors impinges on low achievement and attainment, the most important include poor leadership and management, low expectations by some teachers, and poverty of aspiration among parents, pupils and the community. However, although any or all can apply in certain circumstances, inspection evidence shows that the most significant in those circumstances is the quality of leadership and management, and the school's capacity for rigorous and honest self-evaluation leading to sustained improvement.

High-quality leadership will build on a school's smallest strengths to bring about improvement. There are no examples over the past five years when the inspectorate did not find some evidence of good practice. In every school inspected, individual teachers or departments were managing to achieve good outcomes despite the socioeconomic circumstances of the school. Where leadership quality is poor, the senior leadership team invariably does not have the capacity to analyse the problem, nor, indeed, to plan strategically and realistically for improvement.

Another significant factor is lack of accountability at all levels throughout a school. Of the schools inspected over the 2006-08 period that required a follow-up inspection, 96% improved by at least one performance level by the time of the follow-up inspection. Monitoring by a district inspector will show whether there is a problem in schools of a "plateau" effect and whether

improvements can be sustained and developed. The inspectorate is developing a risk-based approach to inspection to identify outstanding, very good and good practice, but also to focus on schools where urgent improvement is required.

Robson Davison spoke of the formal intervention process. The response to underachievement has often been to introduce initiatives to address the issues rather than look at a school's circumstances and so tailor support to ensure an improvement in outcomes for pupils. For example, despite noteworthy successes in the raising school standards initiative and the school support programme, some schools did not have the capacity to plan or wisely use the money that they received. They often just bought more resources, and, in the worst cases, became dependent on the additional funding without a strategy or an incentive to exit the programme. In contrast, the Department of Education's school improvement policy, Every School a Good School, which includes a formal intervention process, is one of support with a definite end to the process.

Furthermore, although the quality of the support provided by CASS was generally good, as is illustrated in the case study, it was, in fact, uneven within and across the education and library boards, and a challenge function was not always exercised. In the development of Every School a Good School, the Department sought to address the identified weaknesses of previous support programmes. The current school improvement policy articulates clear roles, responsibilities and, indeed, accountabilities for all the key stakeholders — the Department, the inspectorate, schools and the boards.

Prior to the introduction of Every School a Good School, the Department did not respond formally to inspection reports. That has now, thankfully, changed with the Department affirming schools where outcomes are good and setting out clearly how it expects poorly performing schools to respond to inspection findings in order to effect the required improvements within a specified time frame. Although the standard model of inspection is reviewed annually, the inspection process has not changed with the publication of 'Every School a Good School — A Policy for School Improvement', and inspection reports have been published for many years. The key factor now is that the Department responds formally to the inspection reports.

The formal intervention process makes provision for an intensive programme of support from CASS when the evaluation of a school's work is less than satisfactory. The generally small number of schools currently in the formal intervention process is providing CASS with an opportunity to customise its support for the individual schools and build knowledge cumulatively on the strategies that work and those that do not.

The inspectorate monitors the work of schools in the formal intervention process with a follow-up inspection that takes place within 12 to 18 months. Usually, two monitoring visits take place in the interim period and feedback on the progress being made is provided to the school and to CASS. The follow-up inspection will also record the inspectorate's evaluation of the quality of the post-inspection support provided by CASS and will report publicly accordingly.

Faustina Graham will now take members through the case study. She will set out the background to the study and the success that the school has achieved.

Mrs Faustina Graham (Education and Training Inspectorate):

I will put the study into context for members. In considering the remit that we had been given, we tried to find a school that we thought reflected what you had asked for. We, therefore, looked at skills improvement over the past five years. We chose a school that had been inspected in 2010 and that we were looking at for the first time. The principal at the school came into post in 2005. That enabled us to look at the kinds of improvements that had been made over that period and at the incremental improvements that had been achieved in outcomes for pupils during those five years. We decided to try to find a school in which there was underachievement among boys, which is an issue that was mentioned earlier, so we chose a non-selective boys' school. That is one of the more difficult areas to address. Members will also see from the study that 33% of pupils at the school receive free schools meals.

Members will see from the data that there was a year-on-year improvement in the number of pupils achieving A* to C grades in five or more subjects and in those achieving A* to C grades in five subjects including English and maths. Members will also see that the school was above the Northern Ireland average for non-selective schools over that period.

We chose that school as an example because we wanted to look at something that is realistic and that is based on the reality of the skills in schools at the moment. The factors that make a successful school can sometimes sound idealistic and like generalisations. Therefore, we wanted to show the Committee and the schools that when we talk about school improvement, we are talking about what is actually possible. Sometimes people have to be convinced of that, particularly those who have worked in difficult circumstances for a long period or who have worked in schools where there has been significant underachievement and low achievement. People who get locked into that cycle of underachievement find it difficult to see something differently or to begin to see what is possible.

What was interesting about that school is that the principal came from the school community and was promoted to principal. He understood the issues that the school had faced over a period. He could also look at the issues, not just in his role as principal, and see possibilities for significant improvement in the school. He realised that it was a matter of changing the school's culture and the mindset of some teachers who had lost their motivation to make improvement. Key to doing that, particularly to helping people to see things differently, was an emphasis on professional development.

There has been an emphasis on literacy and numeracy this afternoon. The principal told us that 62% of pupils arrived at the school with reading ages of less than nine years. That is frightening, yet it is reassuring to see what has been possible with regard to the outcomes for those pupils. Someone spoke earlier about the need to be innovative. The principal looked seriously at literacy. He was open and honest with staff about the issues that they faced, and he got the agreement of some staff to cut down on the time spent on other subjects in first year. A member of staff was retrained in literacy skills, and an emphasis was placed on improving children's reading skills with a view to ensuring that once they were up to speed, they could

access other areas of the curriculum more easily and, therefore, progress in other subjects more quickly. That seems to be working.

Stanley spoke about distributed leadership. In successful schools, there often seems to be one charismatic leader doing all the work. What we found interesting in this case study was that there was distributed leadership across the school. It moved gradually into the area of school improvement, particularly with regard to monitoring and evaluation and the introduction of a no-blame culture. The principal was honest, and he would say that when people took risks that did not always work out, he had to bite his tongue and remind himself that there was a no-blame culture. That is practical and real.

Over the past five years, because of the no-blame culture, the principal was able to chart staff's growing confidence in their belief that they could make a difference. Teachers began to open their classrooms to each other. That did not just involve the basics of performance review and staff development (PRSD), which is very much about performance management; it involved sharing practice, too. That did not happen overnight. Teachers were gradually asked to look at what was happening in other classrooms, and trust was built among staff to make that possible.

The inspection findings are based on the work of a principal who knew and understood the community in which the school was based and the people with whom he was working as well as their attitudes and approaches to the young people coming into the school. He recognised the need for a significant shift in the mindset of some teachers and in their attitude towards the young people and what they could achieve. He realised that that would not happen overnight, yet the quantitative data shows that he did not take his eye off the ball in that he also recognised that some of those improvements needed to be immediate.

The principal is honest in that he acknowledges that this is still a journey of improvement. That is true of so many schools. The issue of parental involvement was raised earlier. The principal would probably say that that is the hardest area for him to crack. The school is still struggling with that. The issue is not about getting parents on board, because the principal sees the parents as being very supportive of the school, and our feedback from parental questionnaires

is that parents are generally very supportive. However, saying that you are happy with what the school is doing is different from getting truly involved in your child's education. From the principal's perspective, the school still has to struggle with that issue. That displays honesty in a process in which the school is moving forward and improving. In this instance, thankfully, we see no regression or plateauing of improvement. There is no big rise that comes to a stop; performance appears to be genuinely improving over time.

We received feedback from pupils about the role of their school council and its interaction with the young men in the school. It is important to get a sense of whether pupils feel valued in their school community and of how they interact with each other. The school has been very clear that it does not just talk about, for example, peer evaluation and everyone looking at one another's work; it has consciously tried to ensure that its young people have the skills to evaluate their own work constructively and to provide feedback to their peers. Unless young people are provided with such skills, peer evaluation ends up being just an exercise rather than a skill that is developed.

We are happy to answer any questions. We felt that this was a case study of a typical inspection that we carried out in the course of the year, but it brought to the fore some of the issues that the Committee wanted to discuss.

The Chairperson:

Thank you; that was useful. The Department said that the characteristics are child-centred, high-quality teaching and efficient leadership, and your report talks about ethos planning and leadership. There is no huge difference in those two sets of criteria or characteristics. It may be unfair to ask this question about the case study, because I do not think that any single change caused the transformation, but was that transformation achieved as a result of the way in which the school implemented its policy, or was it a case of introducing a new policy to the school to kick-start that progress? There has been steady progress, and it is clearly identified from 2005 right up to 2009. The submission includes a list of issues, but what was the real driving force behind the transformation? Despite the plethora of policies, I am convinced that a practical

system of nurturing must be seen to be working properly and hitting the right indicators in schools, particularly schools whose free school meals intake identifies them as being in areas of disadvantage, and so on. What was the catalyst?

Mrs Graham:

We said that when things are not effective, it comes down to poor leadership. In this instance, the improvement was inspired by a principal who had a vision but who saw what was possible and was willing to build his vision into one that was shared by the rest of the school. That is different from somebody coming into a school deciding that they will change everything. Here was someone who saw the school's faults and failings over time but who also saw its potential. If we strip Every School a Good School right back, we see that it is about high-quality teaching and learning, which Katrina Godfrey mentioned earlier. The principal very much understood that that is what it is all about.

Rather than exhort people to improve, which we can all do at times, the principal supported staff to improve through, for instance, retraining. For example, the person who headed up all the literacy work has completely changed his mindset from not believing change could happen to talking about what is possible. Teachers will always face the difficulty of becoming disheartened. Just think about the complexities around barriers to learning that the Committee has discussed this afternoon alone.

Sometimes, if people do not know how to approach a problem, they become defensive, ignore it or do nothing. The idea behind the no-blame culture was to get teachers in a school to share what they know and to be honest enough to own up that they do not know how to tackle a particular problem. Often, somebody else will know how to tackle it. To implement that approach sometimes requires training. It is about knowing what is essential at that time.

Stanley referred to the initiative-driven culture of the past, and we always try to point out the need to customise any approach to meet the needs of the individual pupils and organisations.

Over time, any school will change, as will the nature of the children and the young people who attend it. We have to teach the young people who are in front of us, not the young people who we might have had five or 10 years ago or the young people who we would like them to be. It is about the young people who are in schools at any given point and the difficulties and complexities of their needs. We must share that practice and share our concerns. We must be confident enough to admit that we do not know the answer to something but that we will find out and try to support young people as best we can. That principal understood all of that in a quiet way, as opposed to appearing to be leading from the front. He built trust among his staff, and he has reaped the benefits of that.

Mr Geoghegan:

I shall comment on the link between policy and the improvement journey. For example, in 2005, statutory regulations were introduced for school development planning. Those regulations contain a number of indicators and things to do. Some of those are on operational matters, so I will set those aside. The principal was able to use the regulations as a structure and as a process. For example, the principal saw the school in its context in the town with young boys coming there with all of the problems around them. That was stripped down to ask what those young people were coming to the school with and how their needs could be addressed.

The school development planning regulations were used as a structure to engage in the planning process. Therefore, engagement took place in setting the context, and the staff were engaged in the process by talking to them. That had not previously happened at that school, and the regulations helped the principal to structure the process in his head. They also helped the school's governors with their challenge function. The principal was presenting to the governors what he was doing, and he put them in the position of having to challenge him. He asked them to tell him whether he was going the right way.

The teachers and the pupils were also involved, so the policy gave the principal a structure to help him to work through the issues. In some schools, particularly those that are not doing so well, that thinking does not exist. The policy on school development planning helped that school

to move forward, and the principal articulates that view strongly.

Mr Goudie:

The bullet points at the bottom of the case study can be easily mapped back to the pillars of Every School a Good School or some of the factors that we have described, including child-centeredness and the importance of rigorous and honest self-evaluation. We build a self-evaluation process into inspection, and, therefore, if the school says that it has a score of plus 22, we will be careful to say that the score is, in fact, plus 15, and we will say that its process is not sufficiently rigorous or honest. We make that call as part of the inspection process to assist the school with building the capacity to improve its self-evaluation and to help it to become better equipped to do that in the honest and rigorous way that the Committee would want.

The Chairperson:

I want to clarify one procedural issue. I appreciate that your Department is no different to other Departments in that resources are a huge issue and that there is a high demand because of the number of schools that need to be inspected. I do not know the name of the school, but I was informed that a school has not been inspected for 11 years. What process do you use in the inspection regime to get an overview of inspection of the schools estate?

Mr Goudie:

In the primary sector, the ideal position is that we quality-assure a school every seven years. That is based on the premise that a school is inspected once during each child's time at the school. Operationally, that is not possible. We also have district inspectors who call on an incidental basis, so the process is not just as loose as once every 11 years. I expect that that school may well have been involved in a survey or had a district inspection visit. The situation is not just as stark as it may appear, although we are aware that there are schools that we simply cannot inspect once every seven years.

We recently introduced what I described in my presentation as a risk-based approach, which

involves looking closely at schools that are not doing so well and taking that into consideration, although we do not target them. At the same time, we will look at schools that are doing well, because the inspectorate must have a sensible yardstick with which to measure what is possible. The strength of the case study is that we can present it to other schools in similar circumstances as an example. We can say to them, “Come on; this is possible, and here are some of the keys that might unlock the difficulties that you face.”

Mr D Bradley:

Based on your comments on the hallmarks of a good school in a socially disadvantaged area and on the inspection case study, it appears that leadership is the key element in thriving schools. Has enough emphasis been placed on leadership in the general culture of education? Can we do more to ensure that schools have the leadership needed to bring about that type of improvement? The Chairperson said that he was aware of a school that was withering under poor leadership. How can we stop that happening? How can we ensure that schools get good leadership?

Mr Goudie:

The straight answer is no, we have not placed sufficient emphasis on the key role of leadership and management. The 2006-08 report from the chief inspector of the Education and Training Inspectorate indicated that we were concerned about the leadership and management of about 25% of the schools that we inspected; therefore, we must build leadership and management capacity. Part of that involves having a revised PQH programme that is fit for purpose in the twenty-first century. The Committee discussed with Robson Davison the issues involved in making the PQH a mandatory requirement. Perhaps a halfway house would be to require a person who becomes a head teacher to engage with the PQH programme within three years. That may be another approach.

The issue for us is that schools should not wait for an inspection to come along. There is an onus on the employing authority and on the school’s governors to fulfil that challenge function. When we come along and point to leadership issues, people often say, “Yes, we know”. The issue for us is what was done in the intervening period, because there is a responsibility on the

governing body and the employing authority to prevent that situation reaching a certain point. The school also has the opportunity to call in the inspectorate. However, rather than simply accept and respond immediately, before I accede to such a demand, I ask what has been done in the intervening period to improve performance.

Mr D Bradley:

The improvement from 27% to 62% — roughly about 133% — is phenomenal. Is that made up solely of GCSEs or does it include GCSE-equivalent examination results?

Mr Geoghegan:

There would be some equivalence, but the core literacy and numeracy areas are traditional GCSEs. However, some other courses in those figures are equivalent to GCSEs.

Mr D Bradley:

Do you have any idea of the proportion between the two?

Mr Geoghegan:

Sorry, no, not in that instance.

Mr D Bradley:

The inspectorate's advice and evaluation of schools is often peppered with well-known, well-used phrases such as "rigorous self-evaluation". What is involved in the process of rigorous self-evaluation? What process did that school go through?

Mrs Graham:

Peter talked about how the school in the case study used the school development plan as a vehicle

to begin the process. In other words, the idea is to look at the needs of the school and to make sure that everyone in the school and school community has an opportunity to contribute to the analysis of available data: for example, examination outcomes; feedback from parents and governors on what they see as the good and not-so-good elements of the school; and, in particular, feedback from the pupils on their experience of the school. Devising the school development plan, therefore, means looking at the real needs of the school and beginning the cycle through that action-planning process across the school. At post-primary level, that means looking at what each department needs to do to effect improvement. It is very much a journey of continuous and ongoing improvement, in which everyone is involved.

The jargon — monitoring evaluation and so on — can sometimes sound terribly important. It is always a matter of going back to the practicalities. One practical measure about which the principal spoke was the need to ensure that, once the action plans were in place, there were points along the way to check that what was said would be done by a certain time was done. In fact, he got his personal secretary to remind him continually of the times when those things needed to be checked and when the action plans needed to be looked at. It is important to do that, but, at the same time, it is important to be realistic about what happens in schools, particularly post-primary schools, in any given year. We often see quite ambitious plans being put in place during the year, without the recognition that, in the second term, particularly in a post-primary school, the requirements for coursework and examination preparation come on board and that improvement work will, of necessity, slow down. However, people sometimes do not plan with those practicalities in mind, so it is very much about being practical and about realising what can be achieved over a particular period.

What is also absent at times is what could be seen as common sense; namely, having contingencies in place. If you do not get something done by a particular time, how do you get back on track? Those are problems that we see recurring, and they are simple to address. Once things start to get out of control, however, people just ignore the situation. That is what people tell us. That principal said that, in the past, it would have been a case of getting to June, looking at what they had said they were going to do last September and realising that, in fact, not very much had been achieved. Monitoring and evaluation, therefore, are very much about the basic,

ongoing work of any school.

We do not expect to see teachers coming with lots of documents that they put together for the inspection. There is still that perception of inspections. We are happy to look at what a school does on an ongoing basis. It is up to us to find the information and work through it. However, the action plan has to be manageable, with a small number of priorities. Schools must ensure that they truly prioritise issues rather than identify a whole load of things that they know from day one will be impossible to do and that will end up leaving them feeling overwhelmed. Those are practical matters, and the self-evaluation process and the monitoring and evaluation are not rocket science in any sense. It is about common sense and good planning.

Mr Goudie:

There is already a document in the system called ‘Together Towards Improvement’. We developed it along with serving practitioners. It is a route map to allow people to take on the business of self-evaluation, including even deciding if the school is ready to engage in the process. We also produced another document entitled ‘The Reflective Teacher’, which is aimed at allowing individual teachers to engage in the process of self-evaluation.

In August, we will launch an updated version of ‘Together Towards Improvement’ at the Regional Training Unit. It will be web-based so that schools can look at it, extract from it and engage with the process. If they are travelling along the route of self-evaluation, they can judge their progress, and if they just want to put their toe into the water, there is a strategy that allows them to do that. We hope that that will be of assistance to schools in the process of doing what needs to be done.

Mr Geoghegan:

We also have a suite of self-evaluation pamphlets that are subject-based — they are specific to particular areas, such as English or history. They help to focus and support departments when they are dealing with those matters.

Mr D Bradley:

Are they all available on your website?

Mr Goudie:

Yes. They are free of charge, so you can browse through them, or, if you like, we can send you them all. Joking aside, they are certainly available if you want them.

Mr Lunn:

I am primarily interested in the case study, because it is practical. Do you think that that principal made use of all of the strategies and pamphlets when he was appointed, or did he just draw on his own experience, having been at the school as a teacher? Did he use his gut instincts to figure out what was wrong, having observed the situation for a while? Would it be fair to say that his first priority was to galvanise the staff rather than the pupils? He seems to have made a really dramatic improvement in the first year, although I notice that standards in English and maths were already well above the Northern Ireland average. Tell me about that.

Mr Geoghegan:

The principal was the vice-principal of the school beforehand. When going into a school in that situation, galvanising is important, but the question is where to start. In that case, it was a bit of both. The policies are what he wanted to do. It goes back to what I said about the regulations on school development planning. He needed a structure to help him to work through the process, and the regulations provided him with that. Of course, he had all the knowledge and skills, knew the staff and was able to bring that to bear in deciding how he would move the school forward.

Mr Lunn:

Did he get rid of any teachers?

Mr Geoghegan:

He did. Sorry, the governors got rid of teachers, not him.

Mrs Graham:

The principal has a very interesting philosophy on the appointment of teachers. His view is that most people who come to interviews will have the requisite professional qualification; i.e. a degree and postgraduate certificate of education (PGCE). Therefore, the weighting in the interview is more on people skills and the ability to interact and communicate with people. The principal deliberately focuses on that in the interview process, which I find very interesting. People generally come to interviews with the same qualifications, so the principal concentrates on what the school wants from its staff to ensure that young people get the best deal. He is open and honest in that way. Judging from our interactions with him, I would say that he is very knowledgeable about education policy and so on, but he also has the confidence to use what he sees as being the most appropriate aspect of any policy. That is a sign of a really confident principal.

Mr Lunn:

The proportion of pupils receiving free school meals is 33%. Is that reasonably high? I am not asking where the school is located, but is there an element of deprivation in the area?

Mr Goudie:

Yes.

Mrs Graham:

In our analysis, we consider anything over 20% to be high. That is the average for post-primary schools.

Mr Lunn:

Would that school have attracted the input of the inspectorate before the case study began? Would you have been monitoring the position of the school and trying to do something about it in preceding years?

Mr Goudie:

We are lucky in Northern Ireland, because we have been able to sustain the district inspector role, the incidental visit and the professional exchanges that take place. Putting schools into that cycle of inspection allows for the development of schools' intelligence, and the Chairperson touched on that. That is an important piece of intelligence that we will work into the new risk-based approach that we are gradually developing.

Mrs Graham:

We have not collated statistics as such, because our management information systems have improved over a period of time. However, a number of schools had difficult inspections seven or eight years ago and considerable follow-up activity as a result, and we have seen them come out in the very good category after a more recent inspection. We want to pursue that further, because it is interesting to see a school in which the principal remained in post for a significant period and which had fairly traumatic inspection experiences then move into the upper end of the continuum by the time of the next inspection. We have not explored that in detail as yet, but we are starting to pick up some statistics. We have seen enough of that happen in schools over the past two to three years for us to feel that we can begin to learn and benefit from that experience.

Mr Lunn:

How long had the previous headmaster been there?

Mr Goudie:

Years.

Mr Lunn:

In other words, you mean “far too long”. English and maths are lumped together in the chart. Is it fair to say that improvements in other subjects, including maths, flow from improvements in English and reading?

Mrs Graham:

That was the philosophy at that school. Some of the year 8 children had reading difficulties when they joined the school, so the principal made an agreement with the history and geography teachers that if they dropped one period each in order to give pupils an extra period in English and maths, he would step up the time spent on their subjects in later years. That seems to have paid off. In addition, two teachers at the school now have had specialist training in literacy. Our specialists say that reading has a significant impact on a child’s ability to access mathematical questions. However, I am an English specialist, so I am obviously going to say that literacy is the most important skill.

Mr Lunn:

When you were putting the strategy together, did you consult people such as the headmaster as a matter of course?

Mr Goudie:

Absolutely. When we were building the Together Towards Improvement strategy, we engaged heavily with serving practitioners. In fact, we engage with those practitioners on the development of inspection models, too. We do that as a matter of course, because it is hugely important that those documents are grounded in the reality of what serving practitioners experience. We also involve associate assessors, who are either serving principals or vice-principals in schools, in the inspection programme. They bring recent and relevant experience and, if you like, moderate our evaluations.

The spin-off for them is that they then take their experiences, which give them a deeper understanding of the process of self-evaluation, back into the schools system. The feedback from

associated assessors is that engaging in that process is hugely valuable for staff development and continuing professional development. Those folk are recruited through public advertisement, and there is significant interest in those posts each time they are advertised.

Mr Lunn:

Some members have been in constant communication with a group of headmasters, some of whom are still working and some of whom are retired, for nine months in a different forum. I do not know who is right in this matter, so you must not take this as a criticism, but that group has said that headmasters have a heck of a lot of paperwork to do — an encyclopaedia's worth — but that there is not much consultation with them. Therefore, they seem to be saying the opposite of what you are saying.

Mr Goudie:

I can comment only from the perspective of our engagement with them in the inspection process and evaluation. I am happy to engage at any time with the members of the group that you are talking about to hear their views on that.

Mr Lunn:

They would love to talk to you: I am acting as a go-between. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Goudie:

I am very happy to meet them.

Mr Lunn:

Thank you. The case study is really encouraging. Films and television series are made about such things.

Mr Geoghegan:

We have other case studies. In one, for example, a school went into a follow-up process. It had been evaluated as satisfactory and, after re-inspection, moved to being very good. I can provide anecdotal evidence of that, as I was a district inspector. I remember saying to myself when I took over that district and walked into that school, “Wow, there are real difficulties here.” It would be amazing if one could bottle the change in atmosphere there. The improvement was down to the principal and how he engaged others and grew those traits in them. Importantly, they engaged and connected with the pupils and their interests, and when that was done, the curriculum was built up around the pupils and they started to engage in the learning. It is phenomenal.

Mr Lunn:

You keep coming back to the principal, and I am sure that we all have a principal in each of our constituencies to whom we could refer, but I will not do so as it would embarrass someone.

Mrs M Bradley:

When you inspect a school, can you sense whether there is good sharing among the staff? It can be difficult to establish whether there is a good working relationship among staff.

Mr Goudie:

That takes us back to the strength of the district inspector system. Almost invariably, the district inspector is also the reporting inspector. Therefore, in advance of the inspection, the inspector will have already begun to pick up vibrations around the school. As you know, Mary, we also take the opportunity to hear from parents through a parental questionnaire and from staff and ancillary staff through a staff questionnaire. That provides us with basic information about the school before we undertake the inspection. We take all of that extremely seriously, because relationships are hugely important in a school and in the dynamics of a successful school. You can read between the lines in this case and see what the principal has achieved with the staff.

Mrs Graham:

Year 12 pupils are very good at telling people exactly what happens.

Mrs M Bradley:

You said that you contact parents. Are they reluctant to tell you the truth? Some parents feel that, if they tell the truth, it will be known that it was them who did so. That might make them reluctant to say what is really happening.

Mrs Graham:

The questionnaire is confidential. People understand that we will not be telling anyone about who said a particular thing on a questionnaire. I had an interesting experience in one of our area-based inspections, when we were looking at provision across an area. As you say, it takes about 15 to 20 minutes for people to stop saying that certain schools are wonderful. It is not that we want people to criticise a school; we want them to be honest. Usually, it is almost a case of wearing people down until eventually someone says exactly what they think. Then, we normally have a very good, open and constructive discussion with parents.

Mrs M Bradley:

I was a bit worried about parents giving evidence. I tell parents to say whatever they have to say.

Mr Goudie:

We make it clear through the process that the inspection team is available to meet parents directly, at their request. When I was a district inspector, I did that on numerous occasions in response to a request.

Mrs M Bradley:

That is good.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much. That has been useful for the Committee. We may come back to some of the issues as we try to formulate the progress of an inquiry. Thank you for your patience.